Migration and Well-being of Migrants : A Comparative Study of Thai and Cambodian Migrant Workers

Sumalee Chaisuparakul
Associate Professor,
Chandrakasem Rajabhat University
E-mail : chaisumaree@hotmail.com

Abstract

This research had the following three objectives: (1) To study the motivation and patterns of migration of Thai and Cambodian migrant workers, (2) To study the well-being of Thai migrant workers in comparison with their Cambodian counterparts; and (3) To study the migrant workers perceptions of the meaning of the term "well-being" in their own context. This research hypothesized that the migrant workers would have a greater level of well-being after migrating than before, and that Thai migrant workers would have a greater level of well-being than the Cambodian migrant workers since the Thai migration is domestic, thus requiring less adaptation, and the Thai migrant workers would experience less prejudice from local residents compared to non-Thai migrant workers. This was a qualitative research study which used in-depth interviews to collect information from 18 key informants, including seven Thai migrant workers, nine Cambodian migrant workers, and two Thai employers of Cambodian migrant workers. The data were analyzed in accordance with interpretive sociology and phenomenology principles. This study found that both Thai and Cambodian migrant workers were seeking better work conditions and moved in a circular migration pattern. Overall well-being was greater as a consequence of the migration, and Cambodian migrant workers gave a higher self-assessment rating for their well-being than their Thai counterparts. Both groups of migrant workers gave highest priority to family happiness. It is recommended that in order to improve their well-being, both the employers and migrant workers should be encouraged to increase the skills of these workers so that they can move to a higher-paid employment.

Keywords : migration, well-being, circular migration, Cambodian migrant workers

Introduction

In the history of mankind, migration has been a constant and pervasive phenomenon, usually in the search for a better life. Through analysis of the human genome, the very first migrants moved out of East Africa in different directions and at different time periods, and eventually populating all regions of the world. Indeed, it can be said that migration is as old as civilization (Abeelen, 2007). Migration is also a mechanism of conflict resolution in the home community across the dimensions of economics, politics, religious beliefs and cultural difference.

The United Nations (UN) reported that, in 2013, there were an estimated 232 million migrants (or 3.2% of the global total of seven billion population) and, of these, nearly half (48%) were women (United Nations, 2013). The UN created "International Migrants Day" as the 18th of December each year in order to provide greater recognition of the impact of migration on society, highlight the efforts and sacrifices of migrants, emphasize their rights, and showcase their contribution to the social and economic development of the origin and destination communities.

Even though most migrants are able to remit money back home to improve their family's economic situation, many international migrant workers face challenges of adjusting to a new land and culture. Some are exploited or trafficked. Thus, the UN is pressuring countries to give more attention to the welfare of migrants beyond mere economic welfare. For the year 2013, the UN issued a "World Migration Report on Migrant Well-being and Development." This report includes the results of a 2009-11 Gallup World Poll of a sample of 25,000 migrants, compared with responses from 440,000 non-migrants in 150 countries around the world. Some of the questions in the survey included a subjective, self-assessment of well-being. That poll found that migrants invariably travel to places of higher economic status than their home community, and generally feel they are better off than if they had stayed at home. By contrast, the non-migrants had a greater self-assessed sense of well-being than the migrants. It is noteworthy that, if the migration is to a place with a similar level economic development as their homeland, the migrant workers may not feel any better off, or actually may feel less well off than prior to migrating (IOM, 2013).

In Thailand, there are two significant categories of migration. Internal migration, particularly from rural to urban areas has been continuous since 1980 to the present. As a result, over one-third of the de facto Bangkok population is migrant (Jampaklay et al. 2013). The second category is cross-border migration to Thailand, largely from Thailand's three lower-income neighbors (Myanmar, Cambodia, and Lao PDR) which have bi-lateral agreements (MOU) to facilitate labor migration to Thailand. It has been estimated that there are approximately 3 to 4 million migrant workers in Thailand, both legal and illegal (Sciortio, Rosalia and Sureeporn Punpuing, 2009). It is further projected that the demand for cross-border migrant workers will increase to 5.36 million by 2025 (IOM and ARCM, 2013). The demand for low-skilled labor is concentrated in the Thai construction, production and services sectors, and the growth of these sectors in the coming years will further intensify the magnetic effect of Thailand for labor vis a vis its neighbors (IOM, 2011). Since both foreign and Thai lower-skilled migrant workers are urgently needed in the continuity of the Thai

economic sector, the well-being of these migrant workers should be seriously concerned in order to keep these manpower in long-term employment. Thai society genuinely endorses the concept of well-being. Ever since the economic crisis of 1997, there has been a paradigm shift away from the GDP indicator of well-being to the GNH (or Gross National Happiness) indicator, endorsed by the UN in 2011 (Prompakping, 2103). The National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB) in the 7th five-year plan (1992-96) included a 'well-being index' which has continued to be used as a yardstick of social development (Pipat, 2007). Thus, this research was interested in investigating the state of well-being among migrants by conducting a comparison of Thai and Cambodian migrant workers, and to explore the migrants' perception of the meaning of well-being in the context of their own lives. The Cambodian migrant workers are chosen because of their similarities with the Thais in terms of geography and culture, and their increasing number of migrants to Thailand.

Purposes

This research had the following three objectives: (1) To study the motivation and patterns of migration of Thai and Cambodian migrant workers; (2) To study the well-being of Thai migrant workers in comparison with their Cambodian counterparts; and (3) To study the migrant workers perceptions of the meaning of the term "well-being" in their own context.

Hypotheses

This research hypothesized that the migrant workers would have a greater level of well-being after migrating than before, and that Thai migrant workers would have a greater level of well-being than the Cambodian migrant workers since the Thai migration is domestic, thus requiring less adaptation, and would experience less prejudice from local residents compared to non-Thai migrant workers. Benefit of Research

The results of this research should help Thai society to better understand the living conditions, challenges, sacrifice, and happiness of both Thai and Cambodian migrant workers. These data should help inform migration policy, clarify areas that need improvement, and help programs better address the challenges and needs of the migrants.

Research Process

This was a qualitative research study which used in-depth interviews to collect information from key informants, selected by purposive sampling. The interviews were conducted until the information gathered are saturated, thus, yielded the number of 18 key informants, including seven Thai migrant workers, nine Cambodian migrant workers, and two Thai employers of Cambodian migrant workers. The migrant workers were at least age 20 years, had been migrants for at least two years, and for the Cambodian migrant workers, should be able to communicate in Thai. The researcher engaged the services of a bi-lingual interpreter in case the Cambodian respondents needed more detailed assistance. Both the Thai and Cambodian migrant workers had to be formally employed in lower-skilled trades with minimum wage (300 baht a day), so that their income and condition of work are comparable. Interviews were conducted during March 2015 in Bangkok. To construct the questions on wellbeing, the researcher adapted the items from the well-being

index used in the NESDB which cover the following seven dimensions: (1) Health; (2) Knowledge; (3) Work life; (4) Income and expenditures; (5) Family life; (6) Living/working environment; and (7) Good governance of the public sector (Prompakping, 2013). Although the index was aimed for quantitative measurement, these dimensions can also be studied in qualitative approach. Moreover, these dimensions cover the basic condition of well-being in general and the findings on these dimensions will provide specific understanding and improvement on each dimension.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed in accordance with interpretive sociology and phenomenology principles as developed by Alfred Schutz (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). The principal assumption of these approaches holds that reality is not the objective truth but is based on the perception of beholder. Thus, this analysis attempts to view well-being through the eyes of the migrant workers themselves.

Summary of Findings

Because this was a qualitative study with a small sample, the findings are not necessarily generalizable to the larger community of migrants. The key findings are as follows:

Expected Benefit

The results of this research should help Thai society to better understand the living conditions, challenges, sacrifice, and happiness of both Thai and Cambodian migrant workers. These data should help inform migration policy, clarify areas that need improvement, and help programs better address the challenges and needs of the migrants.

Motivation to migrate: Nearly all the respondents said they had migrated for better employment opportunities; one (a Thai female) migrated to be with her spouse while another moved to take care of her sister who was studying in Bangkok under the mother's request. The Thai migrant workers came from lower-income rural families, most of whom did not own land, and whose relatives worked as wage laborers to make ends meet. Some came from families which owned small plots of rice paddy (6-10 rai) but usually these were in the more arid parts of the country, allowing for only one rice crop per year. The rice crop was not enough for family subsistence. All the Cambodian migrant workers came from very poor rural households, with no or little owned land (1-3 rai). One female Cambodian migrant workers said her family had to evacuate to a refugee camp on the Thai border during the reign of the Cambodian Rouge. When her family returned to their home community, they found that their land had been usurped. Thus, she and her siblings decided to seek work in Thailand since they knew they could not find subsistence work in Cambodia. Their motivation to migrate supported the neo-classical theory named "the new economics of labour migration" (Castles and Ozkul, 2014) that decisions to migrate are not made by individuals but by family, who value migration as a way of diversifying resources and generating income to support the family.

Patterns of migration: The predominant pattern of movement of these migrant workers is circular migration. The European Commission (EC) defines circular migration "as a form of migration that is managed in a way allowing some degree of legal

mobility back and forth between two countries". (European Commission 2007, cited by Castles and Ozkul, 2014). All the Thai migrant workers had moved to urban areas when they were in their mid to late teens (after completing compulsory education). Their current episode of migration (at the time of the interview) was not their first. Many go back and forth between the home community and the worksite. Some return home to help with the planting or harvesting of crops even though they may only supervise contract farmers. Others may go back when there are jobs offered such as construction of a house. Some of the female Thai migrant workers returned home for periods of time to sell food. If income from that activity was inadequate, then these migrant workers would return to the urban worksite until they could save enough to return home again. All of the Cambodian migrant workers had migrated to Thailand at the age of 17-18, and half are still working in the original worksite because the employer is good to them, and the pay is fair. Neither the Thai nor Cambodian migrant workers intend to become permanent migrants. While Thai migrant workers go back and forth to their home community, most Cambodian migrant workers only go back to Cambodia for important festivals, and do not seek work in Cambodia because of the relatively lower wages (130-160 baht per day for equivalent work in Phnom Penh). However, some with dependent family members may go back and forth to take care of them.
Well-being of the migrants: The following presents results across the seven dimensions of the NESDB well-being index.

1. Health: Most of the migrant workers in this study said they felt strong and in good physical health, and never were so sick that they had to go to a hospital. One female Thai said she had chronic valvular heart disease, while one male Cambodian migrant workers had suffered a broken leg from a vehicle collision. All of the Cambodian migrant workers in this study entered Thailand legally at last entry, and their employer enrolled them in the social security program, which enables them to obtain subsidized medical care at participating Thai hospitals. For Thai migrant workers, only those on monthly employment contracts are enrolled in social security, while those paid daily are not. Some migrant workers prefer the daily wage arrangement because of the flexibility and freedom to take days off at will. In the words of one Thai migrant workers:

"I get the same wage if I'm paid daily, and I like to have the cash in hand after each day. If I was paid monthly I might fall short during some months and have to take out loans with expensive interest rates."

(Mr. Bun, age 38, Thai migrant worker)

More of the Thai migrant workers reporting feeling stress than their Cambodian counterparts. The Thais' stress largely came from inadequate income or savings to meet periodic needs such as school fees for their children, hiring labor to work the rice farm at home, or helping pay for medical care for family members. The Cambodian migrant workers had fewer money problems and were able to save. Those Cambodian who do experience stress said it was mostly among the new arrivals who could not yet converse in Thai, or mistreatment by neighbors or co-workers. In the words of one female migrant workers:

"When I first arrived here it was stressful. I couldn't speak or understand Thai. I was scolded by my boss for not speaking up."

(Mrs. Tio, age 20, Cambodian migrant worker)

"Once I hung my wash out to dry on the up-stairs balcony. The water dripped down to the level below, and the Thai occupant came up to curse me and threatened to report me to the immigration police."

(Mrs. Tio, age 20, Cambodian migrant worker)

None of the respondents in this study had nutritional problems. Most buy fresh food from the local market and prepare their own meals. The food they prepare is nutritious and economical. The Cambodian migrant workers do not like to buy prepared meals in the shops because they are too spicy or have too much coconut milk for their liking.

2. Knowledge: Almost all the migrant workers expressed little interest in continuing formal education, citing the lack of time or perceived benefit. Two or three Thai migrant workers said they took non-formal education program courses to complete lower high school, but they did not feel they could apply or benefit from the extra schooling. One of the male migrant workers wants to try a new occupation and is planning to study for a diploma in that field. Two of the female Cambodian migrant workers had no formal education. All had learned Thai on their own. Few Cambodian migrant workers could read Thai. Because their jobs are low-skill, there is no need for the migrant workers to learn more about the work, and their employer does not train them in other skills or knowledge areas.

3. Work life: Both the Thai and Cambodian migrant workers were happy to be employed since they were acutely aware of the limited economic opportunity back in their home communities. All of the Cambodian migrant workers were very pleased to be working in Thailand, in the words of one male migrant workers:

"There are no paying jobs in my home town. I even went to Phnom Penh to look for work. But there was only day work at sewing factories which was primarily women's work, and that didn't appeal to me. To get a construction job you had to wait to be called. The foreman would always choose his cronies for the jobs first; outsiders were the last ones chosen. So I would go for days without work. In Thailand it is different. There is steady work and steady pay."

(Mr. Sok, age 32, Cambodian migrant worker)

Because the migrant workers in this study work in the low-skilled occupations in highest demand there is minimal concern about job security. Also, the labor, despite being minimum wage, is not arduous, and the flexibility allows the Thai migrant workers to add secondary jobs such as motorcycle taxi driver during off hours. In the words of one female:

"Working as a maid for the company is not that difficult, but the pay is low and I need to work overtime shifts to make ends meet. I could try to find work as a domestic helper, but I would also lose the freedom to take leave. Working on a day-to-day basis gives me the flexibility to take leave when I need to."

(Mrs. Pit, age 43, Thai migrant worker)

Many of the Cambodian migrant workers related stories about exploitation of Thai employers of illegal Cambodian migrant workers who did not dare to protest to law enforcement or move to a new job site out of fear of being reported to immigration police. Now that the migrant workers in this study are documented, there is more security and this has greatly increased their job satisfaction.

"Those who worked for labor brokers rarely got regular earnings. It was up to the broker how much to pay each worker. Some days they would pay 200 baht, other days it could be as little as 40 baht, which did not allow for any savings."

(Mrs. Niang, age 30, Cambodian migrant worker)

One of the key informant employers of migrant workers explained the rationale for shifting from contracted group labor through agents to individual contract hires as follows:

"In the past, we had a system of contracting with middlemen to procure groups of workers because we didn't want to deal with the issues of hiring illegal migrant workers. In that system, the middlemen were legally liable, and we just focused on getting the job done. However, later on, the middlemen could not always produce the required labor on a given date, in part because they over-exploited the migrant workers and developed bad reputations with the labor force. Increasingly, migrant workers sought employment directly with the company rather than going through brokers. Thus, it became more profitable to hire migrant workers directly to guarantee a work force, even as production needs ebbed and flowed."

(Mr. Samart, age 60, Thai factory manager)

4. Income and expenditures: All of the migrant workers in this study remitted funds back to their dependents in the home community. Most of the recipients were parents with no source of income and/or caring for the young children of the migrants. The Thai migrant workers remitted an average of 2,000-6,000 baht per month. The Cambodian migrant workers were able to save more than their Thai counterparts (i.e., 4,000-6,000 baht per month minimum) but only sent funds to their family in Cambodia on occasion (in the amount of 10,000-50,000 baht per time). migrant workers who lived in employer-provided lodging were able to save more than those who rented rooms (by a margin of 2,000-3,000 baht). Remitted funds were presumed to be for daily living expenses and costs of school and care for the migrants' children, rather than for investment. The Thai migrant workers had no goal for saving a certain amount of funds before returning home. By contrast, the Cambodian migrant workers had clearer savings targets, e.g., in the amount of 500,000 baht, which would cover the cost of building a house and purchasing land for crop cultivation. Even before reaching that target, many of the Cambodian migrant workers are already accumulating land purchases ranging from 1 to 20 rai. One female Cambodian migrant workers was remitting funds to her brother, who is a policeman, to help pay off family debt, and this has helped raised the economic status of the household. The ability to make these remittances reflects the determination of the migrant workers to save through frugal living, and working overtime to maximize income, usually

among the single (unmarried) migrant workers.

"I work every day and try to work overtime as well. I don't like unpaid holidays. I don't spend much and I want to save as much as possible before returning home."

(Miss Sopha, age 34, Cambodian migrant worker)

While the remittances help improve the economic situation for the household in the home community, the Thai migrant workers in this study could not manage to save enough to send back regular and meaningful amounts of funds. The Thai migrant workers also seem to have more unplanned expenses than their Cambodian counterparts (e.g., medical care for family members, purchase/repair of a motorcycle, etc.). The Thai migrant workers feel that their family is better off because of their migration but still has not achieved financial security. By contrast, the Cambodian migrant workers feel that they have helped their family escape from poverty and transition into the middle class:

"In the past we were very poor; we didn't have enough to eat. But now, my parents have enough to eat, and have enough nice clothes to wear. They seem to be happy and smiling, and that gives me great happiness."

(Miss Rin, age 20, Cambodian migrant worker)

"Now we are no longer poor, and have reached the middle-income group. You can tell by my two children who have bicycles to ride to school, while other still have to walk."

(Mrs. Niang, age 30, Cambodian migrant worker)

5. Family life: All of the Cambodian migrant workers in this study had migrated to Thailand as a family unit. They also save as a group to remit funds back home. The husband-wife pairs seem devoted and loving toward each other, and share the same life goals, especially regarding frugal living. The single migrant workers live with siblings or other relatives, in mutually supportive relationships. On non-work days, the Cambodian migrant workers spend time cooking meals for their kinship group. Female migrant workers like to go to temples to make merit on days off, while male migrant workers get together with peers for recreation. These migrant workers receive their salary in bi-weekly payments and rarely spend nights away from their worksite residence in order to save money and avoid social problems. By contrast, the Thai migrant workers seem to have domestic strife such as divorce or remarriage. Nevertheless, most are satisfied with their current partner and feel that their family is a warm and loving family with members who care for each other. The Thai and Cambodian migrant workers are economically self-sufficient because they are the principal bread-winners of the family.

6. Work and living environment: Most of the Thai migrant workers rented an apartment in the range of 2,000-3,000 baht per month. The living environment is rather good. It is safe, and most residential complexes have 24-hour watchmen. Some of the Cambodian migrant workers live in dormitories provided by their employer, while others rent rooms, just as their Thai counterparts do. Some of the Cambodian migrant workers report being looked down upon by Thai neighbors. This is expressed by the tone of voice of the Thais

and threats to inform the immigration police if there is conflict between the two countries (e.g., the dispute over Khao Phra Viharn Temple).

"When the Khao Phra Viharn Temple issue became hot, the owner of our rented rooms told us we had to leave; we were evicted just for being Cambodians. We never caused trouble and had lived there for years without problems."

(Mrs. Niang, age 30, Cambodian migrant worker)

The Thai migrant workers are more sensitive to environmental degradation of urban living, such as the air pollution, traffic, crowded living, etc., more than their Cambodian counterparts. The Cambodian migrant workers seem to have a high tolerance threshold, explaining that they have to put up with the harsher conditions since they are only in Thailand to make money.

7. Good governance by the public sector: The Thai migrant workers do not have problems with the government; though sometimes their employer pays their salary/wages late. Cambodian migrant workers who enter Thailand illegally will have more issues with government since, if caught, they will be fined and deported. Even those migrant workers who keeep to themselves and rarely leave their residence or worksite have been apprehended by immigration police. Some of these individuals suspect collusion between the police and the employer of the Cambodians.

"There are always crackdowns by the immigration police. They will come right into the apartments and dormitories in search of illegals. Cambodians who are jailed have to appeal to their employer to get them out. This can cost as much as 5,000 or 10,000 baht per person, and the employer docks the pay of the worker until the debt is paid off. That leaves the worker with no savings. Some suspect that the police and employer are in it together."

(Mrs. Niang, age 30, Cambodian migrant worker)

Two of the Cambodian migrant workers in this study report had previously been arrested and deported for illegal immigration.

"When I first came to Thailand, I entered illegally and was caught by police at the factory where I worked. I was jailed for 48 days and then deported. I stayed at home for about a month and then returned to Thailand, again illegally. I was caught a second time and deported. This last time I came to Thailand I made sure I was documented. Those times that I was in immigration detention the food was okay but it was hard to sleep. There were hundreds of us in the detention holding unit, and it was hard to lie down to sleep. You couldn't roll over without hitting someone."

(Mr. Pol, age 27, Cambodian migrant worker)

"I was arrested at my rented room one morning at 5 a.m. The police took about 20 of us to the detention center and kept us for three days before being deported. When we got back to Cambodia the Cambodian police were very harsh

with us and scolded us for not trying to find work in Cambodia. They said we give Cambodia a bad name."

(Mr. Sok, age 30, Cambodian migrant worker)

In sum, both Cambodian and Thai migrant workers viewed their well-being in a positive way especially in the dimensions of employment opportunity and income. Cambodian migrant workers seemed to express their satisfaction higher than Thai migrant workers, but this does not imply that they have a better well-being than Thai migrant workers. They only intended to tolerate anything just for the sake of earning and saving money.

Migrant workers Perception of the meaning of "well-being"

The Thai and Cambodian migrant workers were asked to define well-being from their viewpoint. However, only three of the respondents were able to articulate the link between the words "well" and "being happy" The term "well" was interpreted to refer to one's living condition, food, domicile, comfort and convenience. As for "being happy" the respondents interpreted this as referring to the welfare of their family members and said that a satisfactory life had to have well-being.

"We have come to Thailand and can eat and live quite well. However, our parents back in Cambodia are still very poor, and so we cannot be happy."

(Mr. Sok, age 30, Cambodian migrant worker)

"Living 'well' refers to one's lodging and environment, whereas 'being happy' refers to having family close by."

(Mr. Bun, age 38, Thai migrant worker)

When the researcher altered the wording to "what does it mean to have a happy life?" all of the respondents were able to offer a response. Both the Thai and Cambodian migrant workers felt that a "happy life" meant a warm family, mutual love, and staying together with kinfolk.

"A 'happy life' is one where the family members understand each other and, thus, there is no fighting. The family endures hardship and enjoys happy moments together. Whether or not there is enough on hand, the family members speak kindly with one another."

(Mr. Bun, age 38, Thai migrant worker)

"A 'happy life' means living at one's own home, having a kitchen garden, raising some livestock, the happiest time is when I make merit, and go to the temple."

(Mr. Sumon, age 34, Thai migrant worker)

"Happiness refers to going home and making merit during religious festival times in the 8th and 9th months of the year. I long to see my parents so I try to take a lot of overtime work to save for sending money home and visiting as soon as I can."

(Mr. Dee, age 29, Cambodian migrant worker)

"Happiness is...what I cannot think of but.... when I go back home and see the faces of my parents and siblings, I feel very happy."

*(Miss Rin, age 20, Cambodian migrant work*er)

In sum, the important finding of this research is that migration improved the state of well-being for both Thai and Cambodian migrant workers. In particular, the migrant workers appreciate the better job and wages than they could receive back home. The Cambodian migrant workers tend to rate their well-being at a higher level than their Thai counterparts, which is contrary to the research hypothesis. This could be explained by the fact that the differential in income for Cambodian migrant workers is greater than for Thais and, given their relative isolation from mainstream Thai culture and economy, the Cambodian migrant workers are able to save more of their income. This creates a sense of optimism among the Cambodian that they will be able to return to Cambodia in a new and improved economic status. By contrast, the Thai migrant workers did not provide a clear explanation of what their future plans or aspirations are.

Even though some Thais may have negative prejudice towards the Cambodian migrant workers in their community, the migrants are shielded from this somewhat by living in clusters of relatives, and manage to be relatively self-sufficient, i.e., without the need for support from their Thai neighbors. It is noteworthy that both Thai and Cambodian migrant workers give highest priority in their life to family. This shows that these two groups adhere to traditional, extended family values of their home communities, despite the influx of Western cultural norms in this part of the world.

Despite these findings, the reader should be cautioned that the actual situation of the average Cambodian migrant workers in Thailand may not be as favorable as documented in this study, and many may be experiencing rights violations or be victims of trafficking. The Cambodian respondents selected for this study were in stable occupations, had been in Thailand for several years, and were legally registered to work (at the time of the data collection). Thus, their sense of well-being may be favorably biased.

Recommendations

Although both Thai and Cambodian migrant workers viewed their well-being in a positive way, their condition of living is only at the subsistance level. Most of the migrants in this study have earned a minimum wage employment for many years. Their well-being cannot be improved unless they move to a higher-paid job which apparently seems inapplicable. Both the employers and migrant workers should be encouraged to increase the skills of these workers by providing them needed education and training. This, in turn will improve not only the migrant workers' well-being, but also the productivity of the employers' business.

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