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***From Our Eyes: Mekong Migrant Reflections, 2000–2012.* By Mekong Migration Network and Asian Migrant Centre. Chiang Mai, Thailand: Chiang Mai University. 2012. Pp. v, 147.**

The academic literature on migration provides a background that helps the reader to understand why and by whom *From Our Eyes* was written and why it should be read. The literature indicates that within the Greater Mekong Region, some 650,000 people hold work permits that allow them to cross borders annually in search of “better lives”. The region is composed of four countries of origin from which workers emigrate and a primary country of destination to which they move. Countries of origin include Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam while Thailand is the key country of destination.

Their search compels them to move either out of economic necessity and/or opportunity, family tradition, or a sense of adventure. They do so either legally or illegally and on either temporary or permanent bases. Regardless of motive and intent, legal migrant workers face an array of problems including the absence of full protection under labour laws coupled with the presence of situations in which they face unfair labour practices against which they have limited recourse. It is estimated that 40 per cent of regional worker migration involves women and this causes another array of problems including limited family access to healthcare and education opportunities for the children of migrants. The lack of familiarity with local customs and language limitations pose serious challenges particularly when they are accompanied by either discrimination or a lack of common civility on the part of some local residents.

Despite these negative factors, workers decide to cross borders along the greater Mekong river basin because they calculate that personal benefits exceed costs. However, undocumented workers face worse situations; their lack of legal status strips away any semblance of protection under the provisions of both destination country labour laws and intra-regional agreements among origin and

destination countries. Some face human traffickers whose existence is the most egregious aspect of migration. Trafficking is conducted via physical abduction, deception, or duplicity. All too often, it leads to the exploitation of women who are forced into sexual service industries without any semblance of protection.

It is against this background that the volume, a compilation of migrants’ ideas, complaints, and recommendations was created and published. Fifteen migrants into Thailand from Myanmar and Cambodia were interviewed about their experiences as workers in industries ranging from agriculture, construction, mining, fisheries, hotel and domestic services to sexual services. Their interviews should be read “in their own words” as they appear unedited in the volume in order to preserve authenticities. For the purposes of summary and clarity, a version of their comments appears early in the book and begins with the comment that “We, migrants, have made very significant contributions to the social and economic development of the Greater Mekong ... over the past ten years, however our positive impact is often overlooked, and our stories are not often heard... [But] when we are interviewed, our voices are generally considered testimony, and our experiences are summarized” (p. 1).

During 2010 and 2011, the interview with each migrant worker centred on her or his “personal background; high and low points in the past decade; education and vocational training, health insurance and medical check-ups; pre-departure processes; access to government support; personal identification documentation and travel documents; rights in the workplace; safety and work and training; ... access to social justice; trafficking and smuggling arrest, detention and deportation” (p. 3).

Their experiences were summarized by the Mekong Migrant Network at an October 2010 meeting held in Bangkok where key issues were raised: (a) permitting migrants to register in Thailand (the key country of destination) independently from employers; (b) obtaining identity, work permit, and migrant worker cards; (c) enforcing anti-trafficking laws and policies; (d) protecting labour rights; (e) gaining improved

access to healthcare including health insurance, and better access to education for migrant children; (f) obtaining telephones and using the Internet; and finally (g) reducing acts of social stigma and discrimination aimed at migrants by local residents.

Migrant needs and wants are reasonable: for example, they need to be able to move more freely and pay less for passports and work permits; they want to be responsible members of society who are treated with respect and whose children are welcomed into local schools; they need to have further assistance in mastering languages so that their capacities to communicate and understand will be enhanced; and they want to be called legal, be paid legal wages, and work under legal conditions.

Their needs and wants have mostly yet to be met but some limited government actions have taken place, largely due to the activities of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). For example, the Thai Ministry of Labour “has asserted that all workers are entitled to equal protection under national labour laws, including the Labour Protection Act of 1998 (LPA) and the Labour Relations Act of 1975 (LRA)”. However, according to the LRA, union officials must be Thai-born nationals, thus barring migrants from forming new unions or becoming officials in existing ones. Additionally, migrants, particularly migrant women, often work in jobs that are traditionally not unionized, such as domestic work, sex work, construction work, and agricultural work (p. 5).

The fifteen interviewed migrants are not unionized so that they cannot undertake workplace measures on their own. The Royal Thai Government has made it legal for migrants to take grievances to the courts. However, they must do so on individual bases and not with the assistance of “organized” labour. Additionally, not all of their expressed concerns have been addressed by the Royal Thai Government and the book’s contents discuss important concerns and issues that have yet to be confronted.

In conclusion, of particular importance in the volume is the set of migrant interviews — they are the foundation upon which the book’s logic and purpose wrests. *From Our Eyes* is a fascinating account of migrant life and the human drama that has played out as people struggle to improve their living conditions. It also shows the connection between the ways that NGOs continue to bring migrants’ struggles to the awareness of public officials and policy-makers. Key NGOs are the Mekong Migrant Network, the Asian Migrant Centre, and the Mekong Press Foundation, each of which receives support from the Rockefeller Foundation. The book resulted from a confluence linking the NGOs’ work and the lives of migrants — it will be a terrific, interesting, and important “read”, both by university level students and general readers.

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