

Stepping Stones

The Impact of Twin Crises on the
Future of Migrant Education in
Thailand

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Summary Report



Research Team

Tom Lowe, InEd
Naing Win, InEd
Wirachan Charoensukaran, InEd
Nwet Nwet Win, InEd
Tin Zar, InEd
Naw Nay Yu Paw, InEd
Paw Paw, InEd
Th' Blay Moo, InEd
Greg Tyrosvoutis, InEd
Mia Sasaki
Say Gay Poe, YCF
Nay Chi Win, BMTA
Nan Mi Nway, BMTA
Nan Phyu Hnin Eain, BMTA
Brang Aung, BMTA
Nan Phyo Hnin Eain, BMTA

Esther Kyaw, POS
Ye Kyaw Htet, POS
Zin Min Naing, POS
Hnin Hayman, POS
Shwe Shwe Naing, MAF
Khin Su Myat, MAF
Kanongrit Singhabut, MECC
Teerapab Titawatana, MECC
Nyan Htet Aung, MECC
Yoon Htar Aein, MECC
Aung Naing Soe, HWF
Chu Wai Wai Zaw, HWF
Jonathan Jordan, HWF
Saw Lar Bar Tun, HWF
U Hla Than, MTC
Saw Sein Min, MTC
Saw Hla Khin, MTC

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Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic changed the world. The unprecedented restrictions on gatherings affected over 1.6 billion learners and 100 million teachers in more than 190 countries (UNESCO et al., 2021). Worldwide, children have missed an estimated 2 trillion (and counting) in-person learning hours (UNICEF, 2022). Despite the great resilience demonstrated in the collective and concerted response, there is accumulating evidence that children experienced devastating learning losses as a result of the pandemic, and children from disadvantaged backgrounds suffered disproportionately (UNICEF, 2022). In October 2020, UN General Secretary Antonio Guterres warned of a ‘generational catastrophe’ (UN, 2020, para. 1) - a sentiment echoed in recent World Bank research (Bhatta and Katwal, 2022; World Bank et al., 2022a; 2022b).

Over the last thirty years, an educational ecosystem for Myanmar migrant children in Thailand has slowly evolved with the aid of inclusive shifts in Thai government policies, including the landmark 1999 Education for All (EFA) policy. Despite this progress, the ecosystem has long-existed in a state of quiet crisis defined by a multitude of challenges resulting in most migrant children not completing their education (Save the Children, 2014). In 2019, concerted efforts were made to address these challenges through a large-scale participatory action research project led by seven local education organizations. The final report, entitled *Bridges: Participatory Action Research on the Future of Migrant Education in Thailand* (Tyrosvoutis, 2019) created a roadmap of recommendations from the ground to drive improvement of access, quality, recognition, and sustainability of education for migrant children throughout Thailand. The title, *Bridges*, represented the multiplicity of educational pathways that were available for every migrant child to reach their full potential. Now, many of these bridges have been reduced to stepping stones and many education pathways hang in the balance.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on education systems throughout Thailand, resulting in increased drop-out rates, school closures, and learning losses across the country (Belghith and Arayavechkit, 2021; EEF, 2022). In Myanmar, the COVID-19 pandemic became the backdrop to a second crisis with historic implications. On February 1st 2021, the Myanmar military arrested the country's democratically elected leaders and seized power, making unsubstantiated claims of widespread electoral fraud (Goodman, 2021). As a result, the Myanmar education system endured one of the longest periods of school closures in the world (UNICEF, 2022). Today the country continues to experience ongoing political upheaval marked by intensifying civil war, economic crises, a fractured education system, and escalating humanitarian needs (Frontier, 2022b; UNOCHA, 2022; World Bank, 2021b; UNOCHA, 2021).

To explore the impact of these twin crises on the Myanmar migrant education ecosystem in Thailand, 32 local researchers from 8 organizations interviewed 1,013 participants as part of this participatory action research project. Fieldwork was conducted during October and November 2021 - the peak of the pandemic in Thailand. Approached through a lens of education in emergencies, the findings and recommendations are clustered through three themes - Access, Learning and Protection. The title of this report: Stepping Stones: The Impact of Twin Crises on the Future of Migrant Education in Thailand has been chosen to highlight the enduring resilience of educational pathways and the foundations upon which new bridges can be built.



*"Normally we eat 3 meals a day.
Now we can only eat 2 meals a day."*

-Migrant Parent



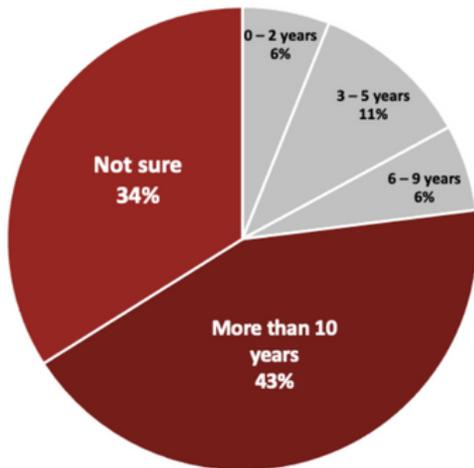
Key Findings | ACCESS

The twin crises had a major impact on children's access to education. Between March 2020 and April 2022, over 3,331 children dropped out from migrant learning centers in Tak province - representing approximately 1 in 4 students (MECC, 2022). Those that remained experienced high levels of absenteeism - approximately 20% of students reported missing more than a month of school. The ongoing crisis in Myanmar has severely curtailed access to student's previously preferred educational pathways. Prior to February 2021, many children and youth studying within MLCs intended to return to Myanmar to continue their studies. Due to the crisis within the country, a large proportion of respondents felt that they could not return and consequently see their long term future in Thailand.

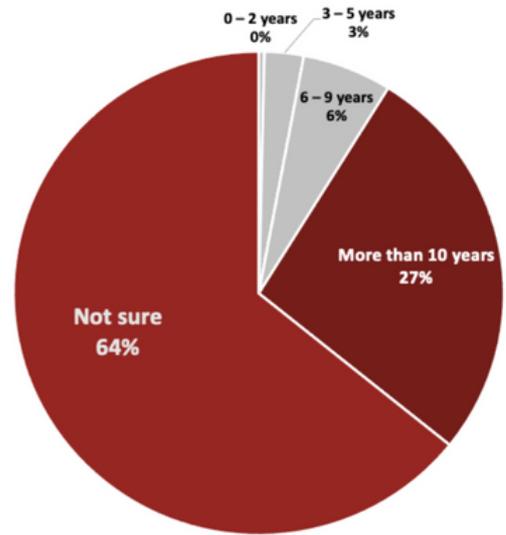
The shift to online and home-based learning modalities helped to fulfill children's right to access education, however, this also created new barriers to access. 80% of teachers in Thai schools, and 91% of teachers in MLCs reported teaching challenges caused by a lack of student access to the internet. Home-based learning required MLC teachers to visit multiple communities to meet with students and deliver printed worksheets. MLC teachers were more than twice as likely (72%) as Thai school teachers (30%) to report challenges with access to printed materials. MLC teachers also reported significant challenges with transportation due to increased costs and heightened travel restrictions.

Inequitable access to vaccines and financial support during the pandemic served as a stark reminder of the inequalities between systems. Experiences of children, parents, and teachers in Thai schools highlight the significant language support that is required to ensure the migrant learners are not excluded from or left behind within the Thai education system.

Migrant parents' expected stay in Thailand (Nov, 2019)



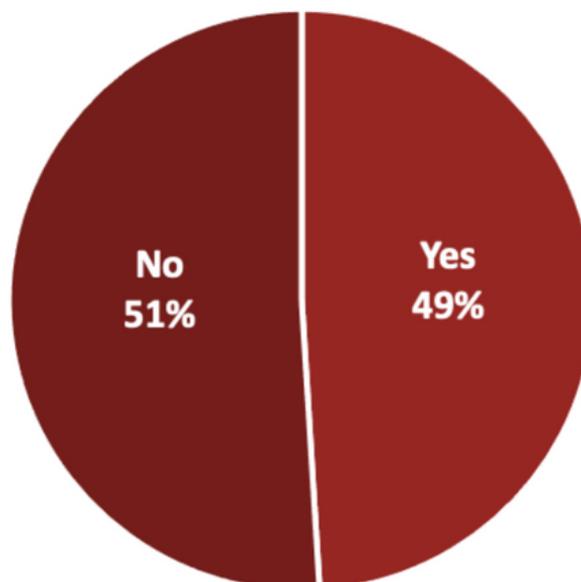
Migrant parents' expected stay in Thailand (Oct, 2021)



"Due to the current situation in Myanmar, we changed our childrens' plan to go back and study in Myanmar. I planned for my children to enroll in high school in Myanmar because I want them to go to university in Myanmar. But now we do not have any way to go back. I now feel like I am losing the way of my children's education and ourselves."

- Migrant Parent

MLC Students' response: Do you know a friend who has dropped out of school since the start of the pandemic?



Key Findings | LEARNING

Quality of learning, as measured by teacher and student self-assessment of learner engagement, declined. Both students and teachers reported a lack of time to meaningfully teach, understand, and assess the curriculum. Under-resourced MLCs experienced a transition from quiet-crisis to outright emergency, with the lack of resourcing severely limiting the quality of alternative delivery modalities. The economic vulnerabilities of migrant families were exposed by the pandemic and then exacerbated by the increased costs of online-learning. Insufficient digital devices and a lack of access to low-cost, high-speed, reliable internet were major impediments to the delivery of quality, inclusive online-learning. The effectiveness of home-based alternatives were limited by time, printing costs, and access to transportation.

Language barriers severely impacted migrant children's ability to engage with the learning provided by Thai schools, and had an adverse effect on student's help-seeking behavior. Whereas 75% of migrant children in MLCs reported asking their teachers for help, only 32% of migrant children in Thai schools reported asking their teachers for help. Furthermore, almost 1 in 10 migrant children in Thai schools reported having nobody to ask for help.

Throughout the last two years, teachers have gone above and beyond the call of duty to earn the utmost respect from their students and communities. Students rated their relationship with their teachers as the most important factor in their education throughout the twin crises. However, teachers continue to work for below adequate wages, despite being pillars within their communities and the center of the strong network of professional relationships that contribute to community-wide resilience. Ultimately, migrant teachers deserve a professional pathway to formal recognition/ accreditation of their teaching skills that would enable them to continue to progress and work across different systems. The impact of the ongoing crises in Myanmar has made it more difficult for migrant teachers to earn recognition/ accreditation from Myanmar authorities and alternative means are needed to secure the professional futures of migrant teachers at this time in which they are needed most.



Key Challenges Undermining Migrant Education



grey = challenges prior to the twin crises
 red = challenges as a result of the twin crises



Key Findings | PROTECTION

Children experienced direct harm as a result of the twin crises. COVID-19 mandated school closures pushed students into isolation, cutting them off from the social support networks provided by their peers, and the formal child protection and safeguarding mechanisms established within schools. The economic impact of COVID-19 restrictions led to 87% of families reporting a reduction in income. This directly impacted families' capacity to feed themselves, provide shelter for their children, protect their children from harm, or provide their children with access to education.

Parents reported that children faced significantly increased child protection risks, including mental health issues, early marriage, and child labour. 55% of parents reported increased risks of mobile phone game addiction. 1 in 5 surveyed students reported both increased stress and feelings of loneliness during the pandemic. When children were asked to describe their feelings during the pandemic, the results produced a cloud of negativity. The impact of the February 2021 political crisis forced migrant parents and their children to re-evaluate their long term plans, increasing uncertainty about future aspirations. The vast majority of migrant parents in Thailand are long-term residents and many hope to remain in the country, but qualitative responses throughout the research reveal that the events of the last two years have led to community-wide feelings of insecurity, uncertainty, and anxiety.

A key source of anxiety for all migrants from Myanmar in Thailand is continued access to appropriate documentation, which limits mobility, legal protection, and access to social services. Documentation is the perennial problem underpinning so many of the challenges faced by migrant education stakeholders. Over 80% of migrant parents surveyed during this research have resided in Thailand for over 10 years yet a significant proportion continue to face uncertainties surrounding their long term futures due to the challenges with accessing affordable, timely, and stable documentation.

The twin crises have further underlined the importance and urgency of addressing these issues. On the one hand, migrant workers are expected to be crucial to Thailand's post-covid economic recovery and long term economic goals as they have proven to be over the last twenty years. On the other hand, Thailand has the opportunity to demonstrate regional and global moral leadership in mitigating some of the damage inflicted by the ongoing and escalating humanitarian catastrophe along its longest border. Improving documentation rights of migrant parents, children, and educators holds the potential to bring about local, national, regional and international educational, economic, political and security benefits. Thailand is a country that has benefited greatly from migration and multiple sectors of Thailand's economy are highly reliant on the migrant workforce. Addressing the issues surrounding documentation today can strategically define what Thailand will be tomorrow. The ongoing crises in Myanmar will continue to negatively impact the wellbeing of Myanmar migrants in Thailand due to anxiety regarding their families at home, documentation in Thailand, and the availability of future educational and vocational opportunities.





Legacies of the Twin Crises

With vaccines administered, schools reopened, and lockdowns fading into memory, there is a distinctly 21st-century temptation to allow collective attention to be drawn towards the latest zeitgeist. However, the challenges of the last two years, as well as the responses to them, will continue to leave lasting legacies. The long term impact of these legacies depends on our collective efforts to address ongoing needs and build upon learning and resilience.

It is estimated that Thailand will require 400,000 new migrant workers in 2022 to rebuild the economy to pre-pandemic levels. Simultaneously, the ongoing crises in Myanmar are likely to continue to act as a push factor, and consequently migration to Thailand in the coming years is likely to increase, and thus the demands on the migrant education ecosystem are expected to increase.

For those currently within the ecosystem, all evidence suggests that migrant learners are likely to have experienced high degrees of learning losses. Research shows that children who have fallen behind academically, or who have previously missed extensive periods of education are more likely to drop out again in the future (Doll, 2013; Sabates, 2010). Thus it may be anticipated that without targeted action, the COVID generation will be at increased risk of dropping out in the coming years.

Events in Myanmar have politicized education. MLCs have lost access to resources, financing, and technical support from within Myanmar. Many migrant families intend to stay longer in Thailand, and Thai-accredited pathways are likely to become increasingly important - especially to younger learners. Older learners who are matriculating through the Myanmar systems are experiencing anxiety and uncertainty about their futures. A lack of alternative post-secondary education opportunities is likely to reverberate throughout the system compounding the increased risks of dropouts.

The events of the last two years have pushed the migrant education ecosystem further away from sustainability. The international donor landscape has shifted in response to COVID-19, needs in Myanmar, and crises in Afghanistan and Ukraine. The long-standing challenges of accreditation and recognition for migrant teachers and children now apply to hundreds of thousands more teachers and learners within Myanmar. Solutions to challenges on either side of the border have the potential to be scaled across multiple dimensions of the Myanmar education ecosystem.

If positives are to be found in the crises over the last two years, it is in the actions undertaken in response to the challenges. Every organization involved in this project has drawn upon the learning from throughout this participatory action research process to adapt programming and initiate new responses. This report spotlights examples that have played a key role in response to the twin crises such as The Border Emergency Fund which has supported over 5,000 families with dry food during the ongoing crises; The Out of School Enrolment TaskForce which has directly enrolled over 400 previously out of school children into education; Digital School which continues to produce over 160 educational videos that has reached over 100,000 learners via UNESCO's LearnBig platform; and Child-Friendly Spaces which offer creative, play-based, learning activities to over 1,300 migrant children led by a trained community champion.

The twin crises have had a major impact on the education of Myanmar migrant children in Thailand, and yet from the responses to crises grows resilience. Although educational bridges for Myanmar migrant children are better conceptualized in the current context as stepping stones, strong foundations remain. It is through evidence-based, community-led, collaborative efforts that resilience can be harnessed to ensure every Myanmar migrant child has access to the resources they need to achieve their full potential.





Key Recommendations to Improve Access

- **Multilingual Classroom Assistants for Early Grades at Thai schools** - The Out of School Enrollment Task Force has found that the most difficult step for out of school migrant children to enter Thai school is the first year. They are 'submerged' into a class with a language they often don't understand or speak at home. This also places a lot of pressure on teachers who cannot speak children's mother tongue language. Additional classroom support is needed for migrant children to succeed. Our team currently supports 4 bilingual classroom assistants to help migrant children make a smooth transition into Thai formal education, but more are needed to meet the needs of all children.
- **Addressing the Digital Divide** - 80% of migrant teachers and 46% of migrant students reported access challenges regarding online learning. In line with UNICEF's (2020) report, *Reopening with Resilience: Lessons from remote learning during COVID-19*, it is recommended to continue providing IT infrastructure to leverage the digital teaching skills gained over the last 2 years. MLC teachers need training, guidance and financial support to deliver effective online teaching. Local organizations and INGOs with expertise and capacity should seek ways to improve MLCs' online capabilities. Financial support is needed for sim cards, data packages, routers, and laptops.
- **Greater Accessibility of Thai NFE (Kor Sor Nor) for Non-Thai Children and Youth** - The ongoing humanitarian crisis in Myanmar has dramatically impacted migrant families who have lived and worked in Thailand for multiple years. They are increasingly seeking education options for their children that are accredited in Thailand. The non-formal entrance exam requires Thai language proficiency in speaking, reading, and writing at approximately a grade 3 level. This language barrier prevents migrant children from accessing this nationally accredited non-formal pathway. Pre-KSN programs for children with low Thai literacy levels are needed to bridge this critical gap. These could be stand-alone programs or integrated with the current MLC curriculum.
- **Explore Alternative Accredited Education Opportunities** - Quality education is not defined by accreditation, however, accreditation drives quality and brings greater opportunities to students. The loss of accreditation due to the Myanmar political crisis has been severely felt by education stakeholders on both sides of the border. It is unlikely a single solution to the accreditation crisis will be found. Multiple pathways should continue to be explored, this may include expansion of GED programs, implementation of iGCSE, or innovation in accredited distance learning courses.

Key Recommendations to Improve Learning

- **Include Migrant Children in Large-scale Assessments of Learning Losses** - Understanding the extent of learning losses during the COVID-19 pandemic is the first step in mitigating the damage inflicted. Robust, rigorous, systematic analysis can support understanding of the gaps to be filled, the resources required and the areas and groups in most need of support to achieve equitable education for all. ASER, EGRA and EGMA are examples of types of assessments that can lead to high quality data that can be built upon. For further guidance explore: *The Guide for Learning Recovery and Acceleration: Using the RAPID Framework to Address COVID-19 Learning Losses and Build Forward Better*.
- **Expansion of Digital School** - To complement the teaching and learning initiatives proved by MLCs, Digital School provides children in Thailand and Myanmar with structured, creative, routine and interactive lessons to keep them engaged and learning. By live-streaming via facebook, Digital School has reached over 100,000 viewers. As of October 2022, over 160 videos have been produced and are available at learnbig.net. Additional funding is needed to scale the initiative to provide supplementary education.
- **Empower Migrant Youth Leaders** - Migrant communities possess an untapped resource: youth who are further in the Thai education systems. Youth leadership and empowerment programs should be rolled out to train youth as community volunteers to break down the language barriers between migrant parents and Thai school staff. Interviewed migrant children enrolled in Thai schools shared they had few people they could ask to help them with their homework. Migrant youth are best placed to help migrant children learn the fundamentals of Thai language as they can speak both children's mother-tongue and Thai.





Key Recommendations to Improve Protection

- **Access to Legal Documentation for Long-term Working Migrants, Migrant Teachers, and Children** - Many migrant families who have lived in Thailand for years still lack necessary legal documents for their personal security. As security concerns continue to escalate, information on how to access legal documentation pathways are needed. Otherwise, migrant families live in fear of reprisal and remain hesitant to access services they are entitled to.
- **Expansion of Safety Nets for At-Risk Children** - The legacies of the twin crises have left children at increased risk of drop out. The expansion of existing formal and non-formal protection mechanisms and educational opportunities can build the resilience of migrant children. The *Child-friendly Spaces*, and the *Learning Resilience through Play* projects are examples of existing projects that employ responsible and trained community focal points to develop community based protection mechanisms.
- **Teacher Support Focusing on Essential Needs and Well Being** - Teachers are on the frontlines: forced to navigate numerous roles and responsibilities and be leaders during this time of uncertainty. Future teacher training should seek to supplement teacher stipends and provide teachers with the tools they need to provide holistic support to migrant children. Future training should also include teacher well-being as educators require outlets and a space to dialogue about the professional and personal challenges they face.

This research was a collaborative effort by the following organisations working to promote access to safe, inclusive, high quality, and recognized education for Myanmar migrant children in Thailand:

The Inclusive Education Foundation (INED) through its **TeacherFOCUS** project aims to reduce inequalities for all children by increasing access to and improving the quality of recognized education options. INED looks to close the gap through educational research, contextualized capacity building, educational system strengthening, community-based solutions, and data-driven advocacy. We believe education is the most direct pathway out of poverty and that a partial education is not enough to keep children safe from abuse, exploitation, and trafficking. www.inedfoundation.org

The Migrant Educational Coordination Center (MECC) is an organisation under Tak Primary Education Service Area Office 2 (TAK PESAO 2) and which leads coordination between MLCs, NGOs, CBOs and Government parties. All Migrant Learning Centres in Tak province are listed under MECC. <https://www.mecctak2.com/>

Help without Frontiers Thailand Foundation (HwF) aims to fight the root causes of poverty and discrimination and violence through education, youth empowerment, health, child protection and community development for long-term sustainability. We work along the Thai-Myanmar border giving children, youth and their communities a chance for a brighter future. <https://helpwithoutfrontiers.org>

The Burmese Migrant Teachers' Association (BMTA) works to promote the rights of teachers through advocacy in collaboration with local and international education partners. BMTA promotes unity and the value of teachers by improving their status through school management training and teacher capacity building. <https://www.facebook.com/migrant.teachers>

The Youth Connect Foundation provides training, apprenticeships and career services so students can transition to safe, productive and independent lives. Through working with migrant learning centers as well as local Thai businesses and governmental authorities, Youth Connect Foundation has developed a unique and successful approach for migrant youth in Mae Sot. <http://youthconnectthailand.org>

Playonside, a non-governmental organisation based in Mae Sot on the Thai-Burma border, was founded in 2013. It mainly uses football as a powerful tool to educate and empower displaced Myanmar migrants and refugees in Thailand. At the end of each weekend, around 1000 migrant children and young people from 27 different migrant schools gather to play, learn and compete while making new friends and expanding their networks. PlayOnside is a highly recognized local organisation focused on promoting social change for migrant communities. Over the past 9 years, we've developed a high-impact methodology using football as a powerful tool that empowers and educates vulnerable Myanmar migrants and refugees in the areas of social inclusion, gender equality, and empowerment." www.playonside.org

The Marist Asia Foundation (MAF) provides support for Burmese Migrant Families with Health and Education Programs. Marist Asia Foundation has been working in Ranong since 2006 and provides a HIV Health, Preschool, Secondary and University Online Program to give migrant children and families a brighter future. <https://www.maristasiafoundation.org>

The Mae Tao Clinic has been serving vulnerable and displaced populations along the Thai-Burma border since 1989. MTC's main programmatic areas are: 1) Primary Healthcare Services; 2) Clinical Training; 3) Education 4) Protection; 5) Community Health; 6) Organisational Sustainability; and 7) Burma Based Health Service in Karen State. Together, these programs enable MTC to holistically serve the needs of thousands of displaced and marginalised people from Burma and respond to the disease outbreak and humanitarian crises along the border. These services are complemented by the numerous collaborations that MTC undertakes with other CBOs, INGOs, networking groups, government and university institutions, ensuring that the plight of the displaced and migrant community is addressed by policy development and other services. <https://maetaoclinic.org/>

