

## **Factors Determining Migration among Hill Tribe People in Northern Thailand**

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### **Abstract**

In Thailand, internal migration research has recently been of marginal investigation. Yet, this study is of the notion of the need to keep it on track of interest, particularly from the perspective of the public and intimate spheres. While rural development program since the 1997 economic crisis has contributed to a rise of return migration from urban to rural areas, there are certain parts of Thailand where there is an on-going flow of rural-urban migration of labor. This is particularly the case for vulnerable and marginalized hill-tribe people. Besides the problem of children and elderly left behind, the prospects of their sustained economic and social development are also expected to be jeopardized. This study focuses on the Karen community, the largest community of hill tribes in Thailand. This is based on a comparative case study of migrants and non-migrants in Pateung Catholic Community in northern Thailand, where there is a very high rate of migration of up to nearly 30%.

The study adopts participatory observation and in-depth interview approaches of qualitative investigation to comparatively study the experience of individual movers and non-movers, from the perspective of the household members of the family of both migrants and non-migrants. To seek an understanding of the characteristics of migrants and non-migrants, their family background, as well as of what has caused the out-migration stream and non-migratory phenomena in the area of investigation, the study examines push, pull, and prohibiting factors –affecting the decision to migrate or not, along neo-classical economic theory and new economics of migration. This study is expected to come up with an appropriate approach to help the minorities and their family to achieve sustainable ways of lives while contributing to sustainable demographic dividend in the community.

## **1. Introduction**

In the present era of globalization, studies of migration in Thailand, a middle income country in Southeast Asia, have largely focused on transnational migration. This is in response to that fact that Thailand has, as 2011 Thailand Migration Report (Huguet and Chamrathirong, eds. 2011) put it, evolved into “a global and regional migration hub for outgoing, incoming and transiting migrants” in Southeast Asia. This compares to a declining trend of research in internal migration, which has turned into, as a scholar puts it, “a problem of the past” (Chamrathirong 2007: 10). Part of the explanation is a declining trend of internal migration from one region to another, from one province to another, particularly to Bangkok, the capital city of Thailand, and the tendency for return migration from urban to rural areas to surpass rural-urban job-seeking migration, according to the National Statistical Office (2012). It is so despite an increasing trend of migration from rural places to urban growth in the same province, which can be expected to negatively affect the prospects for rural demographic dividend to contribute to appropriate rural development. The notion is essentially challenges considering the poor prospects for marginalized ethnic minorities in remote and poor communities to enjoy economic security on their own. Their demographic movement has received relatively little attention in migration literatures in Thailand.

Northern Thailand provides an appropriate setting for an investigation into the demographic movements marginalized ethnic minorities. That part of Thailand has housed seven major tribes, namely Karen, Hmong, Yao, Lisu, Lahu, Lawa, and Akha. This is in addition to these rare and relatively small tribes: Palong, Khamu, Thin, and Mlabri. Many of them have migrated to this area for more than a century ago from neighboring countries. They have maintained their own culture, religion, language, and lifestyles, with little change of quite a long time.

The objective of the present study is to investigate into the demographic movements of marginalized ethnic minorities in Thailand. It specifically identifies the pattern of out-migration, the prospects for return migration, as well as the determinants and constraints of such demographic movements. This is based on the experience of individual migrants and non-migrants, from the perspective of the household members of the family of the migrants and the non-migrants themselves. The study is expected to come up with an appropriate approach to help the minorities and their family to achieve sustainable ways of lives while contributing to sustainable demographic dividend in the community.

This paper is divided into seven parts. After the introduction, which identifies the rational and the objectives of the study, the data and the setting of the study are provided in the second part of the paper. In the third part of the paper, the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the migrants from Pateung Catholic Community to the City of Chiang Mai are elaborated comparatively with those of the non-migrants. This is followed by the patterns of migration, decision making and determinants of migrants, and possibility for return migration, in the fourth, fifth, and sixth parts, respectively. The final part serves as the synopsis.

## **2. Data and Setting**

This study relies on the case study of the Karen people in Pateung Catholic Community in Chiang Mai in Northern Thailand. All of them are Thai citizens, and have secured their Thai citizen identification cards. Although all of them have become Catholic for quite a long time, they have still practiced animism and believed in the existence of a Lord of the Earth and Water, as the master of virtually all natural phenomena, the earth, rocks, trees, etc. This is given the fact that such a believed have been cultivated and transferred from one generation to another on a consecutive basis. The case study of Karen people is selected purposively for this present study. This is based on the notions that the Karen, though distributed in many provinces in western and northern Thailand, are considered the largest tribal group in Thailand, despite the widely varied estimates from one source to another,<sup>1</sup> particularly in Chiang Mai province where they are estimated to contribute up to 70.09% of all hill tribes there (Tribal Research Institute, 2004). According to the registration data provided by Chiang Mai Diocese Statistics in 2013, Pateung Catholic Community, which is located in Mae Jam District, Chiang Mai, consists of 1,579 Karen people. However, a preliminary survey by the authors in 2013 found that there are only 1,153 Karen people actually living there, and that 426 people or 26.97% of the total number of registered Karen population in this village have migrated in a short distance to urban areas, most of which is the City of Chiang Mai, which is growing rapidly in tourism and agro-industry while serving as an education and healthcare hub in the north.

The study adopts a rapid assessment survey along non-participatory observation and structured face-to-face in-depth interview approaches of qualitative investigation to comparatively study the experience of individual movers and non-movers, from the perspective of the household members of the family of both migrants and non-migrants. Such an interview was carried out during October 2013 to November 2013 with 25 samples of the households with at least one working-age member being currently a migrant in the City of Chiang Mai, and 15 samples of working-age non-migrants. This is based on the notion of the demographic dividend framework, which highlights the productive contribution of the working-age population to the economy.

To identify while seeking an understanding of the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of migrants and non-migrants, the migration patterns, as well as of what has caused the out-migration stream and non-migratory phenomena in the area of investigation, the study examines a combination of factors affecting decision making to migrate and not to migrate, along neo-classical economic theory and new economics of migration.

## **3. Demographic and Socio-economic Characteristics of Migrants and Non-Migrants**

The demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the migrants and non-migrants are presented in Tables 1 and 2, respectively. The study finds 5.53 years to be the average period of migration for the migrants from to migrate from Pateung Catholic Community, with the standard deviation of 4.80 years. From the gender and age perspectives, the study finds the migrants to be mainly male (68 %) and at the 31-40 years of age (40 %), followed by those of 20-30 years old (32 %). The average age is 30.68 years, with the standard deviation of 8.72 years. The majority of the

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<sup>1</sup> According to Tribal Research Institute in Thailand, in 2004 there were about 438,131 Karen people in Thailand, constituting 47.45% of all Hill Tribes there, which are in Chiang Mai about 138,447 people or 70.09% of all Hill Tribes in Chiang Mai.

migrants is married (64 %), with a higher proportion of those with children than without one. The case is not much different for the non-migrants. This is given that there are also more male (53 %) than female (47 %) at the average age of 30.53 years, with the standard deviation of 10.59 years. The proportion of married non-migrants is a bit higher (69%) than that of the migrants, while there is a slightly lower proportion of unmarried/single non-migrants than that of the migrants, 33 % and 36%, respectively. Moreover, the study finds one of the migrants and non-migrants is illiterate. More than half of the migrants and non-migrants have attained at least at the high school/ vocational level, 60 % and 66 %, respectively.

As one may expect, the migrants have earned more than the non-migrants. 16 % of the migrants have earned over TB 16,000 per month, comparing to only 7 % of the non-migrants having earned that much. At the same time, another 16 % of the migrants can earn only TB 7,000 or below, comparing to 27 % of the non-migrants. An explanation is that most (60 %) of the migrants are employed in the services and industrial sectors, and 16 % of them have established enough to run their own business in the City of Chiang Mai while another 16 % engaging in street trading and 8 % in a religious mission. This represents a great change from their ways of life back home. The majority (52 %) of the migrants were lack of job before migration, followed by those in the agricultural sector.

Yet, from the average monthly income perspective, the gap is not very wide. The income per month of the migrants is TB 13,832 on average, with the standard deviation of TB 7,330.40. This compares to average income per month of the non-migrants who have regularly earned (13 out of 15 persons) at TB 10,500, with the standard deviation of 5,439.06. There are 2 non-migrants (13 %) under investigation who have not regularly secured their income. The majority (73 %) of them is self-employed in agricultural and handicraft sectors, while there are 13 % running their own small business and around 17 % in the government and religious services.

Background Characteristics of Respondents	Migrants				Non-migrants			
	N	%	Mean	SD	N	%	Mean	SD
1) <u>Gender</u>								
Male	17	68%			8	53.34%		
Female	8	32%			7	46.66%		
2) <u>Age</u>			30.68	8.72			30.53	10.59
20 or Below	4	16%			3	20%		
21-30	8	32%			5	33.34%		
31-40	10	40%			4	26.66%		
Over 40	3	12%			3	20%		
3) <u>Educational Background</u>								
No Education	-	0%			-	0%		
Primary School	3	12%			2	13.33%		
Secondary School	7	28%			3	20%		
High School/Vocational School	9	36%			8	53.34%		
College/University								

	6	24%			2	13.33%		
Background Characteristics of Respondents	Migrants				Non-migrants			
	N	%	Mean	SD	N	%	Mean	SD
4) <u>Marital Status</u>								
Unmarried/Single	9	36%			5	33.34%		
Married with no child	6	24%			3	20%		
Married with child/children	10	40%			7	46.66%		
Number of Children								
1 Child	4	40%			2	28.58%		
2 Children	2	20%			3	42.86%		
3 Children	3	30%			1	14.28%		
More than 3	1	10%			1	14.28%		
5) <u>Period of Migration</u>			5.53	4.80	-	-	-	-
1 Year or Below	4	16%						
2-3 Years	5	20%						
4-5 Years	5	20%						
6-7 Years	6	24%						
8-9 Years	3	12%						
Over 9 years	2	8%						
6) <u>Average monthly income (Baht)</u>			13,832	7,330.40			10,500*	5,439.06*
7,000 or Below	4	16%			4	26.67%		
7,001 – 10,000	5	20%			4	26.67%		
10,001 – 13,000	6	24%			3	20%		
13,001 – 16,000	6	24%			1	6.66%		
Over 16,000	4	16%			1	6.66%		
					2	13.34%		
7) <u>Average Monthly remittance (Baht)</u>			4,112	3,348.67	-	-	-	-
2,000 or Below	4	16%						
2,001 – 4,000	9	36%						
4,001 – 6,000	6	24%						
6,001 – 8,000	4	16%						
8,001 – 10,000	1	4%						
Over 10,000	1	4%						
8) <u>Past Occupation in Original Area (Pateaung Catholic Community)</u>					-	-	-	-
Agriculture for subsistence	7	28%						
Agriculture for trading	3	12%						
Entrepreneur	1	4%						
	1	4%						
	13	52%						

Religion No job								
Background Characteristics of Respondents	Migrants				Non-migrants			
	N	%	Mean	SD	N	%	Mean	SD
9) Current Occupation in Chiang Mai City	7	28%			-	-	-	-
Services	8	32%						
Industrial Worker	4	16%						
Entrepreneur	4	16%						
Street Trading	2	8%						
Religion								
10) Occupation in Pateaung Catholic Community (Non- migrants)	-	-	-	-				
Agriculture for trading					8	53.34%		
Entrepreneur					2	13.34%		
Handicrafts					3	20%		
Religion					1	6.66%		
Government Office					1	6.66%		

Notice (\*) Average and Standard variation were calculated and shown only 13 non-migrants due to 2 respondents haven't got certain income.

[Table: Migrants and Non-migrants' Characteristics (Migrants N=25 and Non-migrants N=15)]

#### 4. Patterns of Migration

The study finds that the migratory patterns of the Karen migrants from Pateaung Catholic Community can be divided into these categories:

- Components of migratory stream: The movements of the Karen migrants under investigation can be divided into two migratory streams. One is that of an individual migrant; and another is that of a whole family. Among them, the former prevails. Some prefer to be alone while others share the accommodation with migrant workers from the same hometown or their working colleague.
- Migratory stream by gender: As earlier mentioned, the migratory stream from the Pateaung Catholic Community is male dominated. Such a pattern is mainly attributable to the culture and norm in their home community where males are the head and the main supporter of the family while females are more associated with domestic work with a comparative advantage in taking care of the children and the elderly. This is also the case for the family migration stream, which involves female and child dependent migrants.

## 5. Decision making and Determinants of Migration

The family members of the Karen migrant workers provide different reasons for the latter to migrate to the City of Chiang Mai. They are: to attain better opportunity and wealth of their lives; for better recognition in the society; for a better job and higher income; to support their children and family; to have a chance for higher education; to distribute their traditional products to the city market; and because the family force them to go there. The first five reasons are mainly shared among migrants in all sectors under investigation: services sector, industrial sector, business owner, street trading sector, and religion services. Meanwhile, those in the industrial and street trading sectors are forced by their family to do so; and the distribution of their traditional products to the city market is another motivation behind those now running their own business in the City of Chiang Mai.

Meanwhile the non-migrants provide these reasons for them to stay in their home village in the Pateung Catholic Community: being satisfied that their job can make a good benefit; to stay close to their family; do not want to change their lifestyle; to contribute to the conservation of the hill tribe's culture; want to enjoy their life/ running a life for pleasure; to attain recognition in their home village; and to support their hometown. Among them, these reasons are shared by respondents in the agricultural and handicraft sectors as well as those running their own business: being satisfied that their job can make a good benefit; to stay close to their family; do not want to change their lifestyle; and want to enjoy their life/ running a life for pleasure.

This reflects in an interview with those who earn their living on agricultural produce and handicraft as well as those running their own business, those working in the government and religious sectors.

*“In Pateaug, I can support and help my family to work. My family works in agriculture for trading. We cultivate along the sufficient economy philosophy bestowed by His Majesty the King Bhumiphol; and our village is close to Inthanon Royal Agriculture Station. The station has sent agricultural experts to support us and help distribute our agricultural produce. We can earn our income, can enjoy working in our hometown; and we can stay with our families. They are our best goal of lives”*

(Pipat, Agriculture for trading, Interviewed on 24 October 2013)

*“I can continue our tribal heritage and support our hometown to develop our quality of lives. If nobody did it, how it would happen? Our culture, our wisdom and our lifestyle will be lost for sure”*

(Sombat, Handicrafts, Interviewed 24 October 2013)

At the same time, those in the handicraft sector also want to maintain the hill tribe's culture, while those in the governmental and religious services would like to attain recognition in their home

village; and to support their hometown. Those in the governmental sector are also satisfied with job and would like to stay close to their family.

## **6. Possibility for Return Migration**

The study finds 36 % of the migrants to be a permanent emigration from the Pateung Catholic Community for they have established their family life while enjoying their work and recognition from the people in the city, besides the notion that a city life is good for their children. This is particularly the case for those running their own business there. This compares 16 % to certainly return for the reason that they have succeeded in what they want in both financial and social terms and would like to contribute their success to their hometown. Meanwhile, there are 48 % the migrants to probably return to the Pateung Catholic Community. This is particularly the case for those who haven't attained their goal while weighing the costs and benefits of return migration.

## **7. Synopsis**

Sample migrants and non-migrants seem to share, to a certain extent, their characteristics from the demographic and socio-economic perspectives. Given the migration under investigation is that from Karen's Pateung Catholic Community in Chiang Mai to the City of Chiang Mai, or rural-urban migration, one may expect from the push-pull perspective of migration elaborated initially in Ravenstein's (1885) Laws of Migration and subsequent neoclassical frameworks, that economic factors play the role as the main stimulus for their. Wealth, job, and income do serve as keywords identified by the respondents motivating such a rural-urban migration. In fact, there are also other reasons, which seem to vary from one migrant to another. When considering those three keywords with those other reasons, this study is of the notion that they can be even re-grouped into one, i.e. migration for a better life. Particularly, it reflects the notion of migration an investment towards a better life from a human capital perspective, as one may find in Sjaastad's (1962) and Becker's (1964) frameworks, through employment and the possibility for further educational attainment of the migrants.

From the decision-making process perspective, the migration of certain Karen migrants from Pateung Catholic Community to the City of Chiang Mai can be explained along the neoclassical frameworks, highlighting that migration is an individual choice of each migrant for utility-maximization or to mitigate misfortunes in the area of origin, while others are not. This is despite the notion that the family/household of the migrants does serve as the relevant decision making unit, as proposed in the Stark and Bloom's (1985) new economics of migration to overcome constraints on family production or consumption.

Yet, the study finds that such constraints are less attributable to market failures there, but more to the relative poor social status of the migrants, that a better recognition, which is interpreted in terms of an improvement of their social status, is the key hidden motivation for migration, as well as the long-term goal for the migrants as well as their family to attain.

The relatively poor social status of the migrants is interestingly found to be more subject to a double sphere of vulnerability, one with the community itself and another within the Thai state at



large. While the latter refers to their status as ethnic minorities in less developed area, the former is the traditional norm of seniority in the community. This is given the fact that seniority applies in social status attainment. Traditionally, a high social status is limited only to the elderly, despite the fact that those at a younger age are relatively efficient to earn a living. This results in a limit for those at a younger age to move along their career path towards a respectable position. The sensitivity to such vulnerability varies from one to another. For some Karen migrants, the status as part of ethnic minorities is a dominant push factor to leave their village to work in an urban area, while others maintain that it was rather the traditional norm in the community itself that push them away. At the same time, both layers of vulnerability function as the push factors.

Both layers of vulnerability affect the local economy, the supply of infrastructure for transportation and fast communication, and the supply of social service facilities, particularly those for educational attainment. Authors' rapid assessment survey along a non-participatory observation approach finds many villagers work relying upon sufficient small-scale agriculture for living and to trading. It is so despite the abundance of natural resources. The migrants and their family consider it was impossible for the local economy to provide enough income. Such a rapid assessment survey also finds the community with only one secondary school. This reflects the problem of insufficient educational facilities in response to the demand of community's population despite the government's Compulsory Educational Policy applicable to all children – indigenous Thais, ethnic minorities, and non-citizens.

In other words, the Karen migrants choose to migrate to attain a better economic status, which they think would lead to a better social status, at least relatively equivalent to the indigenous Thai people in general. Along that path in a medium-term perspective, a higher educational attainment can lead to a better income and a better job. This reflects particularly among the Karen migrants who have not yet established in terms of job in both services and industrial sectors, and those of who can financially avail themselves for higher education. This compares to migrant workers in street trading, due to their relatively educational background and low income.

On the other hand, it is interesting to note that the non-migrants seem to enjoy an easy and peaceful life, considering that the sufficient economy, the society, and the culture are satisfactory to them, beside the possibility to be with their own family.

Authors' post-survey observation finds the possibility for an on-going trend of out-migration from the study site to the City of Chiang Mai, particularly among the population at a younger workforce age group. This trend is for further study after their graduation from the secondary school while also looking for a job. Given a number of migrants already established their family life and even their small-scale business in the City of Chiang Mai, one would expect those permanent migrant to serve as the migrant network to facilitate the flow, job searching, and even employment. Accordingly, this study is of the notion that the Pateung Catholic Community will be more and more vulnerable to lose the chance to maximize the benefits of a demographic dividend, a prominent notion raised in a RAND publication authored by Bloom et al. (2003) in time to provide resources for the future and may subject to a demographic onus instead.

To mollify against the possibility of losing the chance for the said demographic dividend, it is imperative for the Pateung Catholic Community to avoid permanent emigration while encouraging return migration of their working-age population. In this regards, the study is of the notion that, if

the economy of the Pateung Catholic Community can provide a more variety of jobs for their population than it does now, the community will be able to retain and keep their workforce to contribute productively to the local economy. In other words, creation of jobs is in need there for their population to attain a better quality of life and to earn a secured income on a regular basis.

To pave the way for such a prospect, there are several things urgently needed. Among others, it is imperative to supply the community with appropriate infrastructure for fast communication so that the people in the community can upgrade their knowledge, competences, resilience, and to be able to apply technology and innovation in response to the changing environment affecting the local economy, the society and the culture. This is particularly from the human capital perspective.

Moreover, expertise, research and development to increase agricultural productivity should be rendered to the Pateung Catholic Community from R&D facilities nearby on a proactive and regular basis so that the local people are equipped with competences to increase productivity, with knowledge of marketing and management, and the best farming practices, as well as to gain access to markets.

While agriculture can serve as the main source of income and food security, eco-tourism may serve as an option for extra income, to improve the well-being of local people, to reduce outflow of migration, and to motivate return migration.

Last but not least, social cohesion and intergenerational relationships are also to be strengthened in the Pateung Catholic Community while empowering younger generations to contribute with dignity to local economic restructuring and social development towards quality and sustainability.

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