



# Research Brief

## Migrant Workers in the Tourism Industry.

This research brief is based on a research project funded by SHAPE SEA and carried out by Elizabeth J. Kolbe, an MA in Human Rights Graduate of IHRP, Mahidol University, Thailand.



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### **Introduction and Background to the Project.**

Koh Phi Phi, a popular beach resort in Thailand, and has seen a boom in its tourism industry particularly in the years following the devastating tsunami of 2004. Much has been done to rebuild the island into a high-end tourist destination. There is a corresponding increase in the demand for workers in the tourism sector, especially hotels, tour agencies, and food & beverage establishments. Consequently, the island has seen an influx of migrant workers, predominantly from Myanmar but with a smaller number of Europeans, to fill the workforce. The impact of an increased presence of migrant workers on the local workforce, as well as social, cultural, and economic changes, are of concern to the local community.

There are more than 3 million foreign workers in Thailand, mainly in low-end, labour intensive jobs, as many Thai workers left this sector to work in more capital- or technology-intensive manufacturing industries. Migrant workers are blamed for taking away the jobs and suppressing the wages of local workers, and blamed for causing social problems in the host country. This is particularly the case on the small Thai island of Koh Phi Phi where there are many migrant workers in the booming tourism industry. This research examples the perceptions of migrant workers by locals on Phi Phi island, and discusses the potential impact of these perceptions.

### **Methodology**

Field research was undertaken during 2016 by interviewing key stakeholders including residents on Koh Phi Phi, local workers, migrant workers, public authorities, and external experts. The research focusing on the experiences and perception of individuals, details, primarily through questionnaires and interviews. The interviews of local residents and public authorities covered issues of the perception towards migrant workers, and interviews with migrant workers addressed the situation of migrant workers. External experts provided a context to the tourism industry and the status of migrant workers. This research was undertaken for a Master's Thesis at Mahidol's IHRP.

### **Main Findings**

Locals in Koh Phi Phi typically adopt a negative view towards migrant workers. However, a key finding is that many stakeholders have misperceptions about the impact of migrant workers on their lives. These flawed perceptions have the potential to create tensions between the foreign and local communities, which may impact the economic growth on the island for the benefit of both the residents and the State.

This research finds that the impact to the local community caused by the workers is limited. The common perception is that the presence of migrant workers suppresses wages and the availability of jobs for locals, are a cause of social and cultural ills such as crime, and are a burden on the healthcare and education system. With the influx of foreign workers, it is possible that differences in economic, cultural, and social norms may contribute to friction between local residents and migrant workers, but the research shows this is not at the level most locals assume.

While the common perception is that migrant workers take the jobs of the locals, the research shows that this is not the case. Rather, most migrant workers work in complementary positions and rarely have the same jobs as the local Thai population. Migrant workers take up jobs which locals either do not want or do not have the skills to do. These jobs typically include hotel occupations such as housekeeping, laundry service, and bellboy, as well as restaurant occupations such as cooks, servers, and dishwashers. They also include jobs where locals do not have the skills, such as English speaking positions. In particular, because Thai Muslims make up a majority in the local population in Koh Phi Phi, restaurant work which requires contact with pork cannot be undertaken and therefore migrant workers fill the gap.

The research found no local participant who wanted work but was unemployed due to the presence of migrant workers on the island. There was also no evidence suggesting that wages or earnings were suppressed because migrant workers were willing to earn less than their Thai counterparts; rather, some migrant workers earned more because they possessed better work abilities.

There is a justified concern that an increase in the number of Western migrant workers may in the future lead to greater competition for jobs in the tourism industry because the work needs good English-speaking skills, and many Thais living on Koh Phi Phi may be disadvantaged against a Western or even Burmese job-seeker with such skills.

The presence of migrant workers has had some marginal social and cultural impact on the local population. For example, the local population is concerned when Burmese workers dispose of waste inappropriately or over-harvest fish from the seas, while Westerners create social unrest with late-night parties and showing a lack of respect to the locals, as when western men touch women inappropriately. This response is relevant both for the migrant workers and the tourist population.

Despite the Westerners being the main source of social problems, the locals have developed a fear towards Burmese workers only, who are viewed as potential criminals, who commit theft, or engage in the use and sale of drugs. Some of locals say they have changed their daily habits, such as walking alone at night to avoid encounters with these workers. Yet the research participants who speak of such fears are unable to point to any direct experiences of these acts by Burmese workers. Most of them have only received the information in the form of, sometimes multiple levels, of hearsay from others. While the police have indicated that some migrant workers commit such crimes, local Thai residents also commit such crimes. Further, it is often not possible for migrant workers to commit crimes, particularly drug crimes, without a local Thai resident providing support and abetting the acts.

The research argues that there appears to be little correlation between the presence of migrant workers and problems in the labour environment in Koh Phi Phi. Most migrant workers make positive contributions, especially to the tourism industry, by taking up jobs which would otherwise be left vacant because locals are not willing to do them. There are a small number of migrant workers who compete directly with locals in businesses by selling tour tickets or accommodation, but these are cases where there migrant worker can speak English.

In respect of social ills, the suspicion and fear of the locals towards Burmese workers is uncorroborated by crime statistics or factual evidence. Negative personal experience for the locals are exaggerated by rumour within a relatively small community. The existence of such unfounded

fears is a cause for concern, for it drives a wedge between the local and non-citizen community, possibly resulting in greater needless social friction.

### **Recommendations**

As the preceding discussion has demonstrated, the perceived negative socio-economic and cultural impact of migrant workers in Koh Phi Phi are largely unfounded. Yet such mistaken beliefs among the local population has the potential to create rifts and social friction between migrant workers and locals on the island. The case of Ko Phi Phi Island is similar to many tourism sites using migrant workers throughout Southeast Asia. A better understanding between the migrant worker and local community will ensure that the island thrives economically and socially.

Recommendations to address this problem include:

- (1) Bridging the gap between the local and migrant workers community on the island, by a body such as a business group, local government office, or NGO organize a program which:
  - (a) Generates awareness among local stakeholders of the economic importance of migrant workers
  - (b) Combats untrue rumours through positive stories or facts such as accurate crime statistics
  - (c) Educates migrant workers, especially European migrants, about Thai culture and society so as to avoid breaking social norms
- (2) Support the learning of language and technical skills of local Thai residents so that they can be more competitive in the job market;
- (3) Recognize the rights of migrant workers to be regularized so they have employment protection, and protection from social discrimination.