Digitalization to promote decent work for migrant workers in ASEAN

Thematic background paper for the 11th ASEAN Forum on Migrant Labour (AFML)

29–30 October 2018, Singapore

TRIANGLE in ASEAN programme
Supported by

Digitalization to promote decent work for migrant workers in ASEAN

Thematic background paper for the 11th ASEAN Forum on Migrant Labour (AFML)

Foreword

As the world is increasingly relying on digital technology, digitalization can also play an important role in labour migration governance and protection mechanisms.

Whether it is before, during or after moving abroad, migrant workers use apps and digital platforms to access services, share experiences or connect with each other, with their communities, families and friends. They offer tremendous opportunities to simplify, secure, and accelerate the migration process for the growing population of migrant workers in the Asia-Pacific region.

Digital migration management platforms can also help reduce the cost and time induced by formal recruitment processes, which too often pushes many women and men to migrate through informal, undocumented, and unsafe channels. Governments, workers' and employers' organizations and other stakeholders are already applying or at least considering the use of digital technology in their labour migration programmes, systems and governance. Civil society organizations and other private and public actors are developing digital platforms that offer various support services to migrant workers in need.

While technology presents a great opportunity to make labour migration safer, more efficient, and more transparent, digitalization -as any tool- also involves risks, challenges, and unequal distribution of technological gains. For it to promote decent work and better conditions for women and men migrant workers, it needs to be designed, implemented, and used properly, with due consideration of risks and unintended negative effects.

Against this background, on 29-30 October 2018, representatives of governments, employers' organizations, workers' organizations, and civil society from ASEAN Member States convened in Singapore for the 11th ASEAN Forum on Migrant Labour (AFML) hosted by the Government of Singapore, with the theme of digitalization to promote decent work for migrant workers. This report was prepared as a thematic background paper to inform discussions at the 11th AFML on how to maximize positive impacts of digitalization to promote wellbeing of migrant workers.

Ms Tomoko Nishimoto

Assistant Director-General and Regional Director for Asia and the Pacific
ILO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific

Acknowledgements

Table of contents

Abbreviations and acronyms

ACMW	ASEAN Committee on the Implementation of the ASEAN Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers
AFML	ASEAN Forum on Migrant Labour
AMS	ASEAN Member States
App	Application
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Australia)
FLEP	Foundation for Labour and Employment Promotion (Thailand)
GAC	Global Affairs Canada
GCM	Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
ILO	International Labour Organization
IOM	International Organization for Migration
ITUC	International Trade Union Confederation
MoLSW	Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare (Lao People's Democratic Republic)
OFW	overseas foreign worker
OWWA	Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (Philippines)
RFA	request for assistance
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
TFAMW	Task Force on ASEAN Migrant Workers

1. Introduction and background

This paper was prepared as the Thematic Background Paper for the 11th ASEAN Forum on Migrant Labour (AFML) to be held on 29–30 October 2018 in Singapore. The AFML is a multi-stakeholder forum held annually as part of the ASEAN Committee on the Implementation of the ASEAN Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers (ACMW) Work Plan 2016–2020. It serves to provide the relevant stakeholders – tripartite members of the ASEAN Member States, civil society organizations, the ASEAN Secretariat, and international organizations – with a platform to exchange ideas and best practices on issues relating to migrant workers in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region. The Forum gathers annually to discuss and share experiences, as well as to build consensus on the protection of migrant workers' issues falling under the ASEAN Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers, 2007 (Cebu Declaration). It concludes with the adoption of recommendations that bring life to the provisions of the Cebu Declaration. The 11th AFML carries on the theme "Digitalisation to Promote Decent Work for Migrant Workers in ASEAN".

Across ASEAN, digital technology is increasingly being used by labour migration actors – including migrant workers themselves – to improve migration management systems, increase access to information, and ease communication. Digital technology is, however, only a tool, and the extent to which it promotes and facilitates decent work for migrant workers depends on how the technology is designed, implemented, and used. As the use of digital technology increases across all facets of labour migration, ASEAN Member States share a common interest in improving, understanding, and working towards systems that ensure digital technology is accessible, safe, and promotes decent work for all migrant workers.

2. The 11th ASEAN Forum on Migrant Labour

The 11th AFML will be held on 29–30 October 2018 in Singapore. It will be hosted by the Government of Singapore as the current chair of ASEAN and the ACMW. The Government of Singapore is co-organizing the AFML together with International Labour Organization (ILO), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), UN Women, the Task Force on ASEAN Migrant Workers (TFAMW), and the ASEAN Secretariat.

The theme of the 11th AFML is "**Digitalization to Promote Decent Work for Migrant Workers**". This theme further divided into two sub-themes:

- **Sub-theme 1:** Digitalization of migrant labour management, which covers initiatives in ASEAN Member States to leverage technology in managing migrant labour, such as e-governance systems for migration management, digital tools for law enforcement, and regulating occupational safety and health; and

- **Sub-theme 2:** Digital services to migrant workers, which covers efforts in ASEAN Member States to enable migrant workers access to digital support services, including comparing and making informed decision on their choice of recruitment agencies and remittance channels.

Through the sharing of ideas and best practices in these target areas, the 11th AFML aims to equip all stakeholders with greater awareness, insight, understanding, and confidence in leveraging technology to improve decent work conditions for migrant workers in ASEAN, particularly as all participants will

jointly develop a set of recommendations during the Forum to guide both individual and collective efforts on this topic in the future.

Digital technology does not feature in the Cebu Declaration or the ASEAN Consensus on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers, 2017 (ASEAN Consensus), nor have digital solutions been specifically discussed at the previous ten AFMLs. However, **digitalization has linkages to many, if not all, policy and intervention areas discussed in the past 3rd–10th AFMLs**. Therefore, discussing how to maximize the potential of digitalization for achieving the objectives of the Cebu Declaration and the ASEAN Consensus is an important cross-cutting and strategic issue for the AFML. At the same time, designing and implementing balanced interventions also requires a thorough understanding of the challenges related to digitalization as well as the management of related risks.

Different policy and intervention areas discussed in the 3rd–10th AFMLs have been grouped in eight clusters by the ILO to ease monitoring implementation progress.[1] Table 1 below illustrates the application of digitalization in various policy and intervention areas discussed in the 3rd–10th AFML with some practical examples.

> Table 1: Application of digitalization in policy and intervention areas covered by 3rd–10th AFMLs

Clusters of 3rd–10th AFML recommendation		Examples
Digitalization	A. Information dissemination, pre-departure orientation, and support services	• Outreach and information dissemination to prospective migrant workers on Facebook, Line, WhatsApp, and other online platforms • Online pre-departure training
	B. Fair recruitment	• Government databases for managing migration procedures • Online recruitment platforms for direct hiring • Platforms for comparing recruitment agencies
	C. Providing decent working conditions	• Organizing, networking, and information dissemination using Facebook, Line, WhatsApp, and other online platforms • Digital aids in labour inspection • Online remittance and payment services, digital wallets • Online skills training
	D. Facilitating access to redress mechanisms and support services	• Helpline apps • Online support services, e.g., through Skype consultations • Databases to manage migrant welfare, including complaints, assistance, and training
	E. Effective return and reintegration strategies	• Online skills assessments and training • Databases to manage migrant welfare, including reintegration services
	F. Public education campaigns	• Social media campaigning on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, etc.
	G. Collecting, sharing, and analysing labour migration data	• Administrative data drawn from management databases

---

[1]   See ILO, 2013; 2015; 2017.

3. Migrant workers and access to technology in ASEAN

The International Telecommunications Union data from 2017 illustrates that almost half of the population in Asia and the Pacific use the Internet (44 per cent), with 72 per cent of young people between the age of 15–24 being Internet users (ITU, 2017). The proportion of men using the Internet is higher than women, with 39.7 per cent of women in Asia and the Pacific using the Internet, compared with 47.9 per cent of men (ITU, 2017). Within this broader region, South-East Asia has one of the highest rates of mobile Internet usage in the world, with around 90 per cent of Internet users being smartphone users (Hollander, 2017). Internet users in this region spend more time accessing the Internet on mobile devices than in other markets, and the region also has one of the fastest growing emerging smartphone markets (Hollander, 2017). Mobile Internet, accessed through smartphones, is now a fundamental and prolific tool for people in the region to connect, seek information, and access services. Mobile users in the region primarily use their smartphones to access messaging, social media, and information (Internet Society, 2016). An increasing proportion of users (about half) are also using mobile devices to access banking, bill payment, education materials, and e-learning platforms, as well as to buy or sell goods and services. The proportion of users using their mobile devices to access government and social services or job services online is less than a third (Internet Society, 2016).

However, the gains of this Internet revolution are not distributed evenly. In addition to there being a digital gender divide in access to the Internet, factors such as education and income level will also determine who has access to digital technology. Indeed, while the growth of mobile subscriptions

has been higher in least developed countries, the proportion of people with mobile subscriptions is higher the more developed a country is (ITU, 2017). For migrants, this likely means that those from less developed countries, with lower education and income levels, and who are more likely to be employed in unskilled sectors that offer the least protection will also have less access to smartphones and the Internet.

Currently, there is only little information available on Internet usage of migrant workers and prospective migrant workers in the ASEAN region. An ILO study in the Thai construction sector found that many migrant workers have access to the Internet and to smartphones with applications such as Line and Viber that allowed them connectivity with the outside world. There are, however, **gender differences** in women and men migrant construction workers' ability to use the technology, as some women mentioned that only their husbands or sons knew how to use mobile phones (Napier-Moore and Sheill, 2016). There are also **sectoral differences** in migrant workers' access to technology. For example, for domestic workers working in isolated workplaces the use of phones can be divisive. Research carried out by the ILO in Thailand and Malaysia shows that migrant domestic workers rely heavily on mobile phones for information and contact with the outside world. Many employers, however, restrict domestic workers' use of phones, viewing them as a negative influence (Anderson, 2016).

Mobile Internet and online platforms can provide migrants with never before experienced levels of access to communication, information, and services. However, increased digitalization can further isolate vulnerable members of society who do not have the means to use the technology required to access essential services. More efforts are needed to promote women and men migrant workers' access to technology, to build their capacity to meaningfully use this technology, and to ensure that the digital services created can benefit as many women and men migrant workers as possible in all economic sectors.

4. International frameworks on digitalization and labour migration

Until recent years, references to digital solutions and the use of technology have been limited within international normative frameworks, in particular those frameworks that relate to migration. However, in 2008, the integral nature of digital technology in the protection of migrant workers has been recognized in the new Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM). The references to digital technology in the GCM cover a broad range of issues, including data collection on migrants; upgrading travel documentation; improving ease of information; recognising and accrediting skills; and facilitating remittances. (See box 1 below for references to digital technology found in the GCM.)

Similarly, the potential for information and communication technology (ICT) and global interconnectedness to accelerate human progress is recognized in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and specific references to the role of technology were also included in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) themselves. For example, in SDG Target 5.b is to "Enhance the use of enabling technology in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women". The indicator for measuring progress towards this target is the "proportion of individuals who own a mobile telephone, by sex" (UNGA, 2015, 5.b.1).

Box 1

**References to digital technology in
the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration**

Objective 4: Ensure that all migrants have proof of legal identity and adequate documentation

20. a) Improve civil registry systems, with a particular focus on reaching unregistered persons and our nationals residing in other countries, including by providing relevant identity and civil registry documents, strengthening capacities, and investing in information and communication technology solutions, while upholding the right to privacy and protecting personal data.

20. b) Harmonize travel documents in line with the specifications of the International Civil Aviation Organization to facilitate interoperable and universal recognition of travel documents, as well as to combat identity fraud and document forgery, including by investing in digitalization, and strengthening mechanisms for biometric data-sharing, while upholding the right to privacy and protecting personal data.

20. c) Ensure adequate, timely, reliable and accessible consular documentation to our nationals residing in other countries, including identity and travel documents, making use of information and communications technology, as well as community outreach, particularly in remote areas.

Objective 11: Manage borders in an integrated, secure and coordinated manner

27. b) Establish appropriate structures and mechanisms for effective integrated border management by ensuring comprehensive and efficient border crossing procedures, including through pre-screening of arriving persons, pre-reporting by carriers of passengers, and use of information and communication technology, while upholding the principle of non-discrimination, respecting the right to privacy and protecting personal data.

Objective 12: Strengthen certainty and predictability in migration procedures for appropriate screening, assessment and referral

28. a) Increase transparency and accessibility of migration procedures by communicating the requirements for entry, admission, stay, work, study or other activities, and introducing technology to simplify application procedures, in order to avoid unnecessary delays and expenses for States and migrants.

Objective 18: Invest in skills development and facilitate mutual recognition of skills, qualifications and competences

34. d) Use technology and digitalization to evaluate and mutually recognize skills more comprehensively based on formal credentials as well as non-formally acquired competences and professional experience at all skills levels.

Objective 19: Create conditions for migrants and diasporas to fully contribute to sustainable development in all countries

35. f) Provide easily accessible information and guidance, including through digital platforms, as well as tailored mechanisms for the coordinated and effective financial, voluntary or philanthropic engagement of migrants and diasporas, especially in humanitarian emergencies in their countries of origin, including by involving consular missions.

Objective 20: Promote faster, safe and cheaper transfer of remittances and foster financial inclusion of migrants

36. e) Develop innovative technological solutions for remittance transfer, such as mobile payments, digital tools or e-banking, to reduce costs, improve speed, enhance security, increase transfer through regular channels and open up gender-responsive distribution channels to underserved populations, including for persons in rural areas, persons with low levels of literacy, and persons with disabilities.

Objective 21: Cooperate in facilitating safe and dignified return and readmission, as well as sustainable reintegration

37. c) Cooperate on identification of nationals and issuance of travel documents for safe and dignified return and readmission in cases of persons that do not have the legal right to stay on another State's territory, by establishing reliable and efficient means of identification of own nationals such as through the addition of biometric identifiers in population registries, and by digitalizing civil registry systems, with full respect to the right to privacy and protection of personal data.

Source: Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration.

5. Digitalization: Opportunities and benefits

Digital technology can be a beneficial tool in making labour migration management systems more efficient and transparent, increasing connectivity, and providing better services and information to migrant workers. When designed and implemented in a rights-based way, digital technology has the potential to help address many of the challenges facing labour migration today, including time, cost, transparency, connectivity, and accountability.

5.1 Digital management systems: Improving efficiency and transparency

Many governments in the ASEAN region have developed **digital management systems** and databases for governance of different aspects of the migration process and provision of services to migrant workers. Management systems are being created and piloted for facilitating recruitment and administrative processes for overseas placement, as well as for managing migrant workers' personal profiles and access to services and welfare support throughout the migration cycle. Some of these management systems are linked to online services, such as online pre-departure orientation, skills training, or legal counselling. For example, the Vietnamese Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs has been assessing online applications for labour supply contracts[1] since January 2017. The

---

[1]   The online applications for labour supply contracts are available at https://csdl.dolab.gov.vn.

Ministry also issued Circular No. 35/2017/TT-BLDTBXH, which addresses database management and operation, as well as the exploitation of Vietnamese contract workers working abroad. The Circular requires that all employers of Vietnamese migrant workers must register labour supply contracts on the online system of the Ministry. Other digital management systems may be accompanied with mobile apps and smart cards to ease migrant workers' access to related services. (See boxes 2 and 3 for examples.)

Such management systems have a great potential to make recruitment and administrative processes for overseas placement **smoother and faster**, which can bring benefits to governments, employers, and migrant workers themselves. These systems can have the benefit of reducing the time and cost associated with regular migration, which in turn increases the attractiveness of regular channels channels for migrants. Online repositories that hold migrant documentation (including contracts), allow applications for welfare fund contributions, and host online complaints mechanisms can save migrants time and money as they seeking to protect themselves or otherwise resolve issues when they arise. In addition, digitalization of recruitment and administrative processes increases **transparency and accountability** at all stages of the migration cycle. Digital platforms have proved beneficial in keeping a record of agreements, or a "**digital trail**". This can prove particularly useful in addressing issues such as contract substitution or fee charges/repayments, by providing an evidential trail that migrant workers, recruiters, and employers alike can rely on.

Box 2
OWWA Electronic Case Registry and Response System (e-CARES)

In the Philippines, the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) operates an Electronic Case Registry and Response System (e-CARES) where migrant workers can register their complaints. The e-CARES system classifies the nature of the migrant worker's complaint, assigns the case to the specific overseas post concerned, and allows migrants to track the progress of the case online. The core of the e-CARES system is the Membership Processing System database, which captures the membership profiles of over 8 million OWWA members and the details of their 23,197,187 contract records. The e-CARES system also keeps record of pre-departure educational programmes attended, welfare assistance programmes and services used, and requests for assistance (RFAs) made in case of complaints. The e-CARES has an accompanying mobile app that members can use to view and verify their own profile, renew their OWWA membership, contact OWWA hotlines, apply online for welfare programmes and services, and file online RFAs. The app also generates a digital OWWA OFW (overseas foreign worker) e-card, which can be used – alongside the physical OWWA OFW smart card – to access benefits and privileges, automated verification of membership details, and faster processing times.

Source: Dulay, 2018.

Box 3
MOLSW database in the Lao People's Democratic Republic

The Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare (MOLSW) of the Lao People's Democratic Republic developed a computer system in 2016 to store information and data about outbound migrant workers. The database will be used by the Ministry's Department of Skills Development and Employment, employment service centres, and recruitment agencies, and is intended to help issue work permit cards for Lao migrant workers quickly and transparently. The system will also track recruitment agencies and link workers to particular agencies, as well as identify which workers' contracts are due to expire. The database is designed to collect administrative data on Lao migrant workers, such as gender, age, and working sector, which can assist the MOLSW to design evidence-based systems for the management and protection of Lao migrant workers. To operationalize the database, a training of 24 recruitment aagencies was organized in 2018 with support from the TRIANGLE in ASEAN programme.

5.2 Recruitment platforms: Lowering costs, increasing accountability

Both governments and private sector actors are creating **online platforms for direct hiring** of migrant workers. To be beneficial, such online recruitment activities need to be properly regulated and monitored (see section 6.2 below). Where platforms are monitored and run well, they can provide opportunities for efficient matching between migrant workers and potential employers at lower costs, and transparent e-systems ensure a digital trail. Digital platforms can also help in monitoring recruitment agencies and **increasing accountability** in recruitment practices. Online spaces are being used to register recruitment agents and as a place to record those agents who have had sanctions applied against them and/or are blacklisted. Alternative methods that are increasing accountability include the requirement for recruitment agents to maintain active social network spaces to ensure that migrant workers can directly and publicly connect with the agents in relation to requests, issues, or complaints. For example, the Philippines Overseas Employment Administration requires that private recruitment agencies recruiting migrant domestic workers maintain an active Facebook page for their business, accept friend requests from workers, and use it as a platform for sharing information and accepting complaints (Farbenblum, Berg, and Kintominas, 2018).

Online platforms can also be created to help migrant workers make informed choices about which recruitment agency to use for going abroad. In particular, there has been an increase in the use of "**rate and review**" **platforms** that allow migrant workers to rate and review recruitment agencies to look for cheaper, quicker, and safer labour migration channels. One example of such a platform is the Recruitment Advisor portal created by the International Trade Union Council (ITUC) (see box 4).

Box 4
ITUC Recruitment Adviser Platform

A regional initiative that was set up to support the monitoring of recruitment agencies is the "Recruitment Advisor". This a web based platform developed by the ITUC, with support from the ILO Fair Recruitment Initiative, lists thousands of agencies in Hong Kong (China), Indonesia, Malaysia, Nepal, the Philippines, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, and other countries. The platform is designed to protect migrant workers from abusive employment practices by providing them with peer-to-peer reviews about recruitment agencies in their country of origin and destination. Migrant workers are able to rate the recruitment agencies, describe their experience, and learn about their rights. The governments of the participating countries provided a list of licensed agencies, as well as a list of trade unions and civil society organizations that support the sustainability of the platform by conducting outreach activities informing migrant workers of their rights.

Source: ILO, 2018.

5.3 Messaging apps and social media: Improving outreach, networking, and service provision

Many organizations providing direct services to migrant workers are using already existing **messaging apps and social media platforms** such as Line, WhatsApp, Viber, and Facebook to reach out to migrant workers, help them access services, and enable them to connect and organize with their peers. This approach can be both cheaper (compared to purpose-built platforms) and more likely to be effective (as workers will understand how to use and navigate the platforms and are often already engaging with them). For example, the Facebook page OFWwatch was created by a community service initiative of Mynd Dynamic Team in the Philippines to help overseas Filipino workers connect with other Filipino workers nearby, and to provide peer support if anyone is in trouble.[2] In Thailand, HomeNet, a member organization that runs a network of informal and domestic workers, uses Line as a platform to facilitate peer-to-peer networking.

As many migrant workers with access to mobile phones are already using messaging apps and social media platforms, utilizing these to disseminate safe migration information, tips, and contact details can be very **effective and cost efficient**. Being able to rely on mobile phones for information and contact with the outside world is especially crucial for migrant workers whose ability to leave their workplace is limited, such as domestic workers (Anderson, 2016) and fishers.

Specialized apps are also being created to meet migrant workers' needs for information, networking, and support services. One example of such an app is the Smart Domestic Workers app created by the Foundation for Labour and Employment Promotion in Thailand to train a volunteer network of Thai and migrant domestic workers' leaders to provide information and counselling directly to migrant domestic workers (see box 5).

Box 5
Smart domestic workers mobile app

In Thailand, the Foundation for Labour and Employment Promotion (FLEP) has developed a mobile app – Smart Domestic Workers – to deliver knowledge to domestic workers and provide referrals to help agencies. Information on work permits, domestic workers' rights, and other employment issues is delivered through animations and other easy-to-understand formats. As of September 2018, the app had been visited 54,809 times and downloaded 1,793 times. In addition to the Smart Domestic Workers mobile app, the FLEP operates a Facebook page "Network of Domestic Workers in Thailand", a Group Line (Line@: Hello Volunteer), and a hotline to reach out to domestic workers.

Source: Namsomboon, 2018.

---

[2]   Mynd is a business process outsourcing (BPO) company founded in 2006 by a former OFW, Ms. Myrna Padilla.

5.4 Mobile payment systems: Addressing remittance costs and financial inclusion

Development of new **digital solutions for remittance transfer, e-banking, and mobile payments** offers new opportunities for migrant workers and their families in ASEAN. More and more private sector remittance transfer and mobile payment services are emerging in different intra-ASEAN corridors, making it possible for migrant workers to use these services for transferring their remittances and thereby paying for family expenses back home. Such financial services are already quite established in corridors from Malaysia and Singapore to Indonesia and the Philippines, and are also steadily emerging in corridors from Thailand to Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, and Myanmar.

Currently, the average cost to send remittances from Thailand to Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar, or Viet Nam ranges from 3 per cent to 20 per cent, depending on the service provider used (UNCDF, 2017). New digital solutions for remittance transfers are **increasing transparency and competition** among money transfer operators, which is expected to **push remittance costs down** in all ASEAN corridors. One specific service designed to increase transparency and help migrant workers find the best rates and money saving options for remittance transfers is **SaverAsia**, developed by Developing Markets Associates with support from ILO's TRIANGLE in ASEAN programme (see box 6). Innovative digital tools such as digital wallets and mobile payments can also be helpful in enabling the financial inclusion of persons without access to formal, branch-based banking, for example, those living and working in rural areas.

Box 6
SaverAsia

Remittances remain hugely important for many developing economies in ASEAN, and worldwide. According to the World Bank, migrant workers from Asia and the Pacific sent US$256 billion home in 2017 – this is more than ten times the amount of development aid received in the region. In this region, the Philippines and Viet Nam remained the top remittance destinations with inflows to the Philippines at $33 billion and to Viet Nam at $14 billion in 2017.

SaverAsia is a new digital platform covering nine intra-ASEAN corridors, which helps migrant workers compare remittance costs to find the best rates and money-saving options. The portal provides ASEAN migrant workers with comprehensive and up-to-date information on money transfer services available in key ASEAN remittance corridors: Singapore to Indonesia, Myanmar, or the Philippines; Malaysia to Cambodia, Myanmar, or Viet Nam; and Thailand to Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, or Myanmar. The money transfer comparison function features both live data feeds and full market analysis, helping migrant workers make an informed decision on their remittance choice.

The portal also helps migrant workers to find financial services, such as savings, payments, credit, and insurance products suited to their needs. It further provides migrant workers with information on available financial education courses and local support to help them before and during their time in host countries. In this section of the platform, organizations, such as NGOs, government service providers, and private sector organizations, can communicate their services, products, campaigns, and events to SaverAsia users.

SaverAsia was developed by Developing Markets Associates with partial financial support from the ILO, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australia (DFAT), and Global Affairs Canada (GAC) through the TRIANGLE in ASEAN programme. It will be launched at the 11th AFML on 29 October 2018.

Source: World Bank, 2019.

5.5 Digital aids for labour inspection and reporting: Improving compliance

Digital tools and connectivity can also help labour inspectors to inspect hard to reach workplaces, such as fishing boats and plantations. Introducing Internet or satellite connections in such workplaces will also enable workers to connect to the outside world, report problems, and seek help (see box 7).

Box 7
Satellite communication on Thai vessels

The Thai Government requires Thai vessel owners operating outside of national waters to provide a satellite communication system and device on board for workers at sea. The Ministerial Regulation on Labour Protection in Sea Fishing Work (No. 2) B.E. 2561 states the system must be able to support the transmission of at least a 1 MB text message per person per month for at least one-fourth of workers on board, and the employer must pay for these devices.

One private sector initiative to support implementation is the Thai Union Group PCL's digital traceability pilot programme. Improved connectivity via satellite provides the captain and crew a channel of communication to contact families or make a complaint and report any problems that might have occurred at sea. In addition, the system gives suppliers the ability to improve the efficiency of traceability records validated by fishery managers and to manage risk in the supply chain. The system demonstrates electronic end-to-end traceability and supply chain management with linkages to markets such as the United States and European Union to better address concerns over illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing as well as labour issues in fisheries. The Thai Union is a member of the United Nations Global Compact and the Good Labour Practices programme of the ILO.

Source: Thai Union, 2018.

---

6. Risks and challenges related to digitalization

The introduction of digital platforms for labour migration management and service provision to migrant workers also involves risks and challenges that need to be adequately managed. Access to digital technology is not equitable, and increasing reliance on technology can further alienate isolated migrants. Digital technology also brings with it challenges of misinformation and the need to regulate data use and the privacy of migrant workers.

6.1 Unequal access to technology

While use of digital technology – specifically smart mobile technology – is on the increase among migrant workers, there remain many migrant workers and prospective migrant workers who have no access to technology, or who cannot use it in a meaningful way to protect themselves. Many migrants and prospective migrants may not be able to afford smartphones or the credit needed to get online. As noted above in chapter 3, challenges in accessing technology may be more pronounced for women, who may have less education and access to productive resources than men. Access to and use of phones can also differ depending on sector. Challenges in accessing smart technology or online spaces may also be more pronounced for migrant worker in low-skilled sectors, who may have lower levels of education and income. This is of particular note, as these workers commonly have greater protection needs.

Cost can also be an access issue. While the use of online platforms and digital systems can reduce the time and cost of migration, there may be situations where the costs of establishing the online system itself is passed on to the workers, i.e. if a recruitment agent develops an online system for recruitment and management, the costs associated with developing this system may be passed on to the migrant through fees or service charges.

There is a need to enhance migrant workers access to technology and increase their ability to use it meaningfully to protect themselves. In concrete terms this may mean, for example, prohibiting restrictions in migrant workers' use of mobile phones outside working hours, or helping prospective migrant workers to download useful apps on their phones during pre-departure training and other education events. Even with such initiatives it is however important to remember that digital tools are not a "silver bullet" that will fully enable migrant workers' access to reliable information, as many will continue to not have the resources to access these tools.

6.2   Unreliable online information and services

Ensuring the reliability of the information and services provided online is another major challenge in maximizing the benefits of digitalization to promote decent work for migrant workers. Improved connectivity significantly increases the sources of information and range of services available to migrant workers and prospective migrant workers, but monitoring their quality is very challenging. For example, the ability of national authorities to regulate and monitor the online service provision of an overseas recruitment agency is limited. Reliance on inaccurate information and unscrupulous services online may in worst cases lead to trafficking in persons or exploitation of migrant workers. A particular challenge is to ensure that information on the rights and responsibilities of migrant workers in countries of destination is accurate, as legal frameworks and administrative processes can be difficult to interpret and can be subject to regular changes. The spread of misinformation can mean that migrant workers are unable to exercise or claim their rights or access services, or may lead to situations of perceived risk or panic leading to mass movements of people.

The regulation and monitoring of online information and online services requires active cooperation among different national authorities and among ASEAN Member States. In addition, there is a need to increase migrant workers' ability to critically assess the information they access. One option is including digital literacy and online safety sessions as part of pre-departure trainings and education sessions targeting migrant workers.

6.3   Lack of protection regarding personal data and online privacy

The speed at which digital technology has taken over day-to-day functions and systems has not been matched by the laws on its use. Specifically, a focus on developing and implementing laws in relation to the collection, use, and storage of migrant workers' personal and biometric data has not been at the forefront of discussions as the tools to collect and use such data have been developed. In 2016, the ASEAN Framework on Personal Data Protection was developed, which expresses commitment to a "digitally-enabled economy that is secure, sustainable and transformative". The Framework sets out the principles on data protection to help ASEAN Member States in the development and implementation of domestic laws and regulations. These include protecting personal data from loss, unauthorized access, collection, use, disclosure, copying, or other risks. At the national level, the

presence and consistency of privacy laws and data protection laws are not yet consistent across the region or with the Framework itself.

Many of the management platforms and digital services introduced in chapter 5 collect and store data on migrant workers either directly (e.g., in member profiles, application forms, employment contracts) or indirectly (e.g., through user data and location information collected by social network platforms). In addition, as the use of iris and fingerprint scanning has become more common as a way of monitoring the movement of people, risks relating to privacy protection also extend to migrant workers' biometric data.

Personal biometric and user data of migrant workers is held by the companies that develop and host the sites, or the institutions that use them. This can be government institutions in the case of labour migration management, but also private companies in the case of recruitment and financial services. In the case of biometric data, the engagement of private companies to collect and store such data takes the issues of privacy and control over personal data one step further. Risks related to personal data online can be systemic (e.g., data harvesting or large scale hacking) or individual (e.g., stealing information about vulnerable or at-risk migrants, or adopting stolen identities).[3] An understanding of who has control over the biometric data itself is crucial, especially when dealing with a population of people who can be at heightened risk of being in vulnerable situations. Obtaining informed consent from workers to use data will not always be effective in discharging duties to them.

There is a need to clearly regulate collection, storage, and use of migrant workers' personal and biometric data. This is particularly crucial when private companies are engaged to develop and maintain government digital platforms for migration management. Guidance on data protection and privacy should also be included in online safety sessions during pre-departure trainings and education programmes for migrant workers.

---

[3] For example, on 13 October 2018, Facebook announced that hackers had gained access to 29 million people's accounts, with the ability to see details including phone numbers, emails, and biographical information (Agorakis, 2018). Such information can be used by hackers to direct misinformation to users, in order to influence behaviour.

7. Ensuring that digital services meet the needs of migrant workers

In addition to the benefits and risks of digital technology, there are other elements that need to be considered related to the cost, creation, and sustainability of digital technology in labour migration. In terms of their development, online platforms can be costly and time consuming. Where platforms are established as central to the labour migration management (i.e., migration application systems) they will have good use. However, platforms that are designed to support or benefit migrants can struggle to engage those they are trying to help. In the first instance, platforms that are independent of the online spaces that migrants usually inhabit will struggle to draw users. For some platforms (including rate and review platforms) this can be a key challenge, as the success of such platforms relies on critical mass use. In other cases, the need to keep information up to date, or to provide direct support to the migrants engaging with the platform, will need a level of backstopping that involves a team of people. Online technology may create a new entry point to access information and services, but the information and services still need to be generated by human resources.

In order to address some of these challenges, it is key to ensure that digital technological solutions meet the needs of the people they are seeking to serve. Where technology is built without the user/beneficiary in mind, it can be at best a waste of resources, and at worst can expose vulnerable populations to insecurity around their identity and data. As such, it is critical to take a **beneficiary-**

led and co-creation approach to tech solutions for migrant workers. Co-creation refers to designing solutions to problems in collaboration with those who will benefit from the solution. In the example of tech solutions for migrant workers, a co-creation approach would involve collaboration between tech developers, stakeholders who work with migrant workers (civil society, trade unions, etc.), and the migrant workers themselves.

8. Conclusions

Across ASEAN digital technology is increasingly being used by labour migration actors, including labour migrants themselves, to improve migration management systems, increase access to information and services, and to ease communication. In light of this growth, the 11th AFML will explore the theme "Digitalization to Promote Decent Work for Migrant Workers", providing partners with the opportunity to discuss the opportunities and risks that digitalization presents, and agree to recommendations to ensure that digitalization is a force for the promotion of decent work for migrants.

Increasingly recognized in global instruments and processes, digital technology can be a beneficial tool in promoting decent work for migrants. The use of online labour management systems can improve the efficiency and transparency of the recruitment process, providing migrants with a digital trail that they can use to demonstrate their status and the basis on which they agreed to migrate. Such systems are also being seen to benefit migrants and migration partners in reducing the time and costs associated with migration.

During migration, online platforms facilitate the ability of migrants to communicate with their families at home and with each other. This can benefit migrants in being able to seek and share information, and to communicate when they are experiencing problems and need support. Such support can also increasingly be found online, with public services and non-governmental migrant support services often having online portals to improve accessibility. In addition, digital apps and services can help facilitate remittance transfer.

Such benefits must, however, be seen alongside the risks and challenges associated with the proliferation of online platforms and digital technology. The reliance on friend and family networks is already known to be a key way of disseminating information on migration. There are also questions over how personal data and information is collected, stored, and used, and the extent to which migration actors are monitored and regulated in their interaction with personal data and their accountability to cyber security. In addition, the increasing tendency to turn to third-party online platforms, including Facebook, to host migrant networks or support groups must be balanced, for example, with the recent data breaches that they, and other online platforms, have experienced. A further element to be considered in the reliance upon technology to answer migrants' needs is equitable access to technology. As programming and policy increasingly relies on technological solutions, benefits from the information and services are being unequally realized among migrant populations. It is important that barriers to access for migrants, in particular women and migrants in specific sectors, including domestic work, are addressed.

ASEAN itself has expressed the vision of a "digitally-enabled economy that is secure, sustainable and transformative". To achieve this, the interaction between digital technology and labour migration must be addressed in order to ensure digital technology is accessible, safe, and promotes decent work for all migrant workers.

9. Recommendations

In light of the background review completed by the ILO, key recommendations have been identified and are put forward for consideration by ASEAN Member States.

Sub-theme 1: Digitalization of migrant labour management

1. Encourage governments in countries of origin and destination to develop management databases to facilitate administrative processes related to recruitment and placement, and manage support services to migrant workers throughout the migration cycle, including legal support, welfare assistance, and online training opportunities.

2. Enable management databases to store important documents – such as work contracts, payment slips, or medical certificates – in migrant workers' personal profiles to create a record of agreements, a so called "digital trail". These can be useful if disputes about contract terms, repayments, or other issues arise between a migrant worker and an employer or recruitment agency.

3. Create one-stop service centers, apps, and e-cards to accompany these management databases to enable migrant workers to check their personal profiles, file documents, and access services online.

4. Regulate and monitor the collection, use, and sharing of data on migrant workers to protect their privacy and online safety, regardless of whether such platforms are developed and managed by private companies or state actors.

5. Ensure that costs related to the development and use of digital services are not borne by migrant workers.

6. Increase connectivity in hard-to-reach workplaces, such as fishing boats and plantations, to assist labour inspection and reporting of violations.

7. Build capacity of stakeholders involved in labour migration governance to develop and use digital tools. Promote sharing of good practices across ASEAN Member States.

8. Strengthen the application of general information systems in ASEAN to promptly coordinate and solve problems, for example: strengthening the settlement of complaints.

9. Strengthening the role of civil society organizations in supporting governments and trade unions in migrant worker management.

Sub-theme 2: Digital services to migrant workers

10. Promote women and men migrant workers' access to technology, including irregular migrant workers and those working in the informal sector. Among others, guarantee migrant workers' right to access their mobile phones.

11. Build migrant workers' capacity to use digital tools in a meaningful way to protect themselves. This may involve the inclusion of digital literacy sessions in pre-departure and post-arrival orientation courses to introduce useful resources and tools and train migrant workers in online safety.

12. Promote the use of digital tools in the networking and organizing of migrant workers, as well as information dissemination. Ensure that information is accurate and regularly updated.

13. Promote expansion of digital remittance and other financial services to help migrant workers manage their finances in a smart way and reduce transaction costs.

14. Develop accessible online complaint mechanisms that can track the progress of complaint handling.

15. Ensure that digital tools and services are developed in collaborative way with involvement of migrant workers, and that they respond to identified needs of migrant workers.

16. Regulate and monitor the quality and accuracy of information and services provided on online platforms. Report and blacklist inaccurate information or unscrupulous services.

Bibliography

Agorakis, S. 2018. "Facebook now knows how many users were hacked last month: 29 million", in *Vox*, 13 Oct. Available at: https://www.vox.com/2018/10/13/17973190/facebook-data-breach-29-million-users. [12 Sep. 2018]

Anderson, B. 2016. *Worker, helper, auntie, maid? Working conditions and attitudes experiences by migrant domestic workers in Thailand and Malaysia* (Bangkok, ILO).

Dulay, B.J. 2018. *OWWA e-cares and OWWA free mobile application*, presentation at the National Tripartite Meeting for the 11th ASEAN Forum on Migrant Labour (AFML), Pasay City, 4 Sep.

Endo, I. 2017. "Three things to know about migrant workers and remittances in Malaysia", in The World Bank: *East Asia & Pacific on the rise*, 6 Jan. Available at: http://blogs.worldbank.org/eastasiapacific/three-things-to-know-about-migrant-workers-and-remittances-in-malaysia [12 Sep. 2018]

Farbenblum, B; Berg, L; Kintominas, A. 2018. *Transformative technology for migrant workers: Opportunities, challenges, and risks* (New York, Open Society Foundations).

Hollander, R. 2017. "Southeast Asia could be a leader in mobile internet usage next year", in *Business Insider UK*, 13 Dec. Available at: http://uk.businessinsider.com/southeast-asia-could-be-a-leader-in-mobile-internet-usage-next-year-2017-12 [12 Sep. 2018]

International Labour Organization (ILO). 2013. *Background paper: Progress on the implementation of the recommendations adopted at the 3rd and 4th ASEAN Forum on Migrant Labour* (Bangkok).

—. 2015. *Progress of the implementation of Recommendations adopted at the 3rd – 6th ASEAN Forum on Migrant Labour meetings: Background paper to the 7th AFML* (Bangkok).

—. 2017. *Progress of the implementation of Recommendations adopted at the 3rd – 8th ASEAN Forums on Migrant Labour: Background paper to the 9th AFML* (Bangkok).

—. 2018. *New online ratings help migrant workers avoid unscrupulous recruiters*, press release, 11 Apr. Available at: https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_625204/lang--en/index.htm [12 Sep. 2018].

International Telecommunications Union (ITU). 2017. *ICT facts and figures 2017* (Geneva).

International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC). 2018. *ITUC launches migrant workers 'Recruitment Adviser' platform*, 4 Apr. Available at: https://www.ituc-csi.org/ituc-launches-migrant-worker [12 Sep. 2018]

Internet Society. 2016. *Mobile Internet usage trends in Asia-Pacific* (Singapore).

Nansomboon, B. 2018. *Key issues on digitalization and promoting decent work for migrant workers in Thailand and ASEAN*, presentation at Thailand Tripartite Prepatory Meeting for the 11th ASEAN Forum on Migrant Labour (AFML), Bangkok, 14 Sep.

Napier-Moore, R.; Sheill, K. 2016. *High rise, low pay: Experiences of migrant women in the Thai construction sector* (Bangkok, ILO).

Thai Union. 2018. *Thai Union supports new government regulation to protect workers in Thailand fishing industry*, press release, 11 May. Available at: http://www.thaiunion.com/en/newsroom/press-release/804/thai-union-supports-new-government-regulation-to-protect-workers-in-thailand-fishing-industry [12 Sep. 2018].

United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF). 2017. Remittances as a driver of women's financial inclusion (Bangkok).

United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). 2015. *Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 25 September 2015; Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, A/RES/70/1 (New York).

The World Bank. 2019. *World development indicators*. (Washington, D.C., The World Bank). Available at: http://data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/world-development-indicators [24 May 2019].

Digitalization to promote decent work for migrant workers in ASEAN

Thematic background paper for the 11th ASEAN Forum on Migrant Labour (AFML)

Technology presents a great opportunity to make labour migration safer, more efficient, and more transparent. But, digitalization- as any tool- also involves risks, challenges, and unequal distribution of technological gains. For it to promote decent work and better conditions for women and men migrant workers, it needs to be designed, implemented, and used properly.

Digitalization and how it can promote decent work for migrant workers in ASEAN was the selected theme for the 11th AFML, which took place on 29 – 30 October 2018 in Singapore. This background paper was prepared to inform the discussions and reviews the current opportunities and possible challenges to be addressed for digital technology to promote decent work for all.

Decent Work