

# **Small dreams beyond reach**

**The Lives of Migrant Children and Youth  
Along the Borders of China, Myanmar and Thailand**

**Written by: Therese M. Caouette**

**A Participatory Action Research (PAR) Project  
of Save the Children (UK)**

**DFID** Department for  
International  
Development



**Save the Children**  
UK

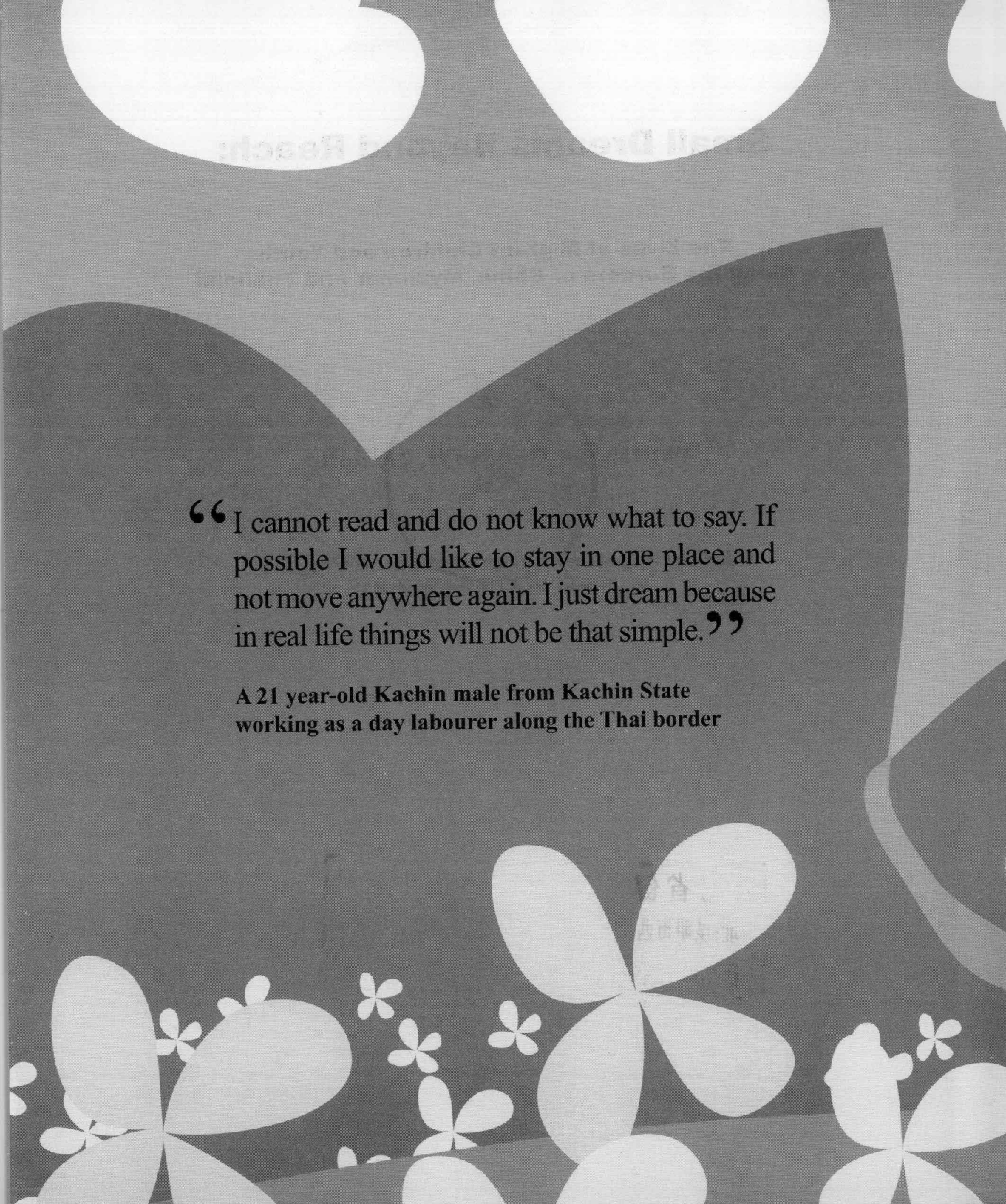
This project was funded by the British Department for International Development (DFID)

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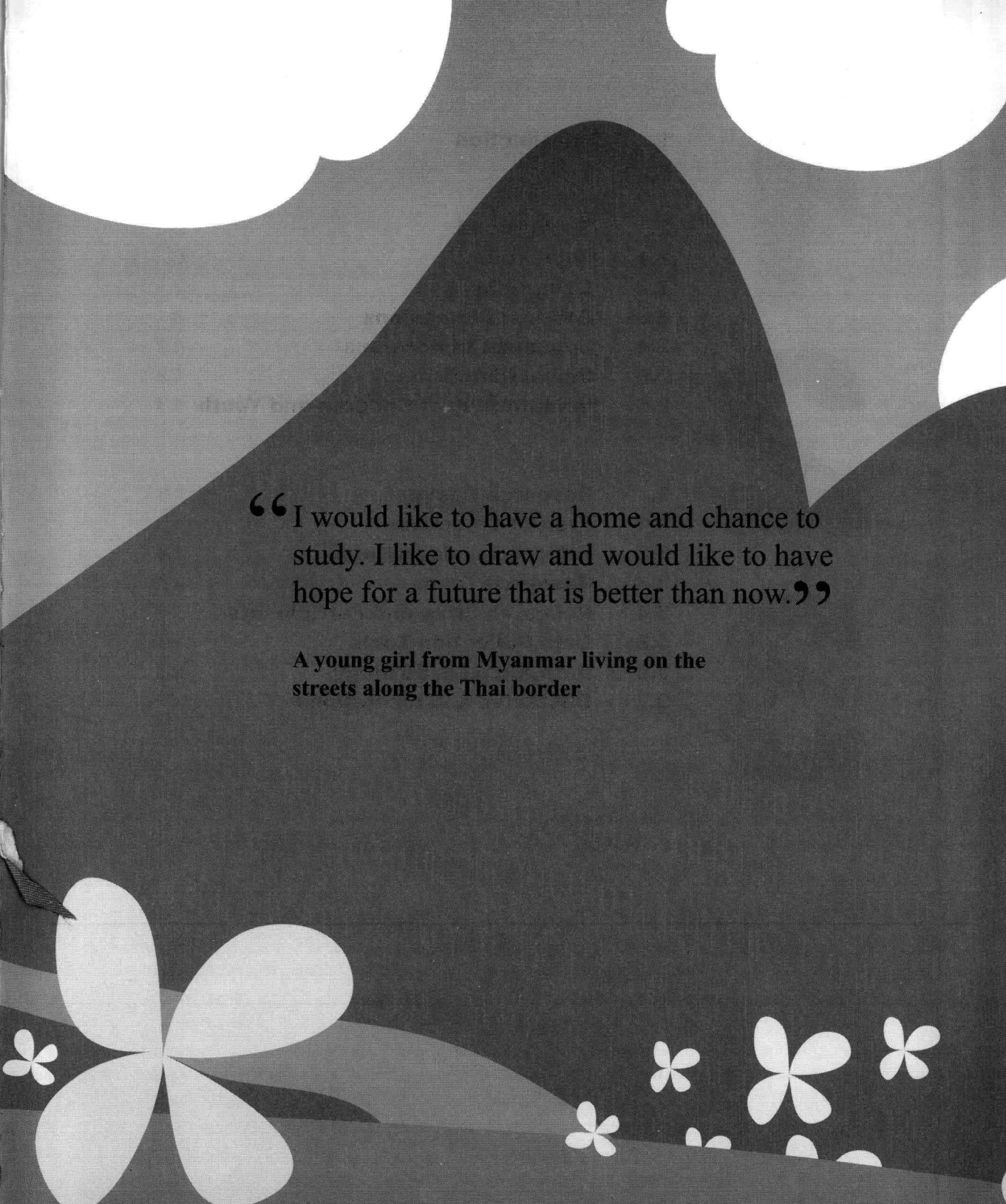
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“I cannot read and do not know what to say. If possible I would like to stay in one place and not move anywhere again. I just dream because in real life things will not be that simple.”

**A 21 year-old Kachin male from Kachin State  
working as a day labourer along the Thai border**





“I would like to have a home and chance to study. I like to draw and would like to have hope for a future that is better than now.”

A young girl from Myanmar living on the streets along the Thai border

## Acknowledgements

It is a daunting task to even begin to acknowledge all the people who have been involved in all the many stages of this project. Thus, it must be said from the onset that the many who contributed so much to this project will not be named, largely because of their own vulnerability as migrants to even use their real names or have them in print. Thus, I will trust that not only will each person know the vital role they have had in making this project possible, not only in its research phase, but in developing pilot interventions and ongoing programmes to address the needs of migrant children and youth along these borders and others in the region.

This project was conceptualised by Save the Children (UK) staff in 1998 in realizing the need to learn more about the realities faced by migrant children and youth along the borders in Southeast Asia. Based on these efforts a project proposal was presented for a Participatory Action Research project among migrant children and youth along the borders of China, Myanmar and Thailand. This project was fully funded by the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID/UK). It was with DFID's support and flexibility that the project was so successfully implemented.

The project was co-ordinated by Save the Children's Southeast Asian and Pacific Regional Office (SEAPRO), a Regional Project Co-ordinator and country teams established in China, Myanmar and Thailand. Each country team was staffed by a National Co-ordinator, National Researchers, Field Researchers, Youth Volunteers and project translators. The project benefited tremendously from the support and leadership of the Programme Directors and the SEAPRO staff who were actively involved in the planning, implementation and review of the project.

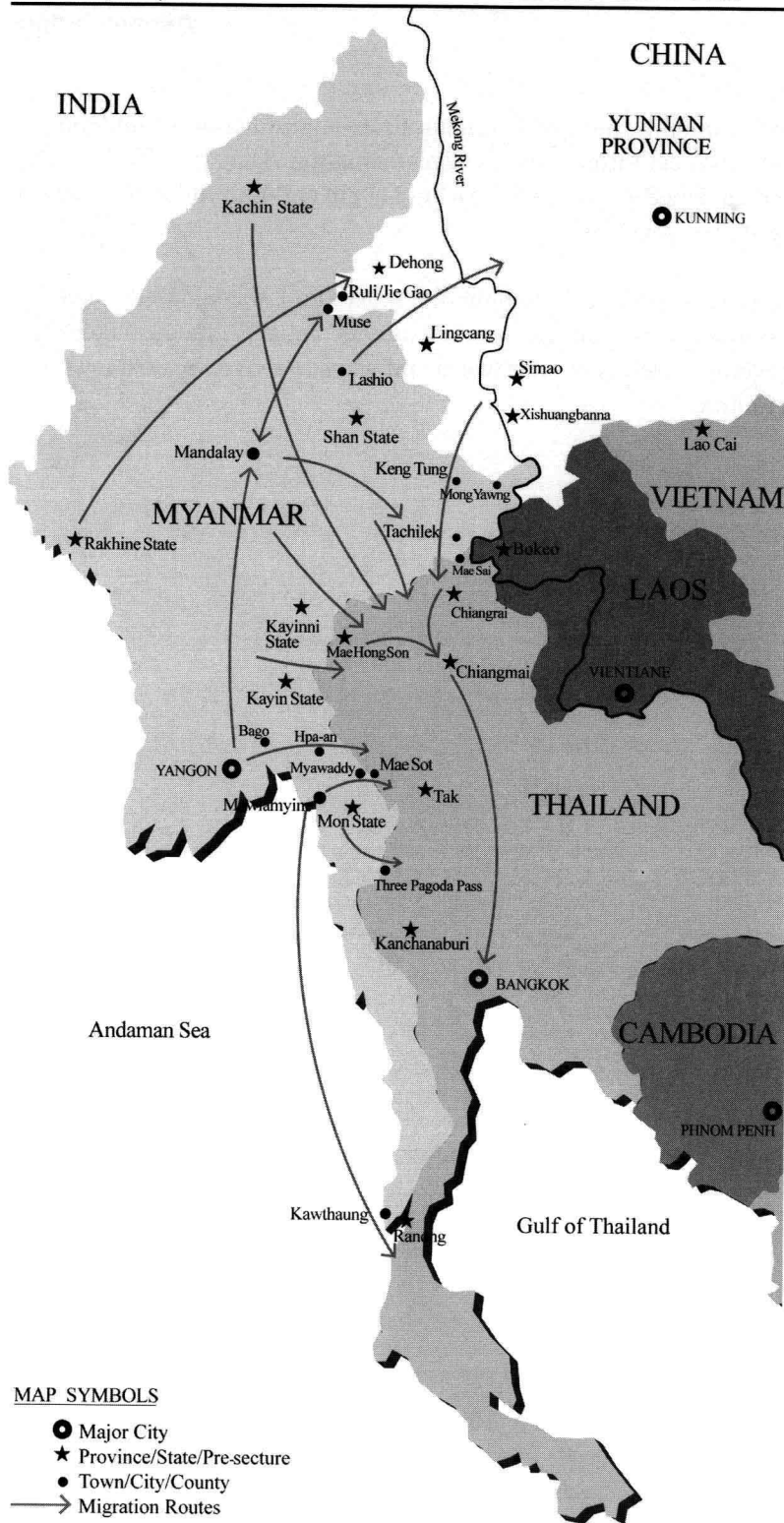
All of those involved in this project have made amazing contributions to their communities and behalf of their communities becomes advocates for action and change. Many of those directly involved in this project are unable to identify themselves by name for reasons of safety and security. Thus, it was agreed that the names of all those directly involved in this project will be withheld. Those who have worked with this project know who they are and will undoubtedly take great pride in the skills they have mastered and amazing work they have done.

The project would not have been possible without the numerous partners, (in-

cluding community members, organisations and other stakeholders) who supported this project throughout its implementation. They provided invaluable insight and guidance in creatively reaching out to children and young persons in the context of their realities.

Last but not only in hopes of remembering most of all, the hundreds of children and young persons who so patiently joined us with amazing energy and determination to find words to describe their world and ways to move forward towards a more hopeful future.

# SC(UK) PAR SITES AND MIGRATION ROUTES



## Executive Summary

Over the past ten years, the borders between China, Myanmar and Thailand have seen the largest flow of migrants in decades. Those from Myanmar have made up the largest proportion of this mobile population. People are moving in unprecedented numbers between these borders for tourism, trade, business, refuge, employment and other opportunities. Few of the available statistics on the total number of migrants in the Mekong sub-region include individuals overstaying their travel permits or those without documentation. Based on knowledgeable estimates, the number of migrants in the region involves millions of people.

Those most impacted by migration are the peoples along the mountainous border areas between China, Myanmar and Thailand, who represent a variety of ethnic groups. In addition, there are also the dominant ethnic populations of each country, the Bamar, Han Chinese and Thai who are migrating to the border areas in increasing numbers.

Although it is hard to find age and gender breakdowns in the limited data available, both the countries of origin and countries of destination find that those migrating are largely young people and often include children. There is a significant demand for female labour and a disproportionate number of female migrants without documentation. This is due largely to the types of jobs female migrants undertake, their isolation (due to fear and confinement), the unwillingness of employers to register them and the lack of sensitivities to their particular situations, needs and rights.

Though many acknowledge the growing numbers of children and youth migrating and/or their families, there is little awareness as to their concerns and needs, with extremely few interventions undertaken to reach out to them. In an effort to fill this void, SC(UK) implemented a project for Participatory Action Research (PAR) with migrant children and youth along the shared borders of China, Myanmar and Thailand from April 1999-March 2001 with funding from the Department for International Development (DFID, UK Government).

The majority of the cross-border migrants were young, came from rural areas and had little or no formal education. Along all the borders, young people began migrating on their own at about the age of thirteen. Though some children under thirteen also migrate on their own, most are accompanied by their parents or relatives.



The decision to migrate is complex and usually involves numerous overlapping factors. The participants in this study did not give one reason exclusively, but an explanation that included economic survival, war, refuge, government policies, personal problems and envisioned opportunities abroad. The majority of migrants first explained their need to move to find work as necessary for their daily survival.

Migrants travelled a number of routes that changed frequently according to their political and economic situations. The vast majority crossed without documentation and even those with travel permits, often stayed beyond their expiration or did not abide by the restrictions placed on their visit, ultimately resulting in being identified as illegal immigrants.

Generally, migrants leave their homes not knowing for certain what kind of job they will actually find abroad. Even when they think they know, they often find it is not what they expected. The actual jobs available to migrants were very gender specific. Migrant girls and women sought jobs in factories, shops and restaurants, sex work (direct or indirect), the entertainment industry or as domestic workers (cleaning and care taking). Male migrants found jobs in the fishing and agricultural industries, or as manual day labourers, or construction workers.

Though the living and working conditions of cross-border migrants vary according to the place, job and employer, nearly all the participants noted their vulnerability to exploitation and abuse without protection or redress. The interviews in this study revealed extensive debt-bondage, sexual abuse, illegal confinement, confiscation of documents, arrest and extortion, forced overtime, few basic resources and poor living conditions that were overcrowded, insecure and often violent. Sexual abuse was commonly reported among girls and young women, particularly among those involved in sex work and domestic service.

The general health problems impacting children and young people were identified as malaria (the most common illness reported), tuberculosis (TB), dengue fever, diarrhoea and malnutrition. Reproductive health issues were a major concern among youth and adults at all the project sites.

For all illnesses, most of the participants explained that it was difficult to access public health services due to distance, cost and/or their illegal status. Many re-

ported trying to treat their problems themselves or through traditional healers or military medics. Only when these efforts did not work and their illness progressed to a serious state did they attempt to access public health services or private medical care.

Along all the borders, most of the children did not attend school and among those who did only a very few had finished primary level education. Those who were displaced or had migrated across the borders cited constant mobility, remoteness, insecurity and lack of documentation as the reasons why their children did not attend school. Economic instability and language barriers were other important factors. There was also an attitude among participants in several of the study sites that formal education would not lead to a good life, even if young people were to finish higher levels of schooling. Cross-border migration was seen as an opportunity to obtain experience and develop practical skills. Consequently, many children reported not going to school or dropping out of school early. These children began working at an early age and were vulnerable to exploitation as a result of their limited knowledge and skills.

Drug production, trafficking and addiction were critical issues identified by the communities at all of the research sites along the borders. Participants noted the problem of drug addiction, particularly among young people, with children as young as nine and ten years old considered vulnerable to experimentation and addiction. Young migrants also reported being introduced to amphetamines by their employer in order to work harder and longer hours. In addition, migrants along all three borders noted the ease of recruiting migrants into the drug trafficking business, and expressed frustration with the inability to deal with drug-related problems in their families and communities.

Child labour was found in all three countries, particularly along the border areas and among migrant populations. This was largely a result of extreme poverty and of children left orphaned or abandoned by their parents. Many young children were observed working largely in the service and entertainment sectors (such as teashops, restaurants and hotels that often included direct and indirect sex work), in agricultural related jobs, or as day labourers or beggars. In addition, child soldiers, both in the army and with armed opposition groups, were found in Myanmar. According to the attitudes and perspectives of those in this study, children were of a 'workable age' as early as six or seven years old.

Trafficking of persons, predominantly children and youth, was common at all the study sites. The majority of young women and children were trafficked into sex work, marriage, domestic work or begging. This study found that the majority of girls from migrant communities along the Thai-Myanmar border left their border villages for jobs further in Thailand. Typically, girls were recruited during the fifth and sixth grade. Trafficking of girls and young women into marriage was also frequently reported by girls and young women from minority communities in Northern Shan State, who often were forced into marriages deeper into China. Many domestic workers from Myanmar also reported being trafficked into domestic work and forced into arrangements and conditions without their knowledge or agreement. Trafficking of young children and babies was also reported from Myanmar into China.

Orphaned children along the border areas were found to be the most vulnerable, often living without assurance of their most basic needs. These children were the most likely to be exploited and trafficked. Abandonment was a common problem, related to drug trafficking and addiction, HIV/AIDS, and loss of contact with family during migration. In addition, migrants' illegal status often leads to arrest, detention and deportation, with children reporting being treated as adults during this process, often separated from their family and communities. Large-scale migration in the Mekong sub-region has led to increasing numbers of children without citizenship.

Migrants frequently considered their options and opportunities to return home. For many, the decision to return revolved around issues of security and logistics. Discriminatory attitudes towards those who have migrated, especially girls and young women, made the reintegration process extremely difficult, often resulting in further migration.

At the conclusion of many of the interviews and focus group discussions, participants were asked about their future hopes and aspirations. The simplicity of their dreams highlights the struggles of many along the border, including migrant children and youth. The study also explored responses by community members, government departments and support organisations, non-government agencies, religious bodies, employers and other stakeholders.

Based on the project's findings, SC(UK) has provided recommendations at the conclusion of this report to address the critical issues faced by migrant children and youth along the borders of China, Myanmar and Thailand. These recommendations include: methods of working with migrant youth, effective interventions, strategies for advocacy, identification of vulnerable populations and critical issues requiring further research.

In conducting this project, SC(UK) used Participatory Action Research (PAR) to provide opportunities for children and youth to identify their concerns, vulnerabilities, needs and interests. Project participants were encouraged to develop interventions, take responsibility for implementation and document their progress as a means of learning and educating others about their lives and concerns. Given that few (if any) interventions had previously been undertaken with migrant children and youth, this approach provided a great deal of insight and interest among the community, and national and regional partner organisations and advocates. The pilot interventions undertaken included a wide-range of activities and a variety of implementation strategies for raising awareness, and strengthening capacity building, life skills training and outreach services. The PAR process used in this project and the interventions that emerged from it will be presented in a separate report.

SC(UK) found the participatory approach to research and the development of pilot interventions to be effective ways of involving children and youth. This approach is particularly helpful when working with vulnerable populations and a wide-range of sensitive issues. The tentative situation in which many migrant children live requires a tremendous amount of flexibility and sensitivity, as well as open exchange with project participants. The ongoing challenge of including the participation of diverse ethnic populations with their various languages, cultures and circumstances is an essential component of working with migrants. Another invaluable component of working with migrants whose lives transcend national boundaries is cross-border exchanges and collaborative efforts. These exchanges and efforts need to be extended to a network of partners at the community, provincial, national and regional levels.

Based on the participatory research process used in this study, the following interventions were identified as most effective in empowering migrant children and youth in the Mekong sub-region: life skills training and literacy education, strength-



ening protection efforts, securing channels for safe return and providing support for reintegration to home countries. These efforts need to be initiated in tandem with advocacy efforts to influence policies and practices that will better protect and serve migrant children and youth. SC(UK) has identified vulnerable children and youth populations as in need of further outreach and intervention, and recommends adapting the participatory research methods of this study to other borders in Southeast Asia (such as the border regions of Vietnam-China, Laos-China, Laos-Thailand and other areas along the Myanmar-Thai border), as well as other populations in the region (such as migrants from China living in Thailand).

SC(UK) hopes that together with a broad base of partners the critical issues that deny so many children and youth life's most basic securities and rights will be addressed and appropriate interventions will be made to reduce the exploitation of these young people.

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# **Introduction**

# **1**



# 1. Introduction

Over the past decade, the borders between China, Myanmar<sup>1</sup> and Thailand have seen the largest flow of migrants in the Mekong region. People from Myanmar have made up the largest proportion of this mobile population. The concerned governments have acknowledged over two million people from Myanmar have migrated into neighbouring countries including China, India, Bangladesh, and Thailand.<sup>2</sup> Many international and non-governmental organisations estimate significantly higher numbers of migrants from Myanmar into neighbouring countries. There are also significant numbers of people from China migrating through Myanmar into Thailand and further abroad.<sup>3</sup> However, exact numbers are difficult to determine due to the migrants' mobility, porous borders, the hidden and isolated lifestyles of undocumented migrants, and because many of the migrants along the border are often indistinguishable from the local ethnic population.

Thailand has been the major destination and transit country for migrants in the Mekong Region. The Thai government has officially acknowledged over one million undocumented migrants (the vast majority from Myanmar) currently employed in eight employment sectors in just over half of the provinces in Thailand. If these estimates included migrants in a wider range of labour sectors, the unemployed (including accompanying family members) and the remaining provinces throughout Thailand, the number of migrants crossing the borders into Thailand would be considerably higher.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the number of migrants from Myanmar residing in major border towns in Thailand is equal to or, in some cases, more than the local population in the area.

Since 1988, there has been a steady increase of migration across the Myanmar-China border. Those migrating from Myanmar into China are largely illegal, either lacking documentation or not abiding by the terms granted in their entry permits. Little is known about the cross-border migrant population into China. One source estimated 140,000 persons from Myanmar have relocated to live along or across the Chinese border.<sup>5</sup>

There exists no data on the number of people from China transiting through Myanmar to Thailand and beyond, though studies in China have confirmed this migration.<sup>6</sup> The steady influx of Chinese migrants into Thailand has also been noted by Thai Immigration Detention Centres (IDCs), which hold significant and consistent numbers of detainees from China. According to research conducted in