



Mahidol University  
Institute for Population  
and Social Research



Mahidol Migration Center (MMC)  
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## **Press release title: How do we have better policy in the needed area of migrant workers doing agricultural work in Thailand?**

The Mahidol Migration Center-Joint Research Unit, Faculty of Humanities at Chiang Mai University, in collaboration with the Migrant Working Group hosted the "Collaborative Dialogue on Agricultural Migrant Worker Policy Reform" event, on October 30, 2023 at the Sukolsol Hotel, Phayathai at 9:00-16:30. The Ministries of Labor and Public Health opened this significant meeting that was co-hosted by the Mahidol Migration Center- Joint Research Unit, Chiang Mai University's Humanities Department, the NGO Migrant Working Group, and supported by the International Labor Organization (ILO). The policy reform meeting addressed the need to change this very important export industry valued at 8.1% of Thailand's GDP, composing of agriculture, forestry, and fishing, with US\$23.2 billion in agricultural exports in 2018 (World Bank, 2019).

### **Introduction**

Agriculture used to provide more employment opportunities for Thais in the working-age population, but now the industry cannot survive without the help of migrant workers. About 30% of Thailand's workforce (12.7 million- both Thai and migrants), work in agriculture today (National Statistic Office, 2019). Agriculture sector contributes to the majority of agricultural exports (60%) intended for other Asian countries (Ministry of Commerce, 2019b). Rice is the main crop on 43% of Thailand's land, followed by field crops, rubber, and permanent crops like oil palm (World Bank, 2019). However, the agriculture workforce has declined significantly due to better education attainment, economic growth, and demographic shifts. According to the recent ILO report on agricultural migrants, Thailand relies more on migrant workers from surrounding countries for agriculture and other basic jobs.

### **Situation Update**

According to an analysis of Ministry of Labour data from December 2019, 11.4 percent of registered migrant workers (317,996) had work permits working in the Thai agriculture industry. Of these, 57% were men and 63% of them were from Myanmar. However, it is important to note that the actual number of migrant workers in agriculture is likely much larger, with a significant portion being undocumented (ILO, 2021). In 2023, there are approximately 326,644 registered migrant workers employed in the agricultural sector, according to data from the Department of Employment, Ministry of Labour, Thailand. The most

recent detailed breakdown of the statistics is provided in Table 1 below, covering different categories of agricultural workers as of September 2023.

	<b>Description: Migrant Workers in Agriculture inside Thailand</b>	<b>Number of People</b>
1	Continuing agricultural work year by MOU	92,160
2	Section 64 Aliens who come to work going-back or seasonal	15,256
3	Section 64 according to foreigners coming to work Round-trip or according to the season (Agriculture and Livestock)	9,076
4	Section 64 according to foreigners coming to work Round-trip or according to the season (Continuous Agricultural Business)	1,086
5	Section 63/2 according to Cabinet resolution 7 February 2023 (Agriculture and Livestock)	209,066
<b>Total</b>		<b>326,644</b>

Table 1: Agricultural Migrant Workers Stock Statistics as of September 2023; This is only for those with work permits.

Agriculture sector is vital to the nation's economic growth in exports, as well as domestic food production. With higher standards for fair labor practices, it is essential to address the labor rights and working conditions, so that Thailand can be successful in exporting agricultural products. Despite common belief, agricultural workers in Thailand engage in year-round work involving various crops and multiple employers in the same village area. It was discovered at the Agriculture Policy Dialogue held in Chaing Mai in 2022 November, that many workers in the same province worked for several employers in one year. Additionally, common to the agricultural sector many workers both Thai and migrants hold multiple jobs at the same time. Most workers would look for supplemental jobs nearby in other crops and tasks or across sectors like construction when the work ends because there will be no work and no compensation. How can we better provide for the reality of the agriculture sector and create job security for all agricultural workers. Social security is only for full-time workers, but agricultural workers also need social security. Furthermore, the same ILO survey revealed that while housing for migrant workers was employer-provided and rent-free, housing quality is very sub-standard due to the absence of regulatory oversight. Temporary agricultural housing is often unsafe, unhygienic, and with little safe drinking water. Trade unions and migrant organizations are not involved to improve the working conditions for both Thai and migrant workers, and none of the migrants in agriculture are registered Thai trade union members because there is no farmworker trade union in Thailand, only owner cooperatives.

The agricultural sector in Thailand is not afforded protections and welfare under national labor standards law because workers are categorized as independent contractor work or seasonal temporary employment.

While foreign migrant workers are required to register in social benefit systems such as the Social Security Fund, Workmen's Compensation Fund, and Health Insurance Card Scheme (HICS), these schemes are only for MOU category of full-time migrants. Agricultural migrant workers are excluded from the Social Security Fund due to their short employment contracts, while the Workmen's Compensation Fund includes seasonal migrant workers. This exception from standard labor laws leads to two main issues that were discussed, but will take time to reform: 1) the absence of social security coverage and employer contributions to healthcare, and 2) the lack of a clear system that allows for multiple employers while providing social security coverage. The lack of social security protection for all workers, including documented migrant workers, suggests Thailand requires a new system that suits these unique working conditions specific to agriculture, known as the backbone economy of Thailand.

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Research for journalist sources in Thai and English  
(Start at 7:00min for interviews with migrant workers) <https://soundcloud.com/mahidol-migration-center/podcast-interviews-with-lamphun-agricultural-migrant-workers>  
<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/62ec9c55ef5dae009a536f87/t/63aab963b63d706746b37794/1672132963682/transcript.pdf>

<https://www.mahidolmigrationcenter-jointresearchunit.org/database/the-situation-of-the-management-and-the-laws-and-policies-concerning-migrant-workers>

**Credits:**

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