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► Empowering Migrant Workers: Lessons Learned from ILO Migrant Worker Resource Centres in the ASEAN region



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the European Union

- ▶ **Empowering Migrant Workers:**
Lessons Learned from ILO Migrant Worker
Resource Centres in the ASEAN region

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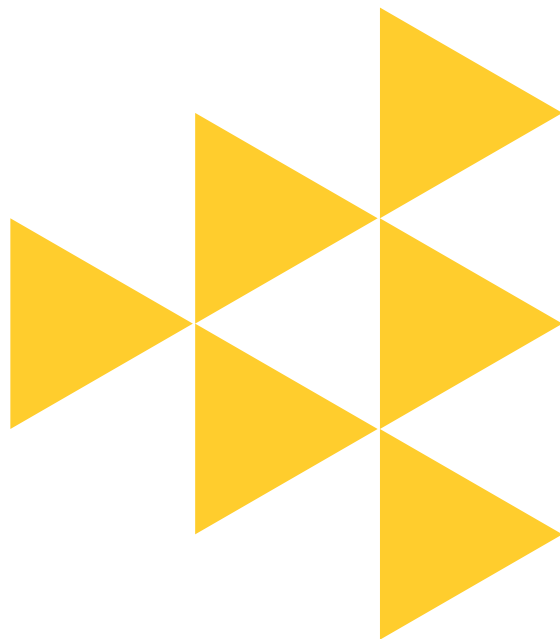
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Abbreviations and Acronyms

APWLD	Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development	MAP	MAP Foundation (Thailand)
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations	MRC	Migrant Worker Resource Centre
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation	MOUs	Memorandum(s) of Understanding
CDPO	Cambodian Disabled People's Organization	MTUC	Malaysian Trades Union Congress
CLC	Cambodian Labour Confederation	NEA	National Employment Agency (Cambodia)
CSO	Civil Society Organization	NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
CTUM	Confederation of Trade Unions Myanmar	PSWS	Persatuan Sahabat Wanita Selangor (Malaysia)
DFAT	Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade	SBMI	Serikat Buruh Migran Indonesia (Indonesian Migrant Workers Union)
EU	European Union	SOGIESC	Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sexual Characteristics
FED	Foundation for Education and Development (Thailand)	SPIAC-B	Social Protection Inter-Agency Cooperation Board
FRN	Fishers' Rights Network	UNCITRAL	United Nations Commission on International Trade Law
GAC	Global Affairs Canada		
HRDF	Human Rights and Development Foundation (Thailand)		
ILO	International Labour Organization		
LSCW	Legal Support for Children and Women (Cambodia)		
IOM	International Organization for Migration		
IUF	International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations		
KSBSI	Konfederasi Serikat Buruh Seluruh Indonesia (Confederation of Indonesian Trade Unions)		
LTSA	One-Roof Integrated Service model (Indonesia)		

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Executive Summary

This publication draws on over a decade of experience by the ILO in supporting Migrant Worker Resource Centres (MRCs) across the ASEAN region. It was commissioned by the following ILO labour migration programmes: TRIANGLE in ASEAN, Safe and Fair/ PROTECT and Ship to Shore Rights.

It presents valuable insights for policymakers and practitioners seeking to improve service delivery to women and men migrant workers. The findings affirm the relevance of the MRCs as an institutional framework that supports expanded access to information and services to enable safe migration and decent work.

An essential element of the ILO MRC model is that it puts migrant workers at the centre of the activities. Their effectiveness stems from strong partnerships with local communities, worker and civil society organizations, and government agencies. Careful selection of partners, extensive capacity building efforts and a focus on achieving long-term sustainability have proven essential in establishing resilient MRCs.

MRCs offer a broad spectrum of services in response to the needs of migrant workers, including counselling and psychosocial support, information and outreach, legal aid, provision of pre-migration training, support for return and reintegration, and targeted programming for migrant women, people with disabilities, fishers, seafood processors and domestic workers. Their role in organizing migrants into networks and facilitating access to trade unions has further empowered migrants to assert their rights and build a collective voice.

It also highlights the importance of cultivating trust through building strong relationships with migrant communities, developing tailored information-sharing strategies, and ensuring inclusive and rights-based messaging. Formal and informal networking has enabled MRCs to extend their reach, address gaps in labour and social protection, and provide timely support to migrant workers who experience labour rights violations or workplace accidents.

Although the MRCs continue to face some significant challenges to their operations and sustainability, the ILO experience of providing support for MRCs during the last decade offers clear lessons learned on what works that can be replicated in other regions. Their success underscores the value of localized, adaptable and migrant-centred service models that respond to the operational context while aligning with international labour standards.

The publication offers practical guidance to governments, trade unions and civil society organizations on improving delivery of information and services to support safe migration for decent work. It advocates for further investments in community-based support structures that prioritize the labour rights and empowerment of migrant workers.

1. Introduction

“The MRC gives us hope. It’s a place that helps us to be strong and not lose hope because we need to fight for our rights.” – Quote from a migrant worker who used MRC services.

Migrant workers in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region contribute to the societies and economies of countries of destination and their countries of origin. In countries of destination, they fill labour shortages, bringing needed skills and contribute to local economic development through their work and spending. At the same time, their remittances support families and communities in their countries of origin, and on return, migrant workers bring skills and knowledge acquired abroad.

But despite the importance of labour migration to the region, migrant workers continue to experience widespread labour exploitation and abuse and remain under-served by the formal service infrastructure of governments. It is for this reason that the ILO has worked with government, trade union and civil society partners across ASEAN

to develop and operate Migrant Worker Resource Centres (MRCs) that can provide migrant workers and their families quality information, services and support across the duration of their migration journey, from pre-departure decision-making to finding a new job upon their return. MRCs unite technical support with on the ground practical interventions with the aims of making migration safer and ensuring access to decent work.

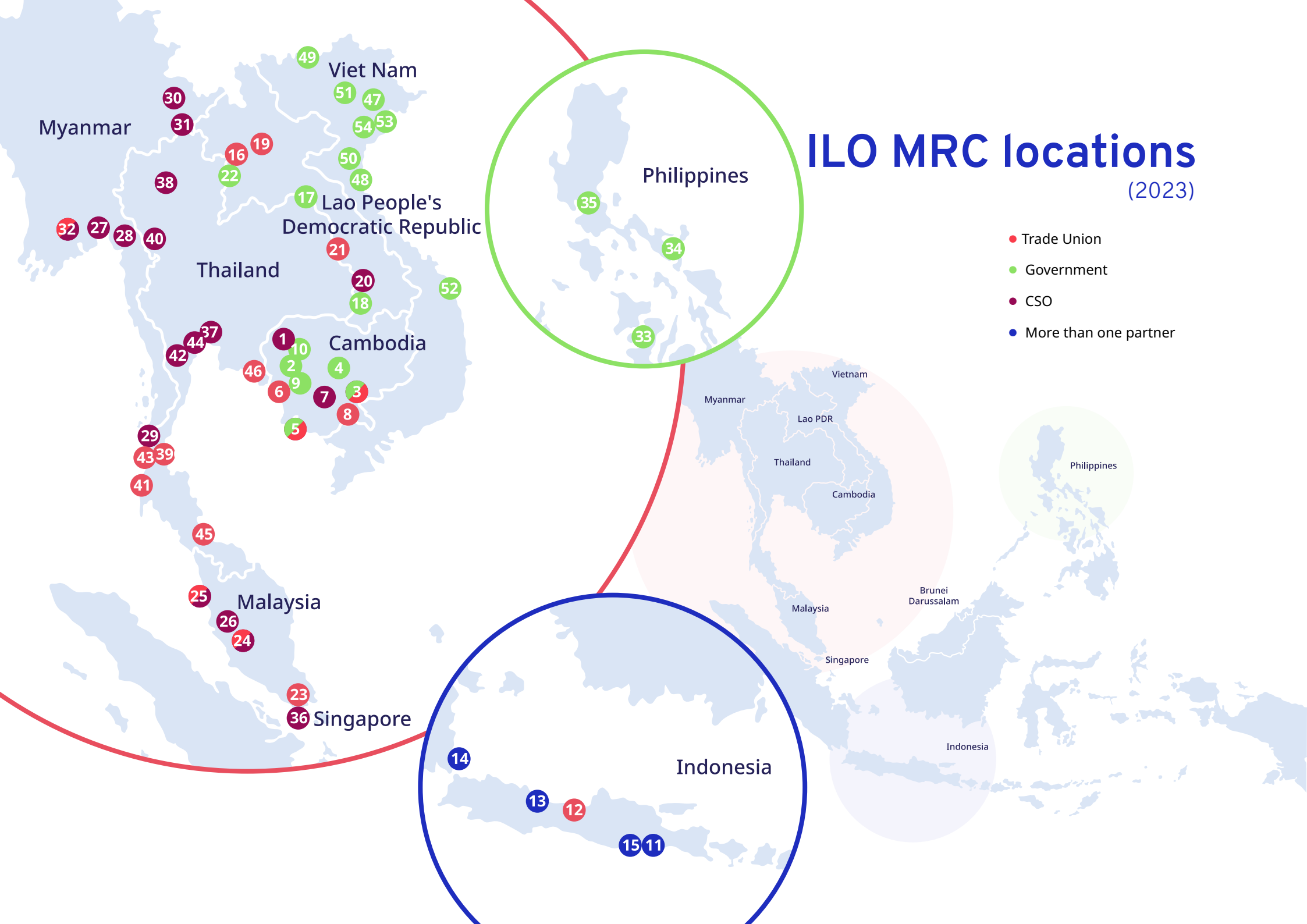
So what exactly is an MRC? It is a physical space, with regular opening hours and staff on duty, where potential migrant workers, returned migrant workers, migrant workers’ families and other community members can visit to obtain information and assistance regarding migration. MRC staff also conduct outreach activities, in person or through social media, to potential migrant workers, their families and their communities. ILO-supported MRCs provide a range of services and are required to maintain a monitoring database of clients (ILO 2014).

This report provides an overview¹ of ILO-supported MRCs in the ASEAN region, giving insights into the history of the initiative and the services that the centres offer to migrant workers and their families.

Village Focus International established the first-ever MRC managed by a civil society organization to provide safe migration information and services to potential and returning migrants in Salavan, Lao People’s Democratic Republic.

©ILO/Village Focus International.

¹ The overview is supported by a 2023 assessment of the activities and objectives of 23 MRCs across ASEAN, incorporating the insights of MRC partners from government, trade unions and civil society organizations (CSOs) in relation to the needs and challenges of migrant workers and how their MRCs work to address them in a comprehensive and compassionate manner. In addition, 120 migrant workers were surveyed about their experiences with MRCs in order to gain insights from the centres’ principal clientele.



Cambodia

- 1 Banteay Meanchey
- 2 Battambang*
- 3 Kampong Cham*
- 4 Kampong Thom*
- 5 Kampot*
- 6 Koh Kong
- 7 Phnom Penh/Kandal
- 8 Prey Veng*
- 9 Pursat
- 10 Siem Reap*

Indonesia

- 11 Bli tar
- 12 Central Java
- 13 Cirebon
- 14 East Lampung
- 15 Tulungagung

Lao People's Democratic Republic

- 16 Bokeo
- 17 Bolikhamxay
- 18 Champasak*
- 19 Luang Prabang
- 20 Salavanh
- 21 Savannakhet
- 22 Xayabury

Malaysia

- 23 Johor Bahru
- 24 Kuala Lumpur/ Selangor*
- 25 Penang*
- 26 Selangor

Myanmar

- 27 Bago
- 28 Hpa An
- 29 Kawthaung
- 30 Keng Tung
- 31 Tachileik
- 32 Yangon*

Philippines

- 33 Negros Occidental
- 34 Tabaco City
- 35 Quezon City

Singapore

- 36 Singapore

Thailand

- 37 Bangkok
- 38 Chiang Mai
- 39 Chumporn
- 40 Mae Sot
- 41 Kuraburi
- 42 Petchaburi
- 43 Ranong
- 44 Samut Sakhon
- 45 Songkhla*
- 46 Trat

Viet Nam

- 47 Bac Ninh
- 48 Ha Tinh
- 49 Lao Cai
- 50 Nghe An
- 51 Phu Tho
- 52 Quang Ngai
- 53 Thai Binh
- 54 Than Hoa

* In these locations, two different partners operate separate MRCs.



The ILO started to support the setting up and implementation of MRCs in countries of origin and destination in ASEAN in 2011. By 2023, a total of 65 MRCs in nine ASEAN countries² have provided services to potential, current and returned migrant workers as well as to their family members.³ Between 2011 and 2024, per ILO-internal records (based on partner reporting), MRCs provided comprehensive services to close to 650,000 migrant workers (43 per cent women). Some 15,600 legal cases were settled with MRC assistance between 2014 and 2024, with more than US\$13 million in compensation awarded to migrant workers in these cases.

Though supported by the ILO, the centres themselves are run by partner organizations from governments, trade unions and civil society organizations (CSO).⁴ This arrangement means that there are a diversity of voices and experiences within the network of MRCs, which offers a collective set of skills and services that all MRCs can draw upon and learn from, broadening stakeholders' perspectives with regard to the important role that migrant workers play and the support they need.

The ASEAN region is a major hub for international labour migration, and contains both countries that are predominantly countries of origin for migrant workers and countries that are predominantly destination countries for migrant workers. MRCs can be found in both. MRCs in origin countries are predominantly focused on preparing migrant workers for their journey abroad through safe migration counselling, legal assistance services, providing information and training on labour rights in destination countries and how to access support services, and offering training on key life skills like financial literacy. Country of origin MRCs also work with the families who have been left behind, and assist returning migrant workers

through reintegration support and psychosocial support (if needed). At the same time, MRCs in destination countries primarily support migrant workers who are in the country, providing information and counselling, and assisting migrant workers who have found themselves in unfortunate circumstances, whether it be a labour dispute over pay or more serious situations involving violence and harassment or forced labour.

Broadly speaking, at the MRCs or through their outreach activities, potential, current and returned migrant workers and their family members can:

- **obtain information and advice** related to labour migration processes and labour rights (including social security), occupational safety and health in the workplace, skills, and sector-specific information;
- **secure increased access to justice** through legal assistance to pursue grievances and legal claims, including on recruitment abuses, due wages, benefits and compensation for injuries or in cases of violence and harassment.
- **obtain referrals to specialized service providers**, including official complaint mechanisms, shelter, medical care, anti-trafficking groups and women's organizations.

- **attend trainings** on a range of issues, including financial literacy, organizing, gender equality, language and vocational skills, and small enterprise development
- **join regular meetings or exchanges** of migrants to share experiences, have support and peer help to overcome difficulties; including women only exchanges.
- **have opportunities to network with other MRCs**, trade unions, and women's organizations to organize collectively and have access to end-to-end support.
- **receive psychosocial counselling and emergency support** including temporary safe shelter and livelihood support in cases including violence, abuse, mental health and trafficking.

Though it should be noted that the actual services available at any particular MRC will vary depending on the type of organization that is operating – government, trade union or CSO – and whether it is located in a destination country or origin country. Nevertheless, all MRCs aim to ensure that migrant workers can access a full range of services, either directly from the MRC or through referrals to other organizations.

² The nine countries are: Cambodia, Indonesia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Viet Nam.

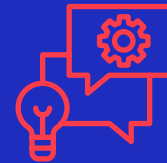
³ ILO support for the MRCs in the ASEAN region is provided through three regional programmes: (1) TRIANGLE in ASEAN: Safe and Fair Labour Migration, supported by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and Global Affairs Canada (GAC); (2) Safe and Fair: Realizing women migrant workers' rights and opportunities in the ASEAN region, part of the European Union–United Nations Spotlight Programme; and (3) Ship to Shore Rights South East Asia, supported by funding from the European Union.

⁴ ILO support in Myanmar is exclusively delivered through civil society and trade union partnerships, as there are currently no government-led ILO supported MRCs.

What goes into running a Migrant Worker Resource Centre?

Establishing MRCs

- Selecting the right partners
- The importance of monitoring and evaluation and ensuring data confidentiality
- Planning for sustainability
- Building the capacity of MRC partners to deliver services
- Developing a security plan

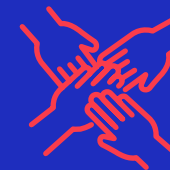
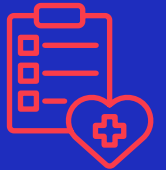


Cultivating relationships to deliver effective services

- Building strategic networks
- The importance of community outreach and building trust
- Identifying information needs and strategies for sharing relevant, clear and accurate information

Provision of support services

- Legal assistance with complaint cases and social protection benefit claims
- Career guidance for migrants
- Empower migrant workers through collective bargaining and membership in trade unions/ migrant worker associations
- Strengthening social protection rights
- Tailored capacity-building programmes
- Psychosocial support
- Gender-responsive services and migrant workers with disabilities





Outreach activities in Xayabury province, Lao People's Democratic Republic, 21-24 February 2022. Staff provide information to prospective migrant workers, especially to people who live close to the Thailand border.

©ILO/Mongkon Duangkiew.

► 2. Putting workers first: What goes into running a Migrant Worker Resource Centre?

This section provides an overview of what is involved to establish and operate an MRC, as well as examples of good practices employed by MRCs across the region. The section is divided into three parts moving through the process of establishing a MRC on to developing and delivering a basic suite of services and then finally discussing the provision of specific specialized services for migrant workers and their families.

2.1. Establishing MRCs

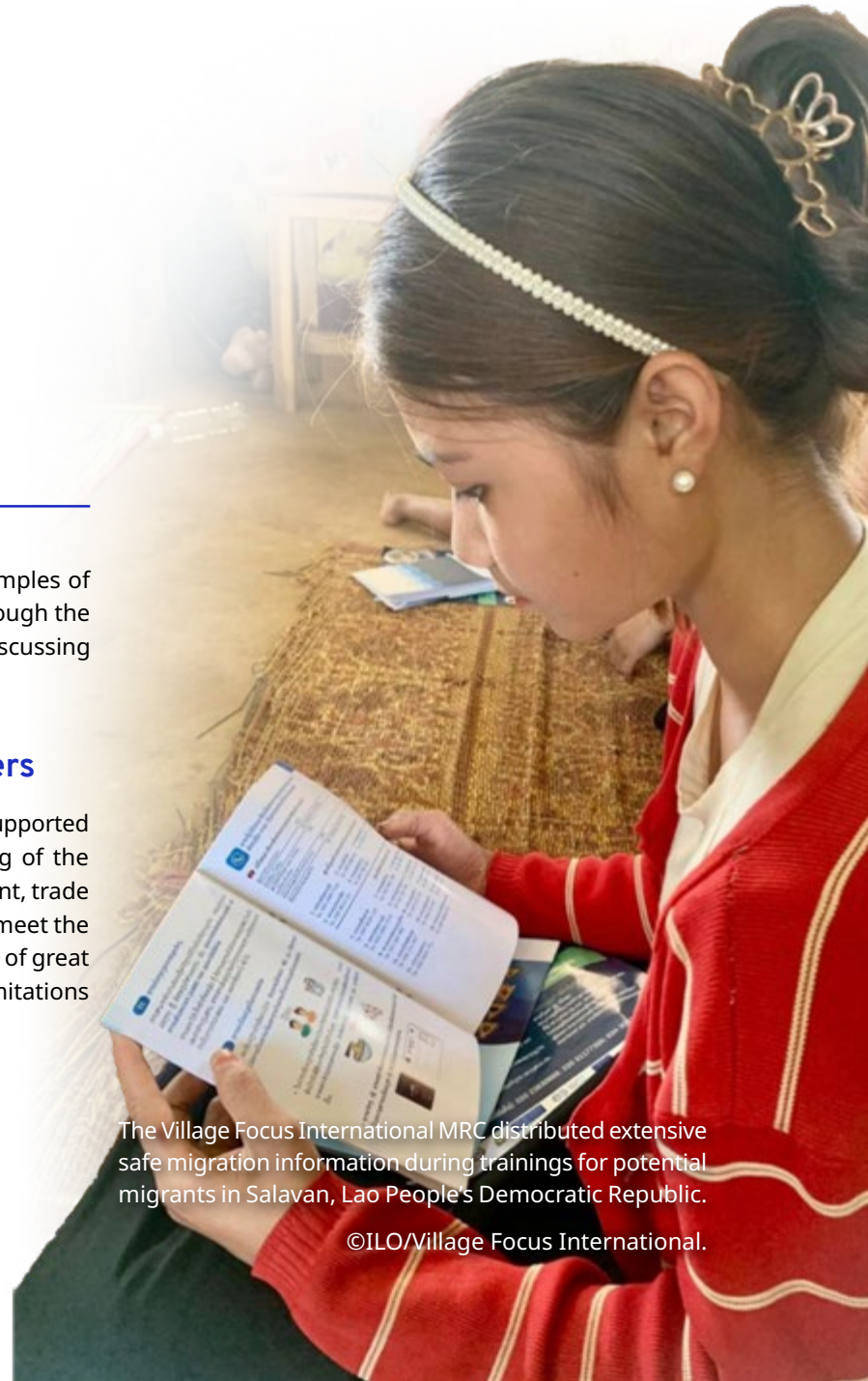
There are a number of important factors that need to be considered when establishing an MRC. This section addresses these factors, not only in relation to start up, but also to ensure that operations run smoothly over time and that services continue to be relevant and valuable to target populations.

2.1.1. Selecting the right partners

The establishment and operation of MRCs are supported by the ILO, but the actual day-to-day running of the centres is handled by partners from government, trade unions or CSOs. Selecting the right partner to meet the needs of the target population is consequently of great importance, and there are advantages and limitations that come with each partner type.

The Village Focus International MRC distributed extensive safe migration information during trainings for potential migrants in Salavan, Lao People's Democratic Republic.

©ILO/Village Focus International.



Government-led MRCs

Partnering with government agencies can lead to easier access to and better coordination with other government services needed by migrants, including issues related to work permits and legal pathways, labour protection, law enforcement, health education and social security. There is also a greater chance that the continuity and sustainability of MRC services will be guaranteed, as these centres are set up within existing government departments and functions. Government-run MRCs also tend to have the most secure access to regular funds, office space and staff, as they are less dependent on external funding compared to trade union- and CSO-centres. In addition, a government-run MRC will be better able to coordinate quickly with other government agencies to offer assistance during emergencies, such as stranded migrants or trafficking cases. Having government MRC partners also offers learning opportunities to government officials as they engage directly with migrant workers, which can have a positive impact down the line on policy development.

However, there are also limitations to working with government partners, which often depend on the specific mandate given by the government to the MRC, as it may translate into limited flexibility in terms of operations or the need to navigate time-consuming

bureaucratic procedures. Another major consideration is the government's policy framework with regard to migrant workers, which may not be comprehensive in scope or limited to regular migrants only. In addition, government priorities can change due to a variety of factors, which could impact service delivery and staffing. Another key consideration is that migrant workers, and in particular those migrating through irregular channels, may be reluctant to use a government-run centre because of a lack of trust in the support they will receive.

Trade union-led MRCs

Trade union-led MRCs are well positioned to represent migrant workers in labour disputes and to provide legal assistance. They are also uniquely situated to empower migrant workers by providing a platform for collective bargaining and advocacy for fair and equal treatment. In addition, trade unions often work with counterparts in other countries, which can assist supporting migrant workers in need of assistance while abroad. Trade union-led MRCs also have greater flexibility to reach out to migrants who are not formally recognized by government agencies, including irregular migrants, domestic workers and workers in the informal sector. Another key benefit of engaging trade unions to operate MRCs is that it helps to demonstrate to the labour movement that migrant workers are an important segment of the labour force with the right to equal treatment.

This last benefit, however, also serves to demonstrate one of the potential limitations of partnering with trade unions, namely that migrant worker membership in

trade unions tends to be very limited. Indeed, some countries in the region have very low levels of trade union membership in general. In Thailand, for example, only 2 per cent of Thai workers are members of trade unions (Human Rights Watch 2019). In addition, certain sectors that employ large numbers of migrant workers, such as agriculture, domestic work and fishing are largely unorganized, and there may not even be trade unions organizing workers in these sectors. While trade union-run MRCs provide support to all migrant workers regardless of whether they are trade union members or not, trade unions may have limited capacity to sustain support to migrant workers without external funding.

Some trade unions also operate in sectors that are traditionally male-dominated, and where women are either casually employed or treated as accompanying family members rather than as migrant workers in their own right. Consequently, trade union-led MRCs may lack the necessary resources and trained personnel to provide gender-responsive information and assistance to migrant workers (in multiple languages) on a variety of needs.

CSO-led MRCs

One of main advantages to partnering with CSOs is that many are already based in communities and have developed strong engagement with migrants and their families and can consequently work directly with the communities to develop their programmes to be more responsive to changing needs. One of the largest advantages held by CSO-led MRCs is their ability to cater to specific groups of migrant workers, both through their capacity for engagement at the grassroots level and because they have the required staff expertise. For example, women migrant workers who have experienced violence and harassment, including sexual violence and harassment, are able to receive information, services and referrals from CSO-run MRCs with specialized and experienced staff who are able to address these women's specific needs – both in the immediate and long term. CSO-run MRCs also tend to have strong organizational networks; so if they do encounter a case that sits outside their area of expertise, they will likely be in a good position to secure assistance from other CSOs that focus on the area in question, whether it is labour rights, health, education, women's rights, disability, children and so on. CSO-run MRCs are also more likely to employ staff and volunteers from the migrant community – including women – to provide services, help with translation, develop strategies and guide the organization in the most appropriate responses. CSOs are also able create

alliances with CSOs in other countries to respond to migrants' needs inter-country and to advocate in solidarity for migrant workers' rights. Another major advantage of CSO-run MRCs is that migrant workers, and particularly those with irregular status, may feel more comfortable seeking assistance from a centre operated by a CSO than one run by the government.

The key limitation when it comes to CSOs is sustaining funding. Well-established organizations can to some extent choose funding sources which correspond to their strategies, but many CSOs, especially newly established ones, may face funding constraints, limiting the services they can offer. In addition, where funding is completely dependent on donors, programmes and staffing may have to be regularly adapted according to the donors' requirements. Having to comply with government regulations can also sometimes impose certain limitations on CSO activities. CSOs also have no authority to enter private workplaces, which can limit their outreach to migrants. CSO activities may also be limited by security concerns, particularly in cases where CSOs are supporting migrants in labour cases against employers, recruitment agencies or brokers, or when they are supporting victims of violence and harassment or other abuses.

2.1.2. The importance of monitoring and evaluation and ensuring data confidentiality

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) are critical to tracking progress achieved, understanding the challenges experienced and informing the development of improved MRC services. The MRCs are responsible for monitoring of their own results on an ongoing basis; while evaluations are typically carried out as part of independent mid-term or final project evaluations for the ILO and other project stakeholders.

Emphasizing the importance of obtaining first-hand information on MRC results, the ILO has sought to empower MRC partners to conduct their own M&E. To achieve this aim, the ILO has developed a dedicated *Monitoring and Evaluation Training Manual for Migrant Worker Resource Centres*,⁵ and uses that to conduct regular tailor-made M&E trainings for all MRC staff in all target countries. MRC staff also continue to have regular engagement with ILO project staff, who provide support and guidance on monitoring and evaluation.

To support M&E efforts, MRCs use Client Cards to collect data on the demographic profiles of their clients and the use of particular services, including detailed accounts of services administered and their outcomes. The Client Card information is kept strictly confidentially and is entered into an anonymized database so it can be used for reporting purposes. By recording service delivery outcomes, MRCs are provided with accessible

evidence and information illustrating how their services have affected migrant workers' lives in the long-term. Outcomes are also monitored by following up on the employment outcomes of clients who have benefited from skills training and job matching services. In cases of cross-border assistance, including, for example, legal or psychosocial support, MRCs in both countries record the details in their case management allowing for an overview of end-to-end support in case management.

Long-term ILO support for capacity-building on M&E has enabled MRCs to obtain a detailed understanding of how their activities have protected migrant workers and nurtured their ability to make evidence-based adjustments to their interventions. By providing joint trainings with multiple partners, not only have MRC staff learned how to use ILO M&E reporting tools but cooperation between the different MRC partners has also been enhanced.

Beyond its value in improving service delivery, M&E is a critically important project management skill. By building the capacity of MRC partners on M&E, the ILO has not only helped them to improve the effectiveness of their services for migrant workers, but also supported many of them to obtain additional financial support from other donors.

⁵ The manual can be downloaded at: <https://www.ilo.org/publications/monitoring-and-evaluation-training-manual-migrant-worker-resource-centres>.



The Future Light Center MRC conducted safe migration outreach to women factory workers who were considering migration in Bago, Myanmar.

©ILO/Future Light Center.

2.1.3. Planning for sustainability

“Without ILO funding we would continue to roll out at the community level. We have built a team that has deep understanding, they are inspired and passionate, it is close to their heart – so they would continue but, yes, our activities would have to be scaled down.”
– MAP Foundation-led MRC, Thailand

Sustainability can refer to the sustainability of a particular organization or the sustainability of the services offered to migrant workers, including the maintenance of high-quality services delivered by experienced and trained team members.

Planning for sustainability – including developing a strategy for how to deal with the exit of any donors or other stakeholders – has to be a priority right from the very beginning of the MRC planning stage. A particularly key aspect of ensuring MRC sustainability is securing sources of funding. In addition to training and other forms of technical support, the ILO has provided funding to MRCs throughout the region, but partners have always been encouraged to seek other donors – or, particularly in the case of government-run MRCs, additional internal sources – to ensure that funding continues over the long-term. As noted above, in addition to receiving training on topics related to migrant workers and service delivery,

the ILO has supported MRC partners in the monitoring and evaluation efforts, a key organizational skill that is looked for by donors, which rely on reporting to ensure that their funding is being used properly and effectively.

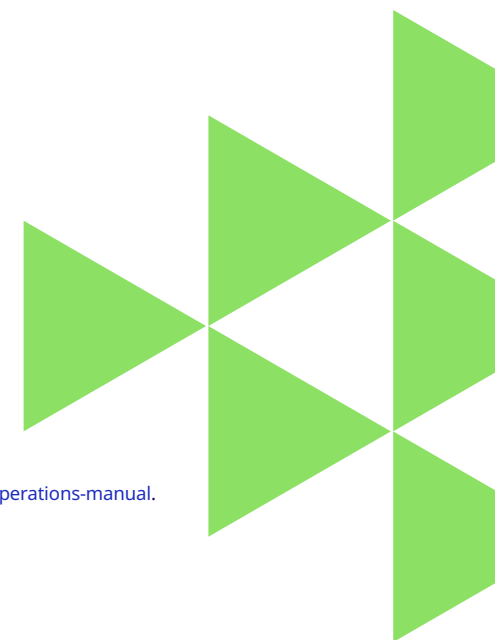
In recent interviews, MRC partners, whether they were government, trade union or CSO, were universally confident that the services would continue beyond the funding period. CSOs with successful records of providing services to migrant workers have been able to obtain funding from different donors, although it is worth noting that they may have no control over future funding trends of the donors and may have to adapt to comply with these trends. Nevertheless, being recognized as an ILO implementing partner is often highly beneficial in expanding support for CSOs, bringing them to the attention of additional donors who may be interested in providing funding.

Among government-run MRCs and trade union-run MRCs, sustainability has generally been tied to integrating MRCs services into their broader range of services. As earlier noted, government-run MRCs are more likely to be sustainable when they are institutionalized into the operational mandates of a government function. For example, in Cambodia, the National Employment Agency (NEA) indicated willingness to begin rolling out MRC services within all their Job Centres, not only those supported by the ILO. Cambodia and Viet Nam have both requested trainings on the *MRC Operations Manual*⁶ for all provincial labour departments to be able to provide services to migrant workers. In Indonesia, services

provided by government departments, trade unions, Village Task Forces, Women's Crisis Centres and MRCs were all brought together under in the One-Roof Integrated Service (LTSA) model, which has helped to develop more coherent, sustainable and gender-responsive services for migrant workers.

For trade unions, the goal is to better integrate MRC services and migrant worker outreach into their overall mission to protect and support workers. By more fully incorporating migrant workers into their overall advocacy aims, trade unions also set the stage for ensuring the ongoing viability and effectiveness of their MRC services. As one official from a Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC) MRC noted: “To ensure sustainability, the MRC must be budgeted into the MTUC financial plan and members have to be convinced that supporting migrant workers is beneficial to the union as well as the migrant workers themselves. The MRC would have to adapt to be more integrated into MTUC.”

⁶ The manual can be downloaded at: <https://www.ilo.org/publications/migrant-worker-resource-centre-operations-manual>.



2.1.4. Building the capacity of MRC partners to deliver services

MRCs have multiple roles to play in environments where the policy frameworks are frequently changing, demanding that the services also adapt to these changes. The staff and volunteers need regular capacity-building sessions to be able to respond appropriately and effectively.

In addition, in order to implement and monitor the activities and budget, building the capacity of staff and volunteers and strengthening teamwork is critical to the success of the activities. Overall, strengthening organizational development ensures that MRCs are accountable, transparent, able to adapt and to be more sustainable.

All MRCs have received a wide range of trainings under ILO migration programmes, including on MRC operational management, project cycle management, monitoring and evaluation, and case management and documentation. Further trainings have included:

- safe migration;
- labour rights;
- international labour standards;
- national legal frameworks related to recruitment, labour rights, working conditions and social security benefits;

- gender equality and women's empowerment;
- prevention of sexual exploitation;
- labour organizing;
- SaverAsia/remittances and financial literacy;
- disability inclusion;
- provision of psychosocial support; and
- handling cases of sexual and gender-based violence.
- communications

A few recent examples include the partnership with BBC Media Action to conduct capacity-building workshops with MRCs on social media content production, digital strategy, social media analytics and analysis of comments. Further, in 2023, the ILO developed training toolkits to improve MRC service provision to migrant workers with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sexual characteristics (SOGIESC); and migrant workers with disabilities. These toolkits enables MRCs to expand their operations and be more comprehensive in their coverage for these often under-served groups.

MRC implementing partners have recognized the value of the training provided by the ILO, and noted that the development of in-house capacity has enabled them to achieve better results and will continue to improve the situation for migrant workers in the long term, even after ILO project funding ends. They also noted that the

trainings they have received gave them more confidence to deliver their own trainings to the community and to advocate at local, national and regional levels. It is important to note, however, that training needs to be repeated regularly to ensure the quality of service provision and to account for the inevitable issue of staff turnover.

Employment service centre MRCs in Viet Nam, for example, noted that ILO support for building the capacity of staff as well as support for the facilities themselves had been critical to their success. The staff have been trained on how to protect migrant workers, on human trafficking and counselling skills, and have also had the opportunity to learn and share from other MRCs. Building the capacity of the staff to provide accurate information to migrant workers has been essential in providing better protection to migrant workers.



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2.1.5. Developing a security plan

“It’s very sensitive work dealing with labour and human rights and private companies. If we make them lose face, then they will threaten us and we have to decide how high or low the risk is.” – MRC staff, Cambodia

MRCs operate in environments which can potentially put them at risk. A risk assessment helps MRCs identify potential threats, vulnerabilities and impacts on the organization and their clients, and a security plan based on this assessment allows MRCs to implement measures to mitigate the risks and to ensure the safety of staff and clients and the continuation of their activities.

A good security plan can help to mitigate some of the largest risks. For example, an MRC operated by a partner in Myanmar noted that since the 2021 military coup in that country, security risks for everyone have increased significantly (ILO 2022) and migrant workers are wary of any newcomers to the labour migration scene, including the large number of overseas employment agencies that popped up in the wake of the coup. Acknowledging the new landscape, the Confederation of Trade Unions Myanmar (CTUM) MRC started to put particular emphasis on the importance of safeguarding documents and provided concrete advice on how to do so during pre-departure trainings. They also noted that they have learned from past mistakes. Previously they were quick to publicize cases, but after doing so in one case, the family was threatened by brokers.

One of the most sensitive services provided by some MRCs is shelter services for migrant workers who have been victims of trafficking or violence and harassment. Recognizing this, CSO-led MRCs in Indonesia, the Lao

People’s Democratic Republic and Singapore have put in place a series of security measures for safe shelters linked to the MRCs, including careful consideration of the location, gates and doors that securely lock, guards and CCTV cameras. Of course, security issues can be physical or digital. In the case of the latter, the security plan needs to be closely linked to a communications plan.



2.2. Cultivating relationships to deliver effective services

Service delivery does not happen in a vacuum, and there is a need for MRCs to build connections with local communities and potential partners, both to secure their participation and to anticipate their needs. This section addresses how MRCs set the stage for implementing their plans and services.

2.2.1. Building strategic networks

International labour migration is built on a web of networks – local and overseas recruiters, government agencies in origin and destination countries, inter-country arrangements between employers and workers, migrant workers' associations and trade unions – the list goes on. Tapping into these networks is essential to providing quality services and accurate information, in addition to facilitating outreach and building engagement and trust.

At a very basic level, local authorities in areas housing MRCs are gatekeepers to services essential to migrant workers – including provision of passports and travel documentation, social security and social welfare offices, police and the justice system, and education, skills and training, as well as regulating and monitoring recruitment agencies. Whether the MRC is operated by government authorities or other implementing partners, it is essential that MRC staff have a good understanding of the surrounding service infrastructure and how to link migrant workers to the services on offer. In addition, by developing connections with local authorities, MRCs are able to raise awareness in government on migration issues and the role and value of MRCs to local communities. Such awareness-raising efforts have been key elements for MRCs in terms of facilitating the start-up phase as well as improving service delivery going forward.

As noted earlier, the MRCs themselves are led by a variety of different partners – government, trade union and CSO – and offer an array of specialized services, some of which might be unique to a particular MRC. Consequently, intra- and inter-country networking and collaboration

between all of the MRCs in the ILO network allows for any centre to reach out to a range of trusted partners for information, referrals and provision of end-to-end services for migrant workers. This greatly increases the capacity of all MRCs to provide authoritative information and offer the fullest possible range of services for migrant workers.

In addition, many of the CSOs running MRCs are members of national, regional and (to a lesser extent) global migrant and women's networks, such as the Mekong Migration Network, the Migrant Forum in Asia, the Asia Pacific Women, Law and Development Forum (APWLD), the International Domestic Workers Federation, the Clean Clothes Campaign and the Global Alliance Against Trafficking in Women. Participating in these networks not only expands MRCs' knowledge of migration and gender issues, but also gives them more opportunities to highlight the situation of migrant workers in the region. Similarly, MRCs implemented by trade unions benefits from bilateral, regional and global trade unions affiliations, MOUs and other kinds of membership and structures, which enables cross-border support and collaboration.

2.2.2. The importance of community outreach and building trust

Newly opened MRCs dedicate significant time and resources to making the centre known and building trust while well-established MRCs continue to reach out to new migrant workers and adapt to changing conditions. It is essential for an MRC to invest in disseminating information so that migrant workers are aware that the centre exists and know what services it offers. It is also just as important for the MRC to demonstrate that it really does offer high quality services that make it worthwhile for migrant workers to travel to the centre – in some cases taking time off work or traveling considerable distances time. That is ultimately what leads to positive word of mouth, creating a virtuous cycle of promotion and trust building.

Information sources and outreach campaigns have changed dramatically over the last ten years. Printed leaflets, while still useful, may seem outdated and old-fashioned to many of today's migrant workers. MRCs need to be able to constantly demonstrate to their clients and local communities that they are up to date with regard to safe migration information, labour rights, services, technology and the needs of new generations of workers. Furthermore, the MRCs have to compete, in a sense, with recruiters, who have a vested/financial stake in migration processes. Recruiters – especially agents who have ties with the community – are often viewed as an easily accessible source of migration information for those seeking employment abroad. They can be persuasive, changing tactics and targeting those workers with the least access to information – whose vulnerability may make them more susceptible to unscrupulous practices

MRCs are often based in a physical building, which beyond serving as an administrative hub for the centre, also offers privacy for counselling, spaces for meetings and activities, and simply a place for migrant workers to gather in comfort and safety. And while its location can be an important factor in an MRC connecting with target populations, there is rarely a perfect spot available for the centre. For instance, placement in the centre of a factory area in a destination country may be convenient for large numbers of workers to get to, but may also be off-putting for workers who fear their employers will know they have shown an interest in the MRC and therefore may be intending to make a complaint, or in other ways may be seen as trouble makers by their employers. Setting up an MRC in a village with a high level of out-migration may make it easily accessible by those villagers, but young women who are thinking of migrating but have not yet discussed it with their families may not want to be seen going into the MRC. Migrant workers in some work sectors, particularly those who work in private households, on plantations or in remote areas, may face restrictions in travelling to an MRC location.

So while the physical building of an MRC is a definite asset, face-to-face outreach activities to migrant communities are equally important, particularly in terms of making the MRCs known and building trust. Across the region, MRC outreach is conducted by a combination of MRC staff, respected members of the local community, local officials, returned or current migrant workers, and students, many of whom volunteer their time and experience. Most MRCs

have both women and men outreach workers, trained to be able to accurately reply to questions or know when to refer to more knowledgeable members of the MRC.

However, ultimately, the most effective resource the MRCs have are migrant workers themselves. MRCs that offer opportunities for migrant workers to be active participants in the design and implementation of MRC activities are able to reach more migrant workers, build greater trust and be more relevant. MRCs will enlist migrant workers to speak at events, serve as peer counsellors for potential migrants and represent their communities in forums with government and other stakeholders. Such participation breaks down the divide between active service provider and passive recipient, and recognizes the inherently co-dependent relationship between MRC facilitators and migrant communities.

2.2.3. Identifying information needs and strategies for sharing relevant, clear and accurate information

“We provide information for migrant workers so they can make their own decisions.” – staff member at Than Hoa Employment Service Centre MRC, Viet Nam

Access to reliable sources of information is essential for migrant workers at all stages of migration. However, the labour migration landscape is extremely complex, rapidly changing and littered with false information and deliberate misinformation, particularly on social media, making it all but impossible for many migrants to find reliable advice and instruction. And while general information about countries of destination, such as weather, food, culture and language is readily available online, it can be particularly challenging to find the types of specific information needed by migrant workers over the course of their migration journey from pre-departure through to return and reintegration.

MRCs work to fill this gap by providing migrant workers with up-to-date and verifiable information on a wide range of matters associated with labour migration, including how to find a job overseas, navigating visa processes, information about labour rights and social security entitlements, understanding employment contracts, access complaints mechanisms and how to find help in the event of an emergency. In addition to benefiting from the expertise of the ILO and migration-related stakeholders, MRCs use their direct engagement with migrant workers to identify their evolving information

and service needs and take pains to become well versed in addressing these needs. It is the real-life situations and challenges of migrant workers that inform MRCs' support and outreach efforts.

Anyone coming to an MRC location or MRC-run event can be sure to receive up-to-date information and guidance on basically anything related to labour migration, but MRCs do not limit their information dissemination activities to in-person interactions.

All MRCs use social media to share information – and to combat the misinformation often found on social media platforms. MRCs take care to ensure that the information they share on social media is delivered in bite-sized pieces that can be easily updated and also use these platforms to answer questions. Some MRCs also use apps such as Telegram to share documents and information. Online outreach through social media is also increasingly allowing MRCs to reach much larger numbers of migrant workers and to experiment with different messaging formats. In addition to enabling MRCs to distribute messages to target audiences, they also allow for migrant workers and their families to reach out to the MRC and get their questions answered in a quick and





convenient manner. For example, in Myanmar the MRCs have worked closely with the BBC Media Action's "Yay Kyi Yar" project to deliver information, give advice and provide referrals to reliable sources, thus significantly amplifying the MRCs' messages. The Yay Kyi Yar Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/YayKyiYar>) has over 1.5 million followers across ten countries. But as MRC workers would be quick to note, social media is not a panacea, and ultimately needs to be a complement to a range of in-person outreach activities in order to build real connections and trust. In addition, it is important to track the impact that social media activity is having, specifically whether increased social media outreach is resulting in increased visits/calls to the physical centre, as this will help the MRC to determine the time and resources that should be dedicated to social media activity, as well as how much need there might be for additional investment (for example, in the form of social media training or providing online assistance).

Radio broadcasting is another means that MRCs use to get their messaging to otherwise hard to reach groups. In the Lao People's Democratic Republic, the MRC in Bolikhamxay Province broadcasts safe migration information through a provincial radio show, with an estimated listenership of 10,000 people. MRC partner the MAP Foundation operates community radio stations that reach out to migrant, ethnic and local communities with news and information on a range of topics of importance and for the enjoyment of migrant workers, including workers' rights, occupational health and safety in the workplace, HIV/AIDS, women's rights, road safety,

and other general health and cultural topics. In Chiang Mai, MAP Radio predominantly broadcasts in Shan and Thai languages, and in Mae Sot, in Burmese and Thai. Likewise, the Foundation for Education and Development (FED) also broadcast radio programmes in Thailand.

Most MRCs also organize or take part in public or online events to celebrate International Migrants Day, International Workers Day and other important days including International Domestic Workers Day, International Women's Day as well as the annual 16 Days of Activism campaign to raise awareness of violence against women. The MRCs use these opportunities to reach more migrant workers at one time in one place in order to disseminate information, including by providing opportunities for migrant workers to present, perform and advocate.

Where possible, information is presented in multiple languages to accommodate the needs of migrant workers from multiple countries as well as indigenous peoples. For example, MRC partners Mawk Kon (Myanmar) and the MAP Foundation (Thailand) have staff and volunteers from different ethnicities in order to reach different language and cultural groups as well as producing written materials in the Shan language.

2.3. Provision of support services

It has already been noted above that MRCs offer a wide array of services to migrant workers and their families. This section explores some of the more prominent sources on offer, covering labour disputes and psychosocial support to career guidance and training programmes.

2.3.1. Legal assistance with complaint cases and social protection benefit claims

Assisting migrant workers with recruitment and labour grievances is a key service offered by MRCs, and requires good coordination and referral systems, particularly in relation to the provision of legal assistance.

While labour migration can provide tremendous opportunities for migrant workers and their families, labour migrants are a particularly vulnerable population of workers, who may experience labour rights abuses during all stages of the labour migration cycle. A survey of 1,800 migrant workers by the ILO and IOM found that the share of migrants who experience some form of labour rights violation in destination countries in South East Asia is nearly 60 per cent (Harkins, Lindgren and Suravoranon 2017).

The majority of complaints in countries of destination are related to non-payment or underpayment of wages, though issues related to recruitment delays and fraud, occupational safety and health issues, and workers' compensation are also common (Harkins and Åhlberg 2017). While the complaints received in countries of origin are largely recruitment-related, including overcharging of recruitment fees and costs, withholding of personal documents, delays in deployment or recruiters not actually arranging a job at all. Unfortunately, many cases do not receive any remedy due to migrant workers withdrawing

out of fear of retaliation, migrant workers having moved on and lost contact, and authorities refusing to pursue the case because the migrant worker had irregular legal status, language barriers with the relevant authorities or there was insufficient evidence.

It is here that MRCs can step in to receive complaints and work to reach a resolution to the grievance and to secure remedies for the worker. In most cases, a migrant worker asks the MRC for assistance in negotiating a settlement directly with the employer or recruitment agency/broker, being reluctant to take cases through a government complaint mechanisms for fear of intimidation, losing their job or long and costly procedures. In some instances, it is not migrant workers that bring a complaint or request for assistance to the MRC, but their family members back in the country of origin, with such requests often the result of them not being able to get in contact with a worker who is currently abroad. As noted above, since 2011, MRCs have assisted in the recovery of more than US\$13 million in compensation to migrant workers in close to 15,600 cases (ILO-internal records, based on partner reporting).

Most MRCs provide information on the procedure to lodge a complaint, and MRCs with more experience in this field are able to offer specific information concerning



The MRC, run by HomeNet, a civil society organization, is operated by a solidarity group of Thai homebased workers who make garments for an ethical brand.

© ILO/Pichit Phromkade.

the details that will be needed and to discuss the different dispute resolution options available to the migrant worker and the advantages and disadvantages of each. For example, the MRC operated by the Centre for Alliance and Human Rights (CENTRAL) in Cambodia trains volunteers to support migrant workers to lodge complaints. In destination countries, MRCs like the MAP Foundation train migrant volunteers to become paralegal service providers. The volunteers help fill out forms and collate all the necessary information. Other MRCs have active relationships with labour attachés attached to embassies in destination countries, and reach out to these officials to seek resolutions in cases related to migrant workers who are still overseas.

In addition to assisting migrant workers to file formal complaints or negotiate with employers/recruiters, MRCs will assist migrant workers with court cases and other legal matters. Indeed, some MRC partners are actual legal aid organizations. In Thailand, for instance, the Human Rights and Development Foundation (HRDF) provides legal aid to migrant workers in Mae Sot, Chiang Mai and four coastal regions employing migrants in the fishing and seafood processing sectors and has their own in-house lawyers. Other MRCs and partner organizations actually refer legal cases to the HRDF. While in Cambodia, CSO-run MRCs generally refer cases to Legal Support for Children and Women (LSCW), particularly cross-border cases where LSCW has better connections and experience. The MRC operated by the Indonesian Migrant Workers Union (SBMI) receives cases from thousands of Indonesian migrant workers and coordinates with a Jakarta based law firm with support from Justice Without Borders to provide legal assistance in cases of exploitation overseas.

2.3.2. Career guidance for migrants

Labour migration can be a very rewarding experience, both financial and in terms of skills and career development, but it is also tricky to navigate and many migrant workers take up employment abroad without really being fully aware of what exactly the job will entail. In addition, where the jobs on offer are classified as “low-skilled”, both employers’ and workers’ expectations of career development are also low.

Another particular challenge is finding employment on return to the country of origin, as many migrant workers find it difficult to show evidence of the skills they had gained abroad, as they were not provided with certificates or references from their employer abroad.

Given these challenges, MRCs offer career guidance that can help workers successfully navigate a constantly evolving labour markets at home and abroad through the provision of advice and information on job and training opportunities. For example, government-run MRCs in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic are integrated into Job Centres, so they are able to provide potential and returnee migrant workers with information on jobs and training opportunities.

Indeed, some MRCs are attached to public services departments dedicated to employment services, which not only provide career guidance individually but regularly hold job fairs where returned and prospective migrant workers can explore job options both at home and overseas. In Viet Nam and Cambodia, for instance, government-led MRCs organize job fairs where jobseekers can find out about jobs in their own country and overseas. The Than Hoa MRC in Viet Nam and the NEA MRC in Pursat, Cambodia, for example, have organized job fairs specifically for returned migrant workers. The Than Hoa MRC, in particular, seeks to make explicit use of the skills developed by workers who have returned from the Republic of Korea or Japan by linking these returnees to jobs in Viet Nam with Korean and Japanese companies.



2.3.3. Empower migrant workers through collective bargaining and membership in trade unions/migrant worker associations

Organizing, collective bargaining and membership in trade unions or workers' associations are key to migrant workers becoming empowered, and MRCs seek to serve as an entry point to further migrant workers' fundamental labour rights on freedom of association and collective bargaining. They do this in three ways: (1) by being directly operated by trade unions; (2) by providing information and training to migrant workers and their families on trade unions, freedom of association and collective bargaining; and (3) by supporting migrant workers to join trade unions or form their own associations.

As an additional benefit, the presence of trade union-operated MRCs within the ILO network provides staff in all MRCs with exposure to the benefits of strengthening trade unions and the role of trade unions in supporting decent work for all. The ILO has, for example, partnered with the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF) to organize capacity-building training on trade unionism and collective bargaining for MRC staff, which provided practical organizing techniques and strategies.

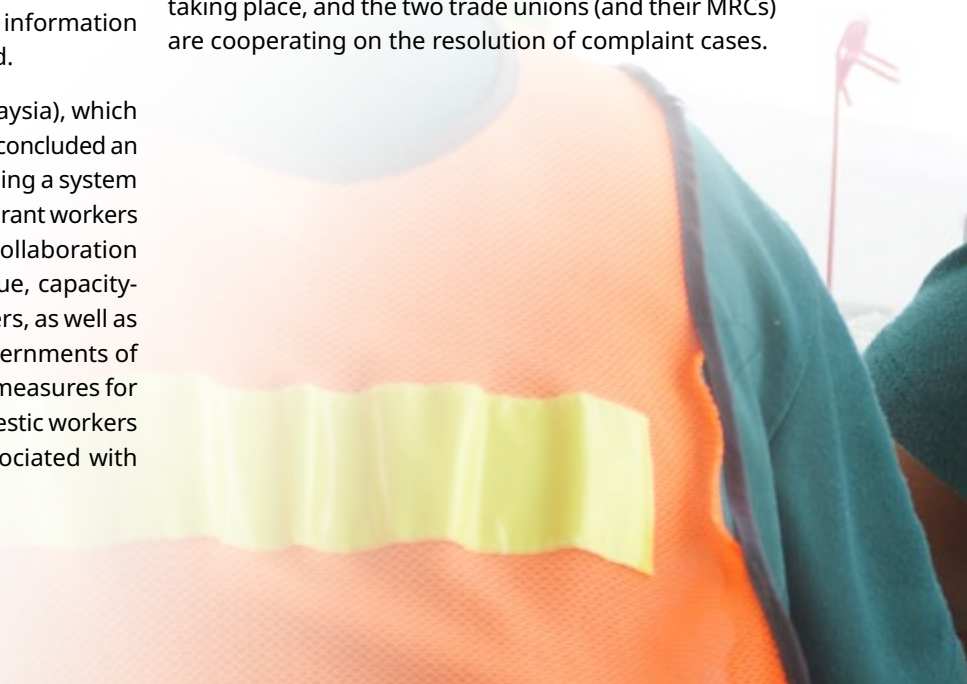
In countries of destination in ASEAN, trade unions are operating MRCs in Thailand and Malaysia, where migrant workers are allowed to join existing unions but cannot form their own, or take on executive positions in any trade union. The coordinator of the Malaysian Trades Union Council (MTUC) MRC noted that migrant membership in the MTUC was very limited; however, the MTUC were still able to provide assistance to non-members.

In countries of origin in ASEAN, trade union-led MRCs operate in Cambodia, Indonesia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Myanmar. Cambodian and Lao migrant workers who hold trade union membership can access a limited degree of support from their trade unions while abroad, usually through their unions coordinating with counterpart trade unions and CSOs in the countries of destination to provide assistance. The MRCs operated by the Konfederasi Serikat Buruh Seluruh Indonesia (KSBSI) in Blitar City and Tulungagung Regency in East Java Province and by the Serikat Buruh Migrant Indonesia (SBMI) in Cirebon Regency, West Java, have members overseas who respond to migrant workers' problems by coordinating with civil society organizations, including women's organizations, to provide case management to overseas and returned Indonesian migrant workers. In Myanmar, the Confederation of Trade Unions Myanmar (CTUM) provides information on trade unions in their pre-departure trainings, including contact information for sector-specific trade unions in Thailand.

The K-SBSI (Indonesia) and the MTUC (Malaysia), which both run MRCs in their respective countries, concluded an MOU in 2019 with the aim of jointly developing a system of protection of the rights of Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia. The MOU developed close collaboration in such areas as campaigns, social dialogue, capacity-building and assistance for domestic workers, as well as an action plan calling for lobbying the governments of Indonesia and Malaysia to take necessary measures for the protection of the rights of migrant domestic workers and their family members. The MRCs associated with

the two trade unions are able to benefit from this MOU to better support migrant workers in the Indonesia–Malaysia migration corridor.

In Thailand and Cambodia, two trade unions operating MRCs signed a bilateral “Collaborative Agreement on Improving Labour Rights Protection for Cambodian Migrant Workers in Thailand’s Fishing Sector” in 2023. The agreement between the Fishers’ Rights Network (FRN) and the Cambodian Labour Confederation (CLC) included four key objectives: (1) the expansion of access to safe migration information; (2) increasing trade union membership to build worker power; (3) expanding access to justice; and (4) enhancing bilateral trade union cooperation and advocacy. Implementation of the agreement has begun, with FRN organizers joining in CLC’s pre-departure orientation activities in Koh Kong, Cambodia. In addition, regular bilateral meetings are taking place, and the two trade unions (and their MRCs) are cooperating on the resolution of complaint cases.



2.3.4. Strengthening social protection rights


Social protection builds resilience among communities, allowing migrant workers to weather shocks. By reducing vulnerability and poverty and increasing security and equality, inclusion in social protection can have particularly noticeable positive impacts for women migrant workers. Social protection increases the ability to make independent life decisions, and offers the possibility to move from abusive situations, whether that be in the home or at work.

Although social protection is a universal human right, a large percentage of the 10 million international migrant workers in ASEAN have no access to social protection, both in the countries of destination and origin (ILO 2022). In countries of destination, irregular and seasonal migrant workers are most often excluded from social protection, including social security schemes. Regular migrant workers who work in certain sectors, including domestic workers, are also excluded in some countries of destination. Where regular migrant workers are covered by social security schemes, understanding the complexities of the system can be a daunting challenge, especially if language barriers are involved or if the migrant workers has never previously had access to social security.

All MRCs in countries of destination work closely with migrant workers to raise their awareness about their rights to social security, and to build their confidence and skills to make claims for benefits due to them. In Thailand, the MAP Foundation-run MRC organizes regular meetings between migrant workers and social security

officials to explain the details of the social security system. Migrant workers feel more confident to try to access their benefits having heard the information directly from the relevant government officials, and the sessions also offer the opportunity for migrant workers to pose specific questions to social security officials. MRCs working with domestic workers, Tenaganita and PSWS in Malaysia, HOME in Singapore, HOMENET, HRDF and MAP Foundation in Thailand has also worked to advocate for the inclusion of domestic workers in social protection coverage.

The MRC run by the Human Rights and Development Foundation (HRDF) has done much work on ensuring worker's compensation payments are made to migrant workers injured during their work in Thailand. In one such case, when a fisher had to have his lower leg amputated after becoming entangled in a winch; the employer paid for the worker's medical expenses but offered no other compensation. HRDF worked extensively with the local Social Security Office to obtain the compensation the worker was due under the law. In cases where migrant workers have died, the MRC operated by the Malaysia Trades Union Confederation (MTUC) collects all the relevant documents (next of kin, birth, death and marriage certificates) from family or friends, and follows up with the employer to secure appropriate compensation. If everything is in order, the compensation is transferred to the next of kin's bank account. The MTUC also helps to ensure migrant workers receive a lump sum compensation for disability before they return to their home country.



“While I worked in Japan I contributed to health insurance, I don’t know if it was private or state insurance, but when I had to go to the hospital, which I did frequently due to having many allergic reactions, my employer arranged the hospital visits, paid upfront and was later reimbursed from the insurance. I felt very lucky, because not all of my friends in Japan got the same service.” – female migrant worker, Than Hoa, Viet Nam

2.3.5. Tailored capacity-building programmes

Migrant workers require a range of soft and hard skills prior to, during and on return in order to navigate living in a new environment, working in a new sector and reintegrating into their home country. Skills such as financial literacy, being able to negotiate, and knowing how to protect oneself are necessary throughout the migration cycle. Access to skills and vocational training can also be vital to career development, particularly if the training offers certification of the migrant worker's skills.

MRCs have supported the capacity-building of migrant workers through linkages with vocational training facilities (particularly in the case of government-run MRCs linked to public employment services), and through the provision of training on a variety of soft skills that are essential to all workers. For instance, the Battambang and Pursat Job Centre MRCs managed by Cambodia's National Employment Agency have links to vocational training institutes, so migrant workers who are interested, can register free of charge and obtain a skills certificate.

The ILO partnered with Atikha Overseas Workers and Communities Initiative from the Philippines to provide trainings of trainers on gender-sensitive financial literacy to MRC staff and women and men migrant workers in multiple countries using the Save Smart: *Migrant Worker Resource Centre Financial Education Training Manual*.⁷ MRC staff and migrant workers across the board noted the value of financial literacy, where migrant workers are encouraged to maintain their own records of working hours and pay, develop goals for savings and plans for their future incomes after migration. Following these trainings, MRCs have provided their own financial literacy

trainings to migrant worker beneficiaries and in some cases actively encourage the participation of migrant workers' family members to enable them to jointly agree on the best productive use of remittances.

In addition, MRCs have established training programmes in the production of various handicrafts and other products for returnee migrant workers and migrant workers who have been victims of trafficking or violence and harassment during their migration journey. For example, the Cambodia Women's Crisis Centre (CWCC), which operates an MRC in Phnom Penh, provides vocational training to women in its shelter – including sewing, coffeemaking and baking. The Mawk Kon MRC in Myanmar has integrated livelihoods training on production of value-added goods using locally available agricultural goods into the empowerment activities of a migrant women's group. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Future Light Centre MRC in Myanmar, for example, provided training on soapmaking to returned migrant workers, combined with cash assistance.

MRCs have also engaged with migrant workers and migrant worker organizations to determine exactly what training is most needed. For example, the Labour Rights Foundation MRC in Thailand organized consultations with migrant workers' committees to identify a pressing need for Thai and English language skills and computer skills, and set up a Migrant Worker Learning Centre in Samut Sakhon for migrant workers to acquire these skills through peer learning.

"When I returned from Thailand, I wanted to migrate again. But my dream was broken when the doctors found a spot on my lung. Friends then told me about the sewing classes organized by the Carelink MRC. I signed up and when I passed the course, they gave me the financial support I needed to buy a sewing machine so that I could start a business. I felt like I had lost my future when I couldn't migrate again but getting new skills has given me a livelihood and hope."
– returned migrant worker, Myanmar

2.3.6. Psychosocial support

In countries of destination, migrant men and women living far from home without community support can experience high levels of stress related to pressure at work, insecurity, loneliness and discrimination. In addition, migrant workers represent a particularly vulnerable group, who all too often face traumatic experiences as part of the migration journey, which may be related violence and harassment (including sexual violence and harassment), bullying, abuse, forced labour or trafficking.

Recognizing the need to address this reality, some MRCs provide psychosocial support services such as counselling or referrals for counselling for returnees. Some MRCs also have shelters to provide safe temporary accommodation to victims, while others refer victims to government- or non-government-run shelters. For instance, the Women's Crisis Centre in Cirebon, Indonesia, which works together with the local MRC provides shelter to women who have been victims of gender-based violence, including returned migrant workers. The Women's Crisis Centre links with social services and hospitals to provide comprehensive care for victims, and provides individual care and support to each woman who uses their services. Psychosocial support is also provided by MRCs to children of migrant workers who stay in the country of origin while their mother or both parents are abroad and experience neglect or abuse.

In addition to addressing the needs of migrant workers that have experienced difficulties or traumatic experiences, MRCs offer support services that aim to proactively support the mental and social well-being of migrant workers before any problems arise by building resilience

and offering reassurance and a sense of community. The Than Hoa Employment Service Centre MRC in Viet Nam, for example, maintains contact with workers who have migrated to the Republic of Korea and organizes Zoom meetings with them every Saturday evening where they can discuss their challenges and problems and find ways to support each other. Using the ILO manual *For Women, by Women: Guidance and Activities for Building Women Migrant Workers' Networks*⁸, MRCs in Thailand, Cambodia and Myanmar have organized migrant women to meet regularly in Migrant Women's Groups. These groups provide spaces for women to share experiences and exchange advice, to support each other in difficult times, learn new skills, explore issues that impact on their status as women in society and build solidarity to address these issues. The Migrant Women's Groups define themselves in terms of empowerment, not victimhood or service provision.

MRCs in Myanmar that provide psychosocial counselling, such as those operated by Carelink, the Future Light Centre and CTUM, have noted the major challenges in reaching men migrants with these services. Most of the current counselling services are available to women, however, men also suffer from stress, isolation and substandard living and working conditions and are constrained by cultural barriers from seeking help – all factors that can affect mental health. Some studies have found that migrant fishers in particular often have unresolved psychosocial conditions due to prolonged periods of exploitation and abuse at sea (Dewanto, Prasetya and Octaviani 2023).

2.3.7. Gender-responsive services and migrant workers with disabilities

Improving migrant workers' access to gender-responsive social protection can have significant impacts on women's empowerment and opportunities, while also improving the lives of men. Social protection systems that do not address inequalities, risk exacerbating the multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination women and all migrant workers face (SPIAC-B 2019). Migrant workers with disabilities are another group that tends to face multiple forms of discrimination, and who are in need of dedicated support services to enable them to make the most of their migration experiences.

MRCs have taken a range of steps to reach migrant populations, reduce barriers to inclusion and encourage participation of known excluded and vulnerable groups. Such measures have included extending opening hours in evenings, on weekends and on public holidays to enable potential, current and returning migrant workers to obtain services outside their working hours, organizing women-only trainings to address the specific information needs of women migrants and employing staff and volunteers with a range of relevant language skills of different genders. Some MRCs also provide childcare services to enable migrant workers with childcare responsibilities, mostly women, to fully benefit from trainings, or other events.

To support the creation of welcoming, safe spaces, the ILO has provided trainings of trainers to MRC staff on gender-sensitive service provision, as well as conducting discussions on ensuring the accessibility of MRCs for migrant workers with disabilities. In addition, all MRCs aim to provide services that are sensitive to the sexual

orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) of migrant workers, and this effort has been supported by the development of training manual on SOGIESC for MRCs).⁹ Many MRCs reported that some LGBTQIA migrant workers access their services, while not necessarily openly identifying as such. Some MRCs are also connected with LGBTQIA networks in their country and jointly organize activities that connect migrant workers to these organizations, which serves to reassure migrant workers with diverse SOGIESC that the MRC is open to and sensitive to the needs of all genders.

In 2022, the ILO partnered with CSO-run MRCs to build migrant women's groups and networks in Cambodia, Myanmar and Thailand. Members of the migrant women's groups engage with each other regularly to create a safe environment where they can share, learn and discuss a variety of issues relevant to their lives. The groups may also provide counselling, support each other and organize advocacy campaigns. In countries of origin, group members may include returned migrant women, women planning to migrate or female relatives of women migrants. In countries of destination, the members are primarily migrant women.

In Myanmar, the Future Light Centre has delivered small grants for women migrants upon return, which can make a huge difference in helping them to successfully reintegrate into their communities. In some cases, there may be no other formal financial safety nets available to support them. Receiving a modest cash transfer can have an out-sized impact in supporting the welfare of





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women migrant workers during their transition to life back home. For example, a woman who returned to Myanmar to give birth after five years of working in a sardine factory in Samut Sakhon, Thailand found that she had no job opportunities available because of the deteriorating political and economic situation in Myanmar after the military coup. With the money received, she was able to pay for the medical care to safely give birth to her child and buy basic necessities to feed her family and take care of her new baby.

The ILO also oversaw a series of successful gender equality and disability inclusion trainings from March to September 2024 in Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar, Thailand and Viet Nam. The sessions brought together migration groups, MRCs and disability rights groups for the first time so they could learn about each other's issues, and importantly about terminology and ways they can help each other. The sessions were geared around practical advice and solutions for engaging with migrant workers with disabilities and supporting them in countries of origin and destination.

In addition, in May 2024, the ILO started a new MRC with an organization of persons with disabilities in Cambodia, the Cambodian Disabled People's Organization (CDPO). The new MRC aims to build capacity on migration and its links to disability, policy engagement and provision of services for migrants with disability. The CDPO will contribute to the promotion and protection of the rights of Cambodian migrants with disabilities and their families through the establishment, strengthening and expansion of migrant disability groups and through provision of disability-inclusive MRC services, including case referrals, information provision and counselling. Referrals will be made to other ILO-supported MRCs and to provincial labour departments, enhancing access to justice and compensation for migrants with disability, knowledge sharing, amplification of migrants with disabilities' voices and ultimately, an increase in the decent work opportunities, disability rights and labour rights protections available for men and women migrants with disabilities.



The Center for Alliance of Labor and Human Rights MRC trains volunteers to become "Safe Migration Ambassadors" to conduct outreach to potential migrants within their local communities in Banteay Meanchey, Cambodia.

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The Fishers' Rights Network organized Cambodian migrant fishers through fisher assemblies in Trat, Thailand.

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3 Conclusions

The overall conclusion from close to a decade and a half of service delivery through MRCs in the ASEAN region is that as long as exploitation and abuse of migrant workers remain rampant, migrant workers' demand for various support services will remain high. MRCs are important actors in the provision of services to potential, returned and current migrant workers, delivering a wide range of services responding to the needs of migrant workers, as well as advocating for migrant workers' rights, empowering migrant workers through building migrant groups, associations and peer to peer networks. MRCs have built alliances within and beyond the MRC network to increase the types of services available to migrant workers, especially in terms of specialized

services such as counselling and legal assistance. The need for services to be accessible, relevant and in some cases different for men and women migrant workers is recognized across the MRCs. That said, there are still some areas that remain work in progress, such as delivering fully gender-responsive services, as well as ensuring that services are accessible to ethnic minorities, to migrants in isolated and remote sectors of work such as agriculture/plantations, fishing and domestic work, and to migrant workers with disabilities.

Since their inception, MRCs have become major trusted sources of information for migrant workers in both countries of origin and destination. MRCs have, over

time, significantly increased their outreach to migrant workers, while maintaining a high level of inter-personal outreach as they continue to reach more and more migrant workers. Furthermore, as well as reaching out in person and disseminating information via printed materials and radio, MRCs are increasingly using social media to share information with a much larger number of migrant workers.

The hosting of MRCs by different actors (governments, trade unions and CSOs) has provided migrant workers with greater access, increased collaboration and mutual understanding between the different stakeholders involved and increased sustainability of services for migrant workers

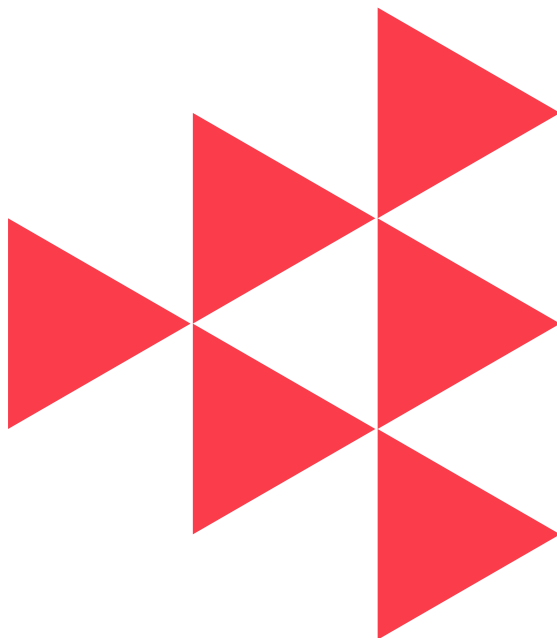
through diversification. The organizational development of MRCs has also been successfully strengthened through the development of operational tools, the delivery of trainings and the sharing of experiences, creating greater resilience to external political, social and economic factors and contributing to future sustainability. The ILO has invested in a range of trainings to build the capacity of the MRCs, resulting in much improved monitoring of activities and sharing of achievements, particularly individual success stories and documenting the remedies provided in complaint cases. Further utilization of the data available from MRC monitoring and evaluation to inform evidence-based improvements and to support advocacy on reforming migration governance policies and practices is still needed.

Finally, in terms of the long-term vision for ILO MRCs, plans need to be put in place to secure funding through the ILO or other donors to continue effective support to MRCs, while also investing in advocacy with government bodies to reform migration and labour policies that continue to render migrants vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Government bodies should also be encouraged to include adequate funding for migrant support services in their national budgets and ensure that migrant workers are included in programmes aimed at improving access to education, healthcare, social security and legal aid. MRCs could then focus on issues that require specialized attention and expertise, including sector-specific services for fishers and domestic workers, accessible services for people with disabilities, and gender-responsive services for women, men and LGBTQI+ persons, ethnic minorities and other marginalized groups.



The MRC and the provincial radio station broadcast the radio programme “Knowledge for Safety” on a weekly basis to 10,000 listeners in Bolikhamxay, Lao People’s Democratic Republic.

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The migrant fishers in their working environment in Rayong province, Thailand. April 2023.

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► Empowering Migrant Workers: Lessons Learned from ILO Migrant Worker Resource Centres in the ASEAN region

This publication draws on over a decade of experience by the ILO in supporting MRCs across the ASEAN region. It presents valuable insights for policymakers and practitioners seeking to improve service delivery to migrant workers.

MRCs offer a wide range of services, including counselling, psychosocial support, legal aid, information, outreach, pre-migration and post-return training, and targeted programmes for migrant women, people with disabilities, fishers, seafood processors and domestic workers. Their role in organizing migrant workers into networks and trade unions has helped build a collective voice and empower migrant workers.

The publication offers practical guidance to governments, trade unions and civil society organizations on improving delivery of information and services to support safe migration for decent work. It advocates for further investments in community-based support structures that prioritize the labour rights and empowerment of migrant workers.

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