POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WORKERS RETURNING TO THEIR HOMETOWNS: A CASE STUDY OF PHITSANULOK PROVINCE, THAILAND

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ABSTRACT

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This article examines the socio-economic impacts and experiences of the workers who returned home in Phitsanulok province during the COVID-19 crisis in Thailand from 2021 to 2022. The study utilizes a mixed-methods approach, including quantitative research involving 385 workers returning home in nine districts of Phitsanulok province, as well as qualitative research through in-depth interviews with 18 workers. The analysis of the collected data incorporates the concepts of social mobility and public policy. The findings reveal that a significant proportion of the workers who returned home, mainly aged between 23–40 years, chose to return to their hometowns for a period exceeding 12 months. These individuals were primarily recent graduates and low-skilled workers employed in the service and industrial sectors. They mostly belonged to the lower middle class, with an average monthly income ranging from 5,000 to 10,000 baht. The study highlights the socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 crisis, including income reduction, increased household debt, and a decline in overall quality of life. As a result, the research puts forth policy recommendations aimed at the state welfare policy, advocating for the establishment of an income welfare system, the promotion of local industry development to foster employment opportunities, the facilitation of reskilling and upskilling initiatives aligned with 21st-century occupations, and the decentralization of power to local authorities to enhance the quality of life and public services for the local population.

Keywords: Workers returning home; mobile workers; public policy; social mobility; welfare policy

1. INTRODUCTION

According to a report from the Thailand National Statistical Office (2021), the workforce mobility rate in the country reached 1.05 million people in 2020, representing 1.5% of the Thai population. The majority of

these mobile workers from the central region of Thailand, accounting for approximately 380,000 individuals (1.9% of the workforce). Demographically, the report indicates that 3.5% of the mobile workforce were aged 15 to 24 years, while 1.6% were adults aged 25 to 59 years. The elderly population, aged 60 years and above, comprised 0.3% of the overall workforce mobility rate. The reasons for workforce mobility varied, with work-related factors being the main cause for approximately 313,000 workers (29.9%). This category includes individuals who were seeking employment, relocating within their current employment, or changing jobs. Family migration, such as following a family member or engaging in a family business, accounted for 221,000 people (21.1%). In addition, 217,000 individuals (20.7%) were workers returning to their hometowns or home regions. These statistics shed light on the intricate dynamics of workforce mobility among Thai workers during the COVID-19 crisis. They underscore the significant impact on workforce mobility and highlight the diverse factors influencing individuals' decisions to move or relocate.

The majority of mobile workers had educational qualifications below a bachelor's degree and were primarily engaged in low-skilled occupations. The educational distribution among mobile workers was: only 2.5% graduated from high school, 2.2% completed lower secondary school, 1.7% had vocational education (vocational certificate/high vocational certificate), 1.6% attained an elementary school level of education, 1.5% had higher education, and 0.7% had no education or less than primary education (Thailand National Statistical Office, 2021). Out of the total worker population, an estimated 616,000 individuals (58.7%) were employed. Among them, 161,000 people (26.1%) were employed as service workers and merchandisers, while 105,000 workers (17.1%) held basic unskilled jobs. Skilled workers in agriculture, forestry, and fishery accounted for 97,000 individuals (15.7%). There were 83,000 individuals (13.5%) employed as factory and machine operators, as well as assembly workers. Other skilled workers and related occupations represented 74,000 individuals (12.1%), and 30,000 people (4.8%) were engaged in various occupations such as technical staff and professionals in different fields (Thailand National Statistical Office, 2021). These figures highlight the occupational distribution among mobile workers, with a significant portion employed in service-related jobs, basic unskilled positions, and skilled roles in agriculture, forestry, and fishery. The data provides insight into the types of employment opportunities available to workers and the skills required for these occupations.

The data provided by the Thailand National Statistical Office aligns with the analysis conducted by Chantaphong and Sujjanitjakan (2021), which emphasized the impact of the closure of establishments due to the government-imposed lockdown measures in 2020. These measures particularly affected workers in the service sectors, including hotels and restaurants, many of whom were mobile workers. As a result, these workers decided to return to their hometowns and seek employment in the agricultural sector as they could no longer afford the expenses associated with city living (Chantaphong & Sujjanitjakan, 2021). Furthermore, a collaborative project involving the Thailand National Statistical Office, Thailand Development Research Institute (TDRI), International Health Policy Program (IHPP), and the UN Joint Team on Data showed that 69.7% of Thai individuals experienced economic deterioration after April 2020, specifically in their occupations and employment. Approximately 14.5% of Thai workers were terminated from their jobs and faced difficulties adapting to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent state measures, such as curfews, restaurant closures, and travel restrictions between provinces. Employment categories heavily impacted by these measures included general contractors, part-time workers, unemployed individuals, small business operators, and freelance workers. These groups were significantly affected by the state measures and the resulting economic crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic (Thailand National Statistical Office, n.d.).

Overall, both sources provide insights into the adverse effects of the pandemic and the government's response to various sectors of the economy, particularly on workers in service industries, leading to significant job losses and economic hardships.

In the northern region of Thailand, the percentage of mobile workers classified as the workers who returned home in 2020 was 1.5%, representing a 0.5% increase from 2019 when the mobility rate was 1.0%. These workers consisted of individuals who had relocated from the central region of the country (26.2%) and Bangkok (20.3%). The majority of these workers were aged between 20 and 24 years (39.2%), followed by workers aged 25–29 years (23.8%), and workers aged 40–49 years (23.3%). Among the total of 9,481 workers, 2,799 individuals had an educational level lower than primary education, and 1,617 had completed only primary school education. These workers were predominantly engaged in low-skilled occupations (Thailand National Statistical Office, 2021). The data presented here is congruent with the analysis conducted by the Bank of Thailand in 2021 whose findings indicated that in the northern region, 2,493 workers were employed in low-skilled occupations within the agricultural, forestry, and fishery sectors, while 1,081 workers were employed as service workers and product sellers (Chantaphong & Sujjanitjakan, 2021). These statistics provide a consistent picture of the employment and educational profiles of the workers who returned home in the

northern region of Thailand, highlighting their predominance in low-skilled occupations and their presence in sectors such as agriculture, forestry, fishery, and service-related roles.

In Phitsanulok, a total of 920 workers were identified as the workers who returned home from January to December 2021. Among these individuals, 201 had completed their education up to the pre-primary school level, while 145 graduated from the lower secondary level. In terms of employment, there were 182 workers engaged in skilled jobs within the agriculture, forestry, and fishery sectors, and 107 workers were employed as service workers and product distributors (Thailand National Statistical Office, 2021). These data illustrate that the workers who returned home in Phitsanulok were primarily young individuals working in low-skilled positions within the agriculture, forestry, fishery, and service sectors. Most of them had attained education levels of lower primary school or primary school. These workers were particularly vulnerable to the socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 crisis. They faced challenges in accessing valuable resources, maintaining well-being, and achieving stability in their lives. Following the COVID-19 crisis, many of these workers are likely to permanently resettle in their hometowns, while others may engage in seasonal mobility to capital cities in search of work before returning home. These individuals can be referred to as "flexible workers returning home." Their mobility is influenced not only by the increasing number of COVID-19 infections in local areas but also by changes in the rural labor force. It is important to study the experiences of these workers to understand the socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on their lives. Additionally, policy recommendations are crucial for mitigating the effects of the crisis and promoting the well-being and opportunities of these workers. Such efforts can contribute to the enhancement of the grassroots economy and the labor force in rural areas of Thailand.

Therefore, this article focuses on analyzing the socio-economic impacts on the lives of the workers who returned home during and after the COVID-19 crisis in Phitsanulok, Thailand. It also presents policy recommendations aimed at improving the quality of life for these workers in the local area.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This research highlights the significance of studying the experiences of the workers who returned home in Phitsanulok province and assessing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on various aspects of their lives, as well as on society and in local economies. The study adopts a framework that incorporates the concepts of mobility and public policy to explore and analyze the situation of the workers who returned home to provide valuable insights into their circumstances and propose effective policy recommendations and measures that can contribute to sustainable improvements in their quality of life and overall social well-being. By examining the mobility patterns and decision-making processes of workers returning home, the researcher sought to understand the factors influencing their choices and the consequences of these choices on their lives. It also aims to identify the social and economic implications of their return to their hometowns amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. By utilizing a public policy lens, the study explores the role of government interventions and welfare policies in supporting and enhancing the conditions of the workers.

2.1 Social mobility concept

In 1999, John Urry's (1999) book "Sociology beyond Societies: Mobilities for the Twenty-First Century" had a significant influence on mobility studies within the field of social sciences. Urry's work delved into the concept of mobility, encompassing the movement of people, capital, information, and objects within the context of globalization. He introduced the notions of "scapes" and "flows" as analytical tools for understanding mobility in the 21st century. The concept of scapes refers to the interconnected networks of machines, technologies, organizations, texts, and actors that form nodes within the broader mobility framework. On the other hand, flows represent the movement of people, images, information, money, and waste across national borders, often beyond direct or indirect control by individual societies (Friesen, 2000). These scapes and flows are integral to the functioning of contemporary capitalism within a globalized context (Urry, 1999).

Following these concepts, mobility studies focus on investigating the causes and possibilities of people's movements within various societal and national contexts, considering the intricate interconnections of networks, scapes, and flows. This includes exploring disruptions and sudden changes, such as epidemic crises that lead to large-scale and rapid displacements and mobilities. Therefore, mobility should not be viewed as a linear trajectory but rather as a complex phenomenon that involves movement to and from different places, including the adaptation to new environments and cultures within the living societies and contexts surrounding individuals. In essence, Urry's work has contributed to broadening the understanding of mobility beyond simplistic notions of displacement and adjustment to new societies. It recognizes the multi-faceted nature of mobility, encompassing diverse forms of movement, adaptation, and cultural dynamics within interconnected global networks.

Kaufmann et al. (2004) provided another perspective on mobility by emphasizing the dynamics of social structures within modern societies. They explored the relationship between spatial and social mobility, considering the potential and actual capacity of goods, information, and people to move both geographically and socially. They viewed social structures and dynamics as interdependent with the capacity to displace entities and highlighted the importance of access, competence, and appropriation in mobility. According to this perspective, mobility is not a straightforward movement but rather a dynamic and complex process. It is influenced by political, social, and economic structures that create opportunities and motivations for mobility. Understanding mobility in the context of globalization is particularly relevant. In the case of the workers who returned home in Phitsanulok, it is essential to consider their dynamic mobility, including the factors that motivate them, their capacities, and competencies. This approach can help us comprehend their social mobility and guide the development of responsive policies and measures to support this group in the future. By acknowledging the dynamic nature of mobility, we can better address the needs and challenges faced by the workers in Phitsanulok and promote their well-being and opportunities.

2.2 Public policy

Public policy refers to the actions and decisions of the government in response to public issues. It involves the political process of addressing these issues fairly and encompasses the determination of policy nature, implementation timeframe, and resource allocation. Scholars have provided various interpretations and definitions of public policy to enhance understanding.

Anumanratchathon (2006) defines public policy as the government's activities and decision-making process, serving as a guiding principle for proactive decision-making and leading to actions that contribute to predetermined objectives. Thamrongthanyawong (2007) identifies the characteristics of public policy, stating that it is a product of the political system and rooted in societal issues that the public expects the government to address. It involves a political process that includes interactions among the public, political parties, congress, courts, bureaucracy, executive branch, and local government. It assigns roles for individuals and organizations to participate in policy-making.

Since 2001, there has been a shift in the perspective and approach to public policy. It is no longer viewed as a linear process imposed by the state on the public. The focus has shifted to participation in the policy process and outcomes based on societal needs, leading to a society-centered approach. This approach considers the state as one component of society and emphasizes reflecting the needs of society in policy-making. Public policy is seen as a social consensus that generates policies derived from the public, signifying the direction and aspirations of society. It provides direction, process, and opportunities for public participation at various levels, creating networks and relationships that influence government decisions affecting the public, communities, and society (Sukkumnoed, 2004).

Knill and Tosun (2008) defined public policy as a continuous sequence of actions aimed at addressing societal issues. These policies manifest in various forms, such as laws, regulations, and rules, and are the outcomes of the political system. Furthermore, Kraft and Furlong (2020) elucidated that public policies emerge in response to public issues, serving as the deliberate instruments employed by the government to address these societal challenges.

Overall, public policy is a dynamic and evolving process that involves government actions, societal or public issues, and public participation. It aims to address public concerns and achieve predetermined objectives fairly and inclusively. In the current research, the concept of public policy was applied to analyze the problems and demands of the workers who returned home in Phitsanulok province and propose relevant policies. The process followed the steps of policy formation and policy formulation to support the policymaking of the Thai government in enhancing the quality of life and welfare of this group of workers.

1. Policy Formation: This step involved collaborative efforts to identify and establish policy issues related to the workers. It included studying the situation, analyzing problems and strategies, and gathering relevant academic information. There was coordination with networks and stakeholders from various sectors and management plans were prepared. Setting public agendas and engaging with stakeholders were important tasks during this stage.
2. Policy Formulation: In this step, policy options were identified and developed. Relevant sectors were analyzed, and policy proposals were formulated based on reasoning, ideas, knowledge, understanding, experience, and academic information. A high-quality policy network was established to collectively analyze conditions, opportunities, and the feasibility of policy actions. Consultations with stakeholders were carried out to guide the process and ensure clarity in policy directions.
3. Policy Adoption: Policy adoption refers to the decision-making process and endorsement of policy proposals or the selection of alternative approaches. Clear policy directions were established, with

clear key points and performance indicators established as shared indicators of success. Policy goals may vary depending on the specific public issue, conditions, and objectives. Some issues may focus on local-level policy goals, while others may aim for the implementation of broader public policies leading to tangible success.

4. Policy Implementation: This stage involved pushing the adopted policies towards practical realization according to the established agenda. The decisions on public policies were incorporated into provincial meetings, plans at various organizational levels, and local plans to drive the implementation of policies aimed at achieving successful outcomes.

5. Policy Evaluation: The final stage involved tracking and assessing the progress of policy implementation and the achieved outcomes. Performance indicators were used to measure the progress in driving the policy and evaluate the resulting outcomes.

By applying the public policy concept and following these steps, the research aimed to support the development of policies that enhance the quality of life and welfare of the workers who returned home in Phitsanulok province. The research process involved policy formation, formulation, and proposed recommendations to contribute to the policymaking efforts of the Thai government.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

In this research, a mixed research methodology combining quantitative and qualitative research methods was utilized with the protection of human subjects. The objective of the quantitative research component was to investigate the mobility and economic and social impacts experienced by the workers who returned home during the COVID-19 crisis. This involved analyzing statistical data, such as ages, educational levels, and occupation types, to provide a quantitative understanding of the workers' situations. Moreover, quantitative research was conducted to identify the workers' demands for public policies and measures that could help rehabilitate and enhance their quality of life.

Additionally, qualitative research was employed to gain a deeper understanding of the workers' post-return experiences and their way of life in Phitsanulok. These qualitative research methods included conducting in-depth interviews to explore various aspects such as the well-being status of the workers returning home, and the quality of life that they had experienced in social and economic dimensions. It also sought to uncover their demands, expectations, and aspirations in both their personal lives and work, while identifying the specific needs that could be addressed through supportive state policies.

By employing both quantitative and qualitative research methods, this study sought to provide a comprehensive understanding of the workers' situations, their challenges and opportunities, and the policy interventions that could contribute to their well-being and overall quality of life.

3.1 Participants

In this research, the participants consisted of the workers who had relocated to Phitsanulok province between April 2021 and August 2022. The total population of the workers in this timeframe was 920 individuals. A sample group of 385 workers, who chose to relocate for work within their hometowns due to the effects of COVID-19, was drawn from the population residing in nine districts of Phitsanulok. The selection of these participants employed a specific random sampling technique, combined with simple random sampling, with a predefined margin of error set at 0.05.

For the qualitative study, in-depth interviews were conducted with eighteen workers who returned to their hometowns. The selection criteria for the participants included:

1. Possessing a copy of a house registration in Phitsanulok province, indicating that they had returned to their hometowns.
2. Being 20 years of age or older.
3. Having experienced job termination or voluntarily quitting their job due to the impact of the COVID-19 crisis.

By including both quantitative and qualitative components in the research design, a comprehensive understanding of the workers experiences, challenges, and needs was obtained. The quantitative component provided statistical data on a larger sample size, while the qualitative component allowed for an in-depth exploration of individual experiences and perspectives. The examination of the survey questions' validity and reliability was conducted by assessing the Item-Objective Congruence Index (IOC). This evaluation involved three experts specializing in public policy, public administration, and political science.

3.2 Data collection

In this research, both primary and secondary data were collected to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and needs of the workers who returned home in Phitsanulok province.

Primary data collection involved the use of questionnaires and in-depth interviews with the sample group. For the quantitative component, 385 questionnaires were distributed to the workers selected through specific and simple random sampling. The questionnaire covered various aspects, such as personal and family information, socioeconomic data, migration factors (e.g., age, education level, income, debt, family burden), previous and current occupational capacities, as well as the economic and social impacts of the COVID-19 crisis. The questionnaire also included questions about the respondents' demands for government policies and measures.

For the qualitative component, in-depth interviews were conducted with 18 workers returning home in Phitsanulok province. The interviews followed a semi-structured format, allowing for a deeper exploration of their experiences, perspectives, and aspirations. The data collection process also involved observation, note-taking, and the recording of audio and video during the interviews to capture additional information.

In addition to primary data, secondary data was collected from various sources, such as books, academic textbooks, theses, research articles, and official documents from government agencies and relevant organizations. Databases from agencies like the Provincial Public Health, Provincial Labor Office, Provincial Social Security Office, and local government organizations were also utilized to access relevant information.

By utilizing a combination of primary and secondary data, the research aimed to gather comprehensive and reliable information to support the analysis and policy recommendations for the well-being of workers returning home in Phitsanulok province.

3.3 Data analysis

In the research, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected, and different methods of analysis were employed for each type of data.

For the qualitative data obtained from the in-depth interviews, a descriptive analysis was conducted. This involved analyzing the responses and narratives of the participants and summarizing the findings using descriptive statistics such as percentages and means. The analysis focused on describing the personal and economic status of the workers who returned home, as well as the social and economic impacts they experienced due to the COVID-19 crisis. The demands of the workers for government policies were also analyzed and presented descriptively. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the interviewees.

Regarding the quantitative data analysis, content analysis was performed on all the collected data and documents. This involved systematically categorizing and coding the information to identify key themes and patterns in the responses. The content analysis allowed for a deeper exploration of the concepts and issues related to mobility, as discussed in the interviews with the workers who returned home.

By employing both qualitative and quantitative data analysis methods, the research aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the experiences, perspectives, and demands of the workers who returned home in Phitsanulok province. The findings from the analysis were discussed with a specific focus on the concept of mobility and its implications for policy recommendations.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research findings delineate the socio-economic impacts on the workers who returned home, encompassing motivating factors or circumstances leading to their return, effects on individual and household monthly income, and household debt. Furthermore, the study addresses the impacts on the quality of life and livelihood of these workers, and suggests policies and measures for improvement, as outlined below.

4.1 The socio-economic impacts on the workers who returned home

The demographics of the 385 respondents showed a distribution of 49.9% female, 42.6% male, and 7.5% identifying as non-binary gender. By age, 30.9% were aged 31–40 years, 29.4% were aged 23–30 years, 17.4% were aged 41–50 years, 12.2% were aged 51–60 years, 6.5% were aged 18–22 years, and 3.6% were 60 years and older. Educationally, 28.6% held a bachelor's degree, 19.7% had a high school level education, 10.4% had completed upper elementary or lower secondary education, and 8.1% had early elementary school education. Among the respondents, 9.6% possessed a higher vocational certificate, 5.7% held a vocational certificate, and 3.4% had either no formal education or had pursued non-formal education (Figure 1).
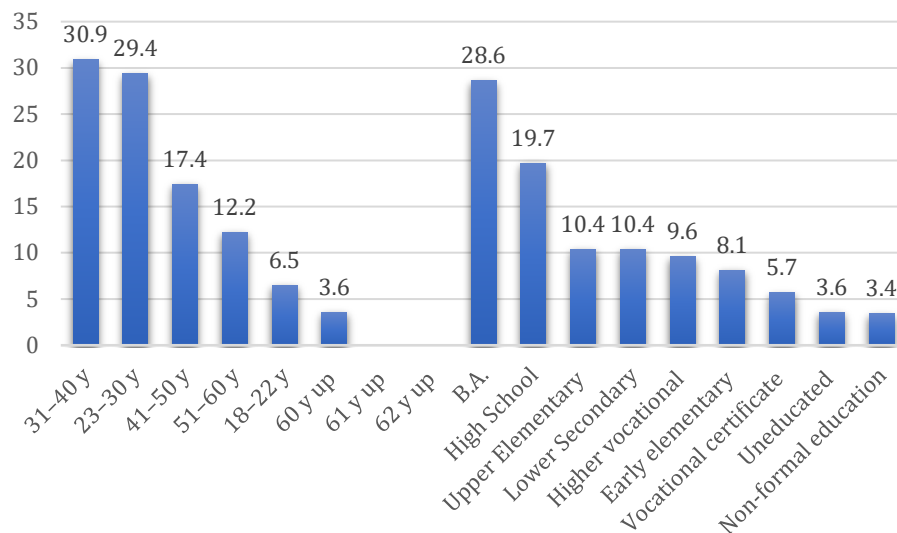
Figure 1: Age groups and education levels of workers who returned home in Phitsanulok, Thailand

In terms of family status, the majority of the respondents were single (49.4%), and 38.7% were married. Otherwise, 4.7% were widowed, 3.8% divorced and 2.3% separated. The majority had 1–3 family members, comprising 54.3% of the respondents, while 24% had 4–6 family members, and 4.1% had more than 6 family members. Single respondents were 12.2% of the total.

The majority of respondents resided in Phitsanulok province, accounting for 92.7%. The remaining 7.3% had their domicile in other provinces, such as Samut Prakan, Rayong, Chonburi, Bangkok, Khon Kaen, Maha Sarakham, Ubon Ratchathani, Sakon Nakhon, Phetchabun, Phichit, Uthai Thani, Chiang Mai, Sukhothai, Satun, Phuket, and Trang.

The majority (65.7%) of respondents had returned for more than 12 months, while 12.7% had returned home for 4–6 months, 8.8% for 7–11 months, 7.3% for 1–3 months, and recent returnees with less than one month, was 5.5% of the total. Therefore, the majority of the workforce consisted of individuals who had returned home or had been working in Phitsanulok province for more than 12 months.

Furthermore, a significant number of people expressed their intention not to move back. The majority of individuals returned home after the first wave of the COVID-19 outbreak (December 2019–November 2020) and the second wave (December 2020–March 2021); a combined total of 51.4% of the respondents.

The motivating factors or circumstances for the workers who returned home included being laid off, becoming unemployed, or resigning (29.6%); a personal desire to return home or move to other work in Phitsanulok province (23.9%); being unemployed and unable to find a job (16.9%); family reasons (14.3%); graduation from university (11.7%); and other reasons (3.6%) (Figure 2).
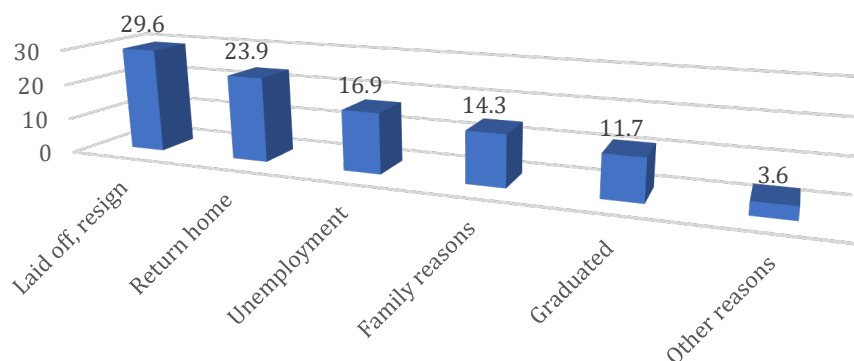

Figure 2: Motivation factors for returning home of workers in Phitsanulok province, Thailand

The study found that the socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 crisis have intensified the income crisis of the workers. The majority of households experienced a decrease in monthly income, while also facing an increase in household debt. Specifically, 59.7% of the respondents reported a decrease in individual and household income ranging from 1,000 to 5,000 baht per month. Furthermore, 17.1% experienced a decrease of 5,000 to 10,000 baht per month, and 4.9% faced a loss of income amounting to 20,000 baht or more. In terms of household debt, 44.2% of the workers reported an increase in debt ranging from 1,000 to 5,000 baht. Additionally, 36.9% experienced an increase in debt of 5,000 to 10,000 baht, while 9.9% faced higher debt levels of 10,000 to 20,000 baht. Furthermore, 4.9% of the respondents had higher debts of 30,000 baht or more. These findings indicate that the COVID-19 crisis has had a significant impact on the income and debt levels of the workers, exacerbating their financial challenges (Figure 3).
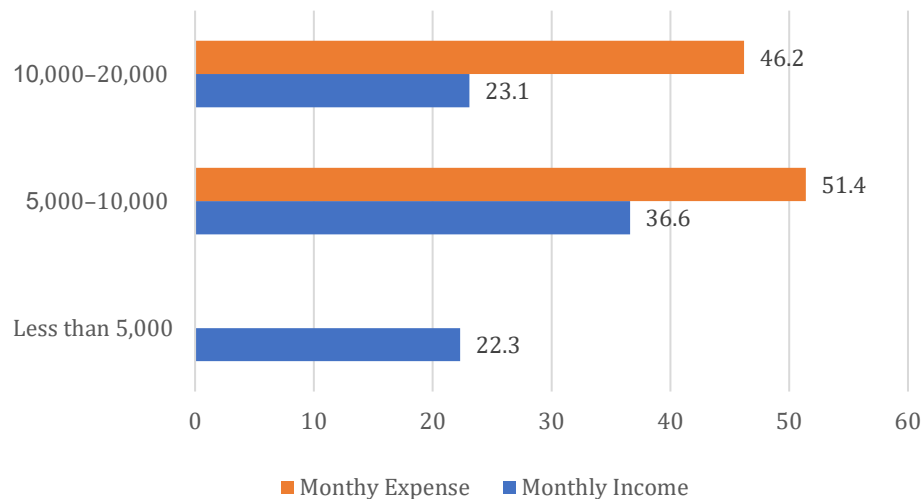

Figure 3: Individual and household monthly income and increasing household expense of the workers returning home in Phitsanulok province, Thailand

The research findings align with the report from the Bank of Thailand (2020) regarding the increase in household debt in Thailand. The COVID-19 crisis has intensified debt issues and negatively impacted people's living conditions and economic circumstances. The Bank of Thailand reported that household debt in Thailand reached more than 80% of GDP before, during, and after the COVID-19 crisis, with a rapid increase to about 90% of GDP during the crisis. This high level of household debt poses a long-term risk and has a negative effect on GDP.

The study found that the majority of workers returning home were young and middle-aged female workers aged 23 to 40 years, with a higher rate compared to young male workers. These female workers were often recent graduates with bachelor's degrees from universities. This finding aligns with the Bank of Thailand's report on the impacts of COVID-19 on youth unemployment. The economic deterioration during the pandemic resulted in a high unemployment rate, especially in the service and trade sectors, particularly in central Thailand's economic zones. The unemployment of the youth group was also attributed to their lack of work experience and a mismatch between their qualifications and the labor market (Hou et al., 2022). Other worker groups in the study, mostly consisting of female workers, were low-skilled or low-income workers with monthly incomes averaging less than 5,000 to 10,000 baht. Their education level was below high school. These groups were identified as the most vulnerable and heavily affected by the government's measures and policies during the COVID-19 crisis.

According to the Puey Ungphakorn Institute for Economic Research in 2020, the majority of female workers affected by government measures during the COVID-19 pandemic were in the age groups of 26 to 35 years and 36 to 45 years. These workers had varying levels of education, ranging from primary school level or lower to a bachelor's degree or higher. Among them, workers aged 25 to 26 were more engaged in educational activities and often held professional jobs that provided work security and the ability to work online from home. This allowed them to adapt more easily to the effects of COVID-19 compared to low-skilled workers whose jobs required on-site presence and were restricted by government regulations (Lekfuangfu et al., 2020).

Based on these findings, the workers who returned home can be categorized into two groups: low-skilled workers and newly graduated workers, with the latter mostly comprising younger individuals. These

workers belong to the new middle-class or lower-middle-class category, earning an average income of 5,000 to 10,000 baht per month. To improve their quality of life and economic opportunities, government policies should aim to support this group.

The study also revealed that many of the young workers who recently graduated from universities or gained skilled experience in central Bangkok or other capital cities chose to start their own small businesses in their hometowns. These ventures included restaurants, homestays, and organic farms, depending on their capacity, competence, available capital, and socioeconomic and political conditions. For instance, one worker successfully established a homestay business in Nakhonchum sub-district, Nakhon Thai, Phitsanulok, with support from their family and utilizing their knowledge and experience gained while working for a company in Bangkok. Moreover, local government organizations, tourism bodies, and academic institutions played a role in promoting Nakhonchum as an attractive tourist destination and eco-tourism village as part of the government's tourism policy.

Another notable example is the case of the workers who chose to start their own small businesses after resigning from their jobs in Bangkok. For example, in Torte sub-district, Wat Bot district, and Saiyoi sub-district, Neonmaprang district in Phitsanulok, some workers decided to establish organic farms. The success of these endeavors can be attributed to the support provided by community enterprises in their respective areas. These community enterprises played a crucial role in upskilling the workers by providing them with knowledge and entrepreneurship skills. They also facilitated access to capital through loan programs offered by community-savings groups. This support system empowered the worker returning home to overcome the challenges of starting a business and fostered their economic independence and growth.

Hence, the availability of a supportive opportunity structure played a crucial role in facilitating the endeavors of workers returning home to establish small businesses using their professional skills and capital. The development of entrepreneurial skills was further nurtured through the assistance of local communities, government organizations, and other relevant stakeholders. However, it is important to note that these workers did not necessarily have the intention to permanently settle in their new locations or situations. Their decisions were influenced by the dynamic interplay of global and national economic conditions as well as government policies. This phenomenon aligns with the concepts of "scapes" and "flows" described by Urry (1999). These concepts illustrate the extensive mobility opportunities involving diverse elements such as people, finances, resources, information, ideas, technologies, and goods. These flows traverse various complex scapes within and across societies and national boundaries, reflecting the interconnected nature of mobility and its impact on individuals' choices and opportunities.

Moreover, Urry's argument highlights that returning home does not necessarily mean engaging in agricultural work, as many of the workers lack the necessary skills, knowledge, capital, and technology required for successful farming. Instead, these workers often find employment in informal sectors or non-agricultural roles, such as low-skilled hired workers. The research findings align with this argument, indicating that a majority of the workers were general contractors, hired workers, or self-employed individuals, while only a minority were engaged in farming or agricultural work.

The agricultural sector alone cannot support the workforce of the workers due to the differences in knowledge, skills, experience, and costs associated with agricultural production. Moreover, the Thai rural economy has undergone significant changes since the impact of the 1997 economic crisis, shifting toward a capital-based industrial economy. Rural individuals have had to adapt to this new economic landscape, seeking diverse employment opportunities beyond traditional agriculture (Kitirianglarp, 2015). This shift has led to income diversification and new professions emerging in rural areas, such as hydroponic farming, organic farming, community restaurants, and coffee shops. These endeavors are primarily driven by the new middle-class individuals who prioritize niche markets and lifestyle choices rather than mass production for the market economy.

Therefore, home-return mobility does not necessarily result in a complete reagrarianization of Thai localities. While some workers may return to work in the agriculture sector, they often combine farming activities with small-scale entrepreneurship, reflecting the changing consumption habits and aspirations of the population. Economic and social conditions play a significant role in driving home-return mobility, with individuals seeking a better quality of life and economic well-being by moving from urban areas to rural areas or even abroad. The COVID-19 crisis has further exacerbated this trend, with reduced working hours and salaries forcing workers to return home. Crucially, the government must implement economic measures to support the workers who returned home, including guaranteed income welfare and funding support. Establishing local industrial systems, particularly in the agriculture and food industries, can create employment opportunities while also enhancing the vocational skills and capacity of the workforce.

The study also reveals the impacts on the quality of life and livelihood of workers returning home, particularly in terms of limited access to social welfare benefits. Many workers lacked financial assistance,

unemployment compensation, and social security, and faced challenges in accessing quality healthcare and medications during the COVID-19 pandemic. These factors contributed to decreased self-reliance, increased stress, anxiety, mental illness, and housing instability. Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive approach that ensures access to social welfare support, healthcare, and housing for the workers.

The social and health implications of the workers returning home extend beyond the economic impacts and have profound effects at the household and local levels. The uncertainty and challenges faced by this group of workers contribute to increased stress levels and cases of depression. These social and health consequences not only affect the well-being of the labor force but also have broader implications for the development of local economies and societies.

The inability to effectively utilize the potential of returning laborers as a valuable workforce and catalyst for development hinder economic and social progress in the affected communities. The rising number of unemployed individuals and declining income levels within local communities have a direct impact on overall employment and unemployment rates in the Thai economy. Moreover, the social quality of life for the labor force and their families is significantly affected, particularly in cases where pregnant workers will have the additional responsibility of caring for children while also caring for elderly family members in their households in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis.

To address these challenges, it is crucial to implement measures that support the reintegration of the workers into their hometowns in the later stages of the pandemic and prepare for future emergencies. This requires adequate budget allocation and the development of public infrastructure, healthcare, and comprehensive social systems at the local level. Local authorities, who are more connected to the labor force in their respective regions, should play a pivotal role in implementing these measures. Income security systems, such as income welfare systems, should be put in place to provide a safety net for returning workers. Efforts should also be made to improve the social quality of life, ensuring access to essential services and amenities.

Creating local employment opportunities targeted at individuals with registered residency in the area is of paramount importance. This approach helps stimulate economic activity, generate employment, and enhance the social and economic well-being of the local community. Local authorities should tailor their actions to the specific needs of the target groups, taking into account the unique challenges faced by the workers in their respective regions. By implementing these measures, the social and economic integration of workers returning home can be facilitated, promoting sustainable development and enhancing the overall resilience of local communities.

In conclusion, the socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 crisis have affected the economic and social status of the workers who returned home, particularly young female workers. The study highlights the importance of government policies that provide support and opportunities for these workers, including addressing their income crisis, reducing household debt, and promoting entrepreneurship and economic development in their respective hometowns.

4.2 Policy recommendations

This article proposes measures and policy recommendations to promote the demands and enhance the quality of life for the workers who returned home, as described below:

4.2.1 Short-term measures:

The proposed short-term measures aim to address the immediate needs of the workers and mitigate the negative impacts they face. These measures include:

1. The Ministry of Labour should offer compensation to workers who have been compelled to cease working, experienced reduced working hours, or are without work due to economic crises, disasters/emergencies, or government policies. The compensation should be at least half of their daily income or not less than the minimum wage rate per day in the area, for at least 90 days. This compensation serves to alleviate the impact of unemployment, job resignations, and income loss on the quality of life of workers.

2. The Ministry of Health should acknowledge the substantial social and health impacts faced by workers and their families, which may include issues like stress and depression. It is imperative to offer comprehensive counseling services at the local level as part of remedial measures. Surveys should be conducted to assess the specific needs of the affected workers, and various channels of communication should be utilized to disseminate information and provide support. Collaboration among responsible agencies, including the Department of Mental Health, public hospitals, and local authorities, is necessary to address the social and mental well-being of the workers.

3. The Ministry of Labour should improve communication and knowledge-sharing regarding labor laws and social security benefits. This is vital for employers, employees, as well as self-employed and hired workers. This measure ensures that workers are aware of their rights, entitlements, and available support systems. It also promotes transparency and fairness in employment arrangements.

4. The purpose of these short-term measures is to provide immediate support for the workers, to alleviate their financial burdens, and to address the social and health impacts that they face upon returning home. By implementing these measures, the well-being and rights of workers in different employment arrangements can be safeguarded, ultimately improving their overall quality of life.

4.2.2 Medium-term measures:

The Thai government should establish income welfare systems or capital funds with low or no interest rates to support the workers affected by the economic crisis during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. These systems should offer accessible capital to support their entrepreneurship or participation in local economic activities in their hometowns.

These medium-term measures aim to provide sustainable solutions by providing financial support and resources for the workers to rebuild their lives in their hometowns. The income welfare systems or capital funds empower them to become self-employed or engage in entrepreneurial activities, thereby contributing to the local economy and improving their overall well-being.

4.2.3 Long-term measures:

In this section, recommendations for long-term measures to enhance the quality of life for the workers who returned home encompass:

1. The Thai government should promote collaborative efforts between the public and private sectors to create employment opportunities and advance sustainable development. This entails joint initiatives focused on poverty alleviation and sustainable growth. By working together, the government and private sector can foster the development of industries, local tourism, services, e-commerce, and local education. Specific training programs or certification schemes should be established to equip unemployed workers, new graduates, and low-skilled workers with the necessary skills. These programs should align with the needs of the private sector and government development goals, enabling participants to seamlessly enter the workforce or contribute to sectors such as manufacturing, tourism, services, healthcare, and community enterprises. Local banks can collaborate with government organizations and community enterprises to support local entrepreneurship.

2. The Ministry of Labour should establish a systematic and regularly updated data collection system to store information about the workers who returned home. The data should be to facilitate collaborative planning, project design, and activities involving various sectors, including government, private sector, and educational institutions. This data can be utilized to develop workforce skills and identify the necessary occupations that align with the evolving needs of workers, employers, and the demands of the 21st-century labor market.

The long-term measures focus on fostering sustainable solutions through collaboration among the government, private sector, and local communities. These measures aim to create lasting employment opportunities, develop local industries, enhance workforce skills, and address the needs of workers and employers. By collecting and utilizing accurate data, policymakers can effectively plan and implement measures that align with the dynamic labor market and promote inclusive and sustainable development.

4.2.4 Policy recommendations:

In terms of policy recommendations, the proposal encompasses the establishment of an income welfare system, the advancement of local industries, enhancement of skills and knowledge relevant to 21st-century occupations, and the promotion of state decentralization, as outlined below:

1. The Thai government should implement a comprehensive income welfare system or financial assistance program that provides support to individuals who are compelled to leave their jobs or face income loss due to economic crises, natural disasters/emergencies, or government policies. This program should cover various occupational groups, including self-employed and contract workers, and provide income security or minimum wage that aligns with the cost of living. The aim is to mitigate the economic impact, unemployment, and poverty in the country.

2. The Ministry of Industry and the Ministry of Labour should collaborate to promote the development of local industries in various sectors to generate employment and work

opportunities for the workforce. This policy not only encourages unemployed workers to return to work but also contributes to the overall growth of the local economy. Examples include promoting agricultural and food industries, electronics, healthcare, tourism, and services, as well as basic public utilities industries. Collaboration between the government, private sector, and local authorities is crucial in realizing these goals.

3. The Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation, the Ministry of Labour, and the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security should collaborate to enhance the capabilities of individuals across all age groups. This should focus on improving skills and knowledge necessary for 21st-century occupations and addressing the evolving demands of the labor force through reskilling and upskilling initiatives. This involves establishing vocational training programs, certification schemes, and other educational opportunities at the local level. By equipping individuals with relevant skills, they can engage in supplementary occupations, generate income while studying, or be prepared for new professions and employment opportunities when relocating or returning to their hometowns.

4. The Thai government should implement meaningful decentralization of power, especially concerning budget allocation and management. This will aid in advancing the development of basic infrastructure and public services at the local level. This includes investing in education, healthcare, information technology, housing, and vocational development. The objective is to enhance the quality of life in local communities, ensuring equality, meeting basic needs, and promoting overall well-being. The objective of this approach is to create favorable and high-quality local environments that enable residents to thrive and contribute to local development.

These policy recommendations seek to address the challenges faced by the workers who returned home and promote their demands and better quality of life. By implementing these measures, governments can support the workforce, facilitate sustainable economic growth, and enhance the overall well-being of individuals and society.

Policy evaluation should encompass process, outcome, and impact evaluations. Process evaluation should center on assessing the collaboration among government offices, local administration, industries, and the private sector in policy implementation. Outcome evaluation should measure the number of the workers who benefit from the income welfare system and experience growth in 21st-century occupations and skills. Impact evaluation should be to evaluate economic impacts, such as increases in the income and capital of workers returning home and reductions in unemployment and poverty within the country.

5. CONCLUSION

The mobility of the workers in Phitsanulok reflects the changing labor landscape in the country, particularly among local communities. The post-COVID-19 era has prompted workers to make different choices regarding their employment trajectories. Some young workers returned home to start small businesses and upgrade their skills as entrepreneurs, while others found work in small farms within their hometowns. Many were unable to afford living expenses in cities and sought a better quality of life and economic conditions in their hometowns. Although some planned to return to cities and industrial zones to find employment, most preferred working in their hometowns due to improved living standards, well-being, and familial and economic circumstances.

This situation presents a crucial opportunity for local development as the majority of the workers are young workers who represent valuable human capital for both local communities and the country. However, the main challenge lies in the lack of financial resources and capacity within local government organizations to enhance the well-being of residents, including access to healthcare and basic facilities, as well as investment in local economic development. Therefore, the research recommends true decentralization of power to local government organizations, particularly in budget allocation for public health and improving the quality of life for residents and workers returning home. Further to this, the government should implement an income welfare policy to provide financial support to workers who may face job loss or unemployment due to economic crises or government policies.

For long-term measures, it is essential to survey and monitor the number of workers returning home to effectively respond to their needs. Analyzing data on labor skills and workforce demands is also crucial for planning and developing workforce capabilities, including employability and job-specific skills. Consequently, the long-term state policy should focus on reskilling and upskilling initiatives, as well as implementing a

welfare state policy that enhances the well-being of Thai workers through income insurance and ensuring a minimum wage. Furthermore, developing local agricultural and food industries, tourism, and service sectors will provide employment opportunities for the workers who returned home, including both the youth and elder workforce, fostering sustainable economic growth in the future.

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