USING SOCIAL CAPITAL TO MITIGATE IMPACTS OF COVID-19: LESSONS FROM RETURNING MIGRANT WORKERS AND THEIR FAMILIES IN A LAOTIAN PROVINCE BORDERING THAILAND

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Using Social Capital to Mitigate Impacts of Covid-19: Lessons from Returning Migrant Workers and Their Families in a Laotian Province Bordering Thailand by Dr Angie Dang is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

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ABSTRACT

In the global context of the Covid-19 pandemic, migrant workers and their families are subject to job cuts, state-imposed restrictions, hostility, discrimination, prejudice and harassment from communities who fear catching the virus from them. They receive little or no state support compared to other population groups. How have migrant workers and their families managed these challenges? What could be learned from them in terms of pandemic management and support to vulnerable groups? Findings from a study in a Laotian province bordering Thailand show that returning migrant workers and their families sourced and used social capital to mitigate the impacts of the first wave of Covid-19. Their social-capital strategies have helped them to cope with the pandemic. Implications are discussed along with recommendations for support and intervention.

KEYWORDS

Covid-19 impacts, migrant workers in Laos, resilience, returning migrants, social capital

INTRODUCTION

Social capital is represented by the resources available to individuals via social networks. It is essential in mitigating the multiple effects of adverse conditions such as conflicts, wars, natural disasters, and most recently the Covid-19 pandemic (Behera, 2021). However, the ways that social capital contributes to the responses to these conditions by individuals, families and groups are diverse and much remains unknown.

Migrant workers are vulnerable in the Covid-19 pandemic. Like others, they have been subject to travel restrictions and quarantines, social distancing, and lockdowns by the authorities (Ritchie et al., 2020). They face job cuts amid rising unemployment and economic recession (Jones et al., 2021), and social and health issues such as rising domestic violence and mental illnesses (Javed et al., 2020; Sharma & Borah, 2020). There is hostility, discrimination, prejudice and harassment from the communities given the fear of the virus infection caused by migrants (Fauzi & Paiman, 2020; Guadagno, 2020; Leng & Saravanamuttu, 2020). They receive few if any relief measures in comparison to local groups (Takenaka et al., 2020).

Migrant workers without jobs have reportedly returned to their origins during the pandemic (Takenaka et al., 2020). There, their positions have shifted from money earners to dependants who relied on others’ support. Their families and communities have lost their remittances, which had been important sources of income (Takenaka et al., 2020). This, in turn, has limited investment and future income-generation activities (Fox et al., 2020).

This paper looks at the ways in which social capital was sourced and used to mitigate Covid-19 pandemic impacts by returning migrant workers and their families in three villages of a Laotian province bordering Thailand in the first wave of Covid-19. The paper first reviews the concept of social capital. It then elaborates on the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on returning migrant workers and their families, and their use of social capital to cope with these impacts. The conclusion draws on the discussion, provides recommendations, and identifies further needs for study and support.
SOCIAL CAPITAL

Social capital is represented by resources that are available to individuals, families and groups through their social connections or networks. Such social networks are created and maintained via exchanges or investments by their members who are mutually acquainted and recognised (Bourdieu, 1986). Migrant workers accumulate and invest in social capital throughout their migratory journey. This starts from before their departure to settlement in the host communities, and continues after their return and resettlement in the home communities. They are involved in networks of kin, friends, workmates, fellow migrants, shared religion and shared origin, among others (Massey, 1988; Gill & Bialski, 2011).

Social networks and social capital are shaped by geographical factors (Mohan et al., 2005). The social networks developed by migrant workers in their places of origin are fundamental and often enduring. Shaikh et al. (2021) found that migrants strongly maintain their kinship, firstly via the families that exist naturally, and other origin-based networks such as connections with friends in their villages. These networks have major socio-cultural significance for migrants, as demonstrated by their strong desire to contribute to them in different ways. For example, it could be returning to live permanently and to improve the village life with amenities and economic activities (Shaikh et al., 2021), or to achieve the desired mobility while maintaining cultural practices and connections with the original communities (Roohi, 2017).

The social networks developed in the destinations are dynamic and can be short lived. Gill and Bialski (2011) found that low-socioeconomic or low-skilled migrants often engage in instrumental, circumstantial and weak connections with people in the destinations. They might not select friends as they wish because of limited opportunities, limited access to established local social networks, and barriers such as language differences and discrimination. This differs from migrants with higher socioeconomic status and high skills, who have better resources to migrate and settle in the destination. These migrants have access to the local professional networks via the workplace. They associate with people of the same status and tend to avoid forming connections with low-skilled migrants from the same origins.

Social networks and ecosystems are interdependent. Social networks are built on the natural environments that provide natural resources for human activities. Individuals and societies access natural resources and other types of resources via their social networks (Bourdieu, 1986). They can use them for both the private and public good (Adger, 2003). They can facilitate actions and increase efficiency, adaptability, creativity and learning (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Human activities, in turn, create changes to the natural environment and natural resources, as clearly shown in the multiple climate-change issues (Adger, 2003). Human activities also shape social networks and social capital, particularly in the case of state policies and actions. For example, privatisation of natural resources results in diminished community capacity to respond to natural disasters (Adger, 2000; 2003). State lockdowns and movement restrictions reduce connections with friends and neighbours while increasing ties with family and the state via social media (Yu et al., 2021).

Both origin-based and destination-based networks facilitate the migration and settlement process by cutting down migration costs. Massey (1988) details these costs to be expenses for transport, food and accommodation. Migrants have to spend time, money and efforts on information and job searches, resulting in a loss of earning opportunities during this time. Migrants also suffer from psychological impacts as they leave their home places for strange places. The migration networks provide information such as requirements for migration, and living conditions. They offer useful support and services such as accommodation, transportation, and job opportunities for migrant workers in the host countries (Massey, 1988; Shaikh et al., 2021). In this way, the networks encourage their members to migrate to the destinations involved. The network members, in turn, expand the networks through their kinship and friendship (Massey, 1988).

Besides benefiting individuals and families, social capital is used for the common good or overall wellbeing of society. This applies to community resources and the collective management of them, because information flows and connections facilitate collective decision-making for social actions and practices (Adger, 2003). Planned and voluntary migration, for instance, has commonly been effective in improving resilience in resource-dependent
communities. People move to other communities to find jobs, earn a better income, and send remittances home to support their families. This helps to diversify household income and reduce the risks of local job shortages, low and unstable income, poverty and natural disasters such as droughts. Therefore, it enriches resources with remittances, diversifies livelihoods and reduces risks of resource dependency (Massey, 1988; Shaikh et al., 2021). This is in contrast to people moving to escape dangers or threats such as famine or wars, of which the impacts are negative on both the origin and destination societies (Adger, 2000). Forced migrants lose livelihoods and resources from their origins while exerting stress on the host societies and their environments, contributing to negative outcomes on the wellbeing and employment of host communities (Verme & Schuettler, 2019).

Because of its enabling power, social capital positively correlates with community resilience against adversities such as natural disasters (Noel et al., 2018) and the Covid-19 pandemic (Bartscher et al., 2021). Social networks provide resources and support for individuals and families to cope with and recover from crises and the multiple impacts of natural disasters (Aldrich & Meyer, 2014; Ritchie & Gill, 2007). The Covid-19 pandemic has negatively affected work and income, increased social isolation, and limited access to essential consumables and services to many individuals and families across societies (Hossain et al., 2020). Social capital has mitigated these impacts; for example, with the resources available to cope as in the case of the state providing relief support to individuals and groups in difficulties.

Social networks also encourage collective actions to problem solve at the community and society levels. For example, communities take responsibility for disaster response, relief, recovery and preparedness (Behera, 2021). They develop social connections and infrastructure to cope with disasters (Reininger et al., 2013). This is because information flows and connections facilitate collective decision-making for collective actions and social practices (Adger, 2003). In the Covid-19 pandemic, the actions and practices include, for example, practising social distancing (Makridis & Wu, 2020) or implementing vaccination to prevent the virus infection (Ferwana & Varshney, 2021).

Social capital has proven useful in illuminating migration and community behaviours in general as well as difficult situations. Social capital also points to how individuals and communities could deal with arising issues, overcome difficulties, recover and redevelop. Therefore, social capital is used in examining how returning migrant workers and their families cope during the Covid-19 pandemic and developing recommendations for support and intervention.

**STUDY OVERVIEW**

The study was conducted in three villages northwest of a Laotian province next to the Mekong River, which is the natural border with Thailand. Their population ranged between 683 and 973, with under 25% of the population having vocational training or university qualifications. Over 90% did farm work. Around 5% were unemployed and the rest raised livestock for a living. None of the three villages had trades, factories, major businesses or other sources of livelihood (Sengdala et al., 2021).

Between October and November 2020, the study collected field data using semi-structured questionnaires targeting returning migrant workers, their family members, and local authorities. Questions focused on work, income, spending and saving, family relationships and social relationships, education of children, and health. These areas were selected given their visibility and importance to overall wellbeing (Stoewen, 2017).
A local consultant was engaged for onsite data collection, given Covid-19-related travel restrictions and border control measures at the time of the study. This consultant facilitated recruitment and engagement with research participants. Convenience sampling was used to maximise the sample. Anonymity was assured and note taking was used if respondents did not consent to be recorded (Sengdala et al., 2021).

Fifteen village officials took part in focus-group discussions. Three village officials participated in in-depth interviews. Twenty-three family members and 38 returning migrant workers responded to the questionnaire survey, including 34 females and 27 males aged between 17 and 75. The survey respondents had limited education. Only 16 people had secondary education as the highest level of education. Understandably, their occupations were predominantly farming and livestock raising, followed by unskilled labour, shop assistants or domestic servants. About 80% had children aged three to 25 years old, some of whom were studying at tertiary level (see Table 1).

TABLE 1. DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION OF SURVEY PARTICIPANTS.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Village 1</th>
<th>Village 2</th>
<th>Village 3</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Returning migrants</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male/Female</td>
<td>2/4</td>
<td>5/8</td>
<td>9/10</td>
<td>16/22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (&lt;= 18/&gt;= 51)</td>
<td>0/0</td>
<td>0/0</td>
<td>2/1</td>
<td>2/1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With secondary education</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have a partner</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have child(ren)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family members</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male/Female</td>
<td>4/4</td>
<td>2/3</td>
<td>5/5</td>
<td>11/12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (&lt;= 18/&gt;= 51)</td>
<td>0/1</td>
<td>0/1</td>
<td>0/4</td>
<td>0/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With secondary education</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have a partner</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have child(ren)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data were also drawn from field observation and secondary sources such as existing records, policies and statistics. These sources were limited, as recent flooding had washed away most village records. Thematic analysis of qualitative data was conducted to identify underlying themes that could provide answers to the research questions.

**MIGRATION AND MIGRATION NETWORKS BEFORE COVID-19**

Low job opportunities and low and/or unstable income in the localities caused about 5% of the population in the studied villages to migrate out, mainly to Thailand and Vientiane, the capital of Laos. These areas were close to the villages, had better economies, more jobs and better earning opportunities, and shared languages and cultural practices. Migrant workers found predominantly low-skilled jobs. These jobs were shop assistants, house servants or farm workers for females, and labour and construction work for males. These jobs could be seasonal or year-round (Sengdala et al., 2021).

The migration-support networks firstly involved families. Families exist naturally and are essential for the reproduction of migrant workers. Within families, parents nurture and provide for children. Adult children are expected to contribute and support their parents. This is evidenced by survey respondents’ reported remittances (see further below) and expectations of children’s education, future job prospects and family contributions. In particular, 72% of respondents wanted their children to have vocational training or tertiary education, and 66% of respondents wanted their children to start working when they completed their education, after the age of 20 or older. Many respondents expected their children to contribute money within the range of current migrants’ remittances to their families as they work in the future.

Peers formed another important support network for migrant workers, and could be accumulated along the migration journey. Over 68% of surveyed migrant workers found jobs when they migrated with peer support. Peers also helped with accommodation. Over 60% of these migrant workers stayed with their friends and the other 24% stayed with their workmates as they worked. Besides peer support, job brokers or middle people, who could be available inside or outside the villages, assisted around 15% of migrant workers to find jobs, for a fee.

The networks of families, peers and job brokers, however, cannot deal with issues such as human trafficking, discrimination, poor working and living conditions, sickness and injuries, which require the state and authorities to be involved. No state-supported networks were reported because official policies in Laos disapprove of low-skilled migrants. Migrant workers, therefore, often have to do without official paperwork and usually avoid state involvement for fear of being executed (Sengdala et al., 2021).

Migrant workers invested in these networks by making regular contributions in money, support and job opportunities. They were expected to, and did, send remittances home. On average one person sent US$76 per month, around 32% of the mean total monthly earnings of US$236. (Income and expenditure data were originally collected in Laotian kip. They were later converted to US dollars and rounded up to the nearest dollar. The exchange rate was 10,000 Laotian kip equivalent to 1.077 US dollars as of 11 December 2020, according to xe.com currency converter. See Figure 2 for more details.) The families or households then used the money to invest in themselves, such as paying for children’s schooling, purchasing household items, servicing debts, and making savings and investments. Besides remittances, migrant workers also accumulated savings for themselves. On average a person saved US$75 per month, approximately 32% of their mean income, which could be mobilised for use in the future. Migrant workers also brought new work contacts to their migration networks and created job opportunities for other members.

The expected exchange also included making regular contacts and visits. Most migrant workers visited their villages and families. They maintained contact with their families regularly using mobile phones and the internet. Some survey respondents reflected that money contribution and frequent visits and contacts helped to improve the family relationship. The lack of contribution, visits and contacts could negatively affect the connections. Some survey respondents noted that family bonds could be weaker because of the distance while they worked away. Such a distance was a barrier to communication and relationship enhancement.
Another way to network was to join social activities and entertainment. On average, migrant workers spent about US$17 per month, i.e., 7% of their mean income, on these activities in their host communities. At the same time, their families or households used remittances to cover social expenses in the villages, which were practical investments in the home social networks. Paying job-broker fees helped to maintain the job-broker services for those who used them. Fees were usually small, about $US14 on average for a job obtained.

IMPACTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

In the first wave of Covid-19 in March 2020, Thailand and Laos imposed lockdown and travel restriction measures. That left migrant workers, both domestic and overseas, with neither work nor income. Many migrant workers chose to return to their villages. Laotians returning from overseas had to be quarantined for 14 days. After this, if they were issued with medical clearance, they could return to their families. The Covid-19 pandemic had extensive negative impacts on livelihoods. It had both positive and negative impacts on relationships, education and health, as detailed below.

Unemployment and low, unstable income with spending deficits

Only 30% of returning migrants managed to find a job, leaving at least 60% without one. Most of those with a job earned between US$5 and US$8 per day. The mean monthly income was one third and the mean monthly household income and income per capita were around 60% of the levels before the pandemic (see Table 2).

TABLE 2. SUMMARY OF INCOME AND EXPENSES IN US$ (OUTLIERS EXCLUDED).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Before pandemic</th>
<th>During pandemic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Range / Mean</td>
<td>Range / Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income of a returning migrant</td>
<td>108–323/236</td>
<td>54–108/83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household monthly income</td>
<td>54–323/206</td>
<td>11–215/120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household monthly income per capita</td>
<td>12–72/41</td>
<td>2–54/25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household monthly expenses per capita</td>
<td>5–67/22</td>
<td>4–58/16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The major sources of income, however, remained largely unchanged. Of the survey respondents, wages were a major source of income for over 90%, followed by agriculture for 75%, remittances for over 50%, trade for over 30% and forestland, business and other sources for 15% (see Table 3).
TABLE 3. MAJOR SOURCES OF INCOME.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Before pandemic</th>
<th>During pandemic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wages</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farming</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remittances</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forestland, business and others</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Families and individuals had expenses for food, clothing, bills, transport, medical costs, children’s schooling, debt payments and purchases, and social events. With low and unstable incomes, returning migrant workers and their families faced deficits when spending exceeded income. Thirty-one percent of respondents had family expenses exceeding their incomes during the pandemic compared to 13% who experienced similar issues before the pandemic. Thus, the affordability rate reduced from 87% to 69% of respondents. Furthermore, family expenses were reduced by around 35% from the expense level before the Covid-19 pandemic.

**Mixed impacts on family and social relations**

The pandemic had mixed negative and positive impacts on family relationships. Three survey participants reported bad relationships because of either the past distance or low family income. However, 37 respondents reported good to very good relationships now that returned migrants could spend time with family, taking care of each other and helping with household chores and family jobs. Thirteen respondents mentioned remittances and regular contributions as important factors in maintaining good relationships.

Twenty-three returning migrant respondents reported having issues with their social relationships. Six rated their social relations with villagers as bad or very bad. Ten stated that they sometimes or often had difficulties in communication with villagers. Twelve reported discrimination from other villagers due to the nature of their work outside the village. For example, some were excluded or restricted from peers and social groups and activities, subject to offensive comments, embarrassed or ignored in public. Eleven family-member respondents advised similar issues of difficult communication and discrimination. In addition, they mentioned being asked to contribute things differently from other villagers and having their possessions stolen or damaged. Respondents acknowledged the villagers’ fear of widespread infection and the state quarantine measures being major causes of these issues.

**Impacts on health and child education**

The Covid-19 pandemic had limited negative health impacts on returning migrant workers and their families. Seven family respondents noted that their returning family members appeared to be angry, frustrated, worried or stressed more often. Seven family respondents stated that they experienced the same issue. One respondent noticed their returning member had worse sleep. One reported increasing substance use and another reported more illnesses.

The pandemic changed schooling and had negative impacts on child education, as seen by many respondents. Of the respondents, 66% advised of school closures. Two percent mentioned school moving to distance learning. Twenty-three percent thought that such changes worsened their children’s schooling.
Sourcing and using social capital to cope

Social capital was a major factor that helped returning migrants and their families cope with the negative, multi-faceted impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. Social capital was sourced from three major networks, which were families and/or households, neighbours and peers, as further explained below.

**Families and/or households**

Families and/or households were a major source of resources for returning migrants, offering accommodation, food, essential items, money and work. All respondents but one lived in houses that were owned by a family member, who was predominantly the respondent’s parent or themselves. Their households often included close family members such as children, parents, partners or siblings.

About 87% of these households owned agricultural land, mainly rice with a mean area of 3.05 hectares. Forty-one percent owned forestland with a mean of 2.76 hectares. Both types of land were predominantly owned by the respondents’ parents, partners or themselves. Returning migrants could work on their family farmland, including rice fields and gardens. They could do other related activities such as selling their farm products. Over 88% of respondents advised that they and/or their family members worked on their farm. However, only about 15% of respondents said that they and/or their family members worked in their forestland. While these jobs did not offer stable and decent earnings, they were considered helpful and supportive to the family. They also generated values and farm products that could help to sustain the households.

Returning migrants could use their savings and the family savings, to which they contributed with their remittances while working outside the villages. This happened to 62% of survey respondents.

**Neighbours, friends, private lenders, villages and the state**

Around 87% of survey respondents advised of seeking help and 95% reported receiving help from others to cover their needs. On average, they received help from two sources outside their households.
Neighbours were the most popular sources of support, assisting 67% of survey respondents. Friends were the second most popular sources of support, providing for 49% of survey respondents. Private lenders and the village reportedly assisted 25% of survey respondents. The state and others were the least popular sources, providing support to around 3% of survey respondents, demonstrating limited state support for the studied population.

Resources came in diverse forms. Neighbours and friends provided food and essential items, income support, job search support and money loans. Villages provided all these forms of help except for food and essential items. Private lenders offered money loans and helped people to find jobs. The state’s assistance was limited to money loans only.

Money loans were the most popular form and 72% of survey respondents reportedly had at least one loan. Food and essential items, job search support and income support were also popular. The percentages of survey respondents who received these resources were 34%, 31% and 25%, respectively.

These resources covered their daily needs and alleviated issues caused by unemployment and low, unstable income and spending deficits, as in the case of food, essential items, income support and money loans. Job search support was used for job searching and job creation. Respondents considered this to be the key to work and income, issues with family and social relationships, health and children’s education.

**DISCUSSION**

At its early stage, the pandemic had both positive and negative impacts on returning migrants and their families. On the positive side, they reunited with families and had better communication and care, which improved their family relationships. The village living environment was more spacious, cleaner and greener compared to the cities with overcrowded, substandard accommodation. On the negative side, they suffered from work and income shortages, mental distress, social stigma and discrimination, and their children could not go to school due to school closures.

The identified negative impacts were consistent with the literature on the pandemic. However, work and income shortages were more severe compared with the general population. The returning migrants’ employment and income declined by 60% and 40% respectively, compared to 17% for the general population as of March 2021 (The World Bank, 2021). Understandably, they did not have a job in the locality before their return and had to compete for one in the more difficult economic environment of the pandemic. These factors could explain the noticed increase in anger, frustration, worries and stresses in response to the pandemic’s pressure (Javed et al., 2020). Furthermore, if the infectious, deadly virus reached these locations, negative health impacts would be massive, as evidenced in other rural communities across the world (Leonardelli et al., 2021; Mueller et al., 2021).

Returning migrant workers and their families focused their coping measures on work and income shortages. They considered solutions to these shortages would alleviate distress and strained family and social relationships. This focus was part of the physiological and safety base of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, the latter of which prevailed in time of crisis (Maslow, 1943). This was also consistent with people’s behaviours in other parts of the world in this pandemic (Duygun & Şen, 2020).

In the absence or scarcity of state support, returning migrants and their families have sourced and used resources from family, neighbour and peer networks, private lenders and the village. These networks either existed naturally or developed before and during the migration process. They not only supported the migrant process before the pandemic but also the return process under the pandemic. The mobilised resources met their short-term needs. Households or families provided for the essential needs of housing, food and work for most returning migrants. They accumulated savings and allowed their use to cover the spending deficits in the pandemic, which was typical for low-income groups (Schembri, 2021). Neighbours and peers offered food, essential items, money loans and job search support. The village and private lenders provided money loans and job search support, and the state only offered limited money loans.
The above networks are part of rural society and its ecosystems. They are essential for the capacity of these systems to survive major shocks and crises and redevelop afterwards (Adger, 2000). The ecosystem provided resources for agricultural activities to produce and generate sustained income for the local population, including returning migrant workers and their families, who farm and run forests in the locality. The networks of families, friends, neighbours, private lenders and villages further generated and distributed these resources to their members. They positively contributed to the capacity to cope with the pandemic.

The pandemic exerted huge stresses on social capital and the capacity of the social and ecological systems. In terms of savings, for example, some survey respondents were already in deficit before the Covid-19 pandemic. Most other survey respondents had limited or no savings, so the usage of savings was also limited. As savings ran out, returning migrant workers and their families would be left with no savings for future needs or other unexpected events.

The pandemic has had stronger impacts on small-scale family farming due to such factors as limited market access because of travel restriction, farm market closures, the lack of storage facilities for perishable produce, and reduced demands (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2020). Low-skilled, labour-intensive service and production areas such as agriculture, construction and retail struggled with varying prospects for recovery (International Labour Organization, n.d.). Jobs and business opportunities were thus much more limited in the economic downturns that the pandemic created (Jones et al., 2021). These were barriers to livelihood development for returning migrants and their families.

Resources from other people in the community were equally limited and loans had to be repaid. The use of private lenders raised questions about possible high interest rates and the potential for resulting huge debts. Only one respondent’s family had to service debts before the pandemic. At the time of the survey, 19 respondents advised that they had received help from private lenders and 13 took loans from them. The community was not used to debts and might struggle after they incurred debts during the pandemic.

It is unclear how these networks could be affected by the pandemic. The fear of infection and the reduced ability to invest in social exchange by network members could undermine such networks. Indeed, most respondents reported that their family cut down spending, including social spending, to two thirds of the pre-pandemic levels. Social spending dropped by US$8 on average. This confirmed the global trends of consumption cuts and spending drops (Baker et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2021). Social spending is essential for social connection, and community participation and development. It also brings about subjective wellbeing, happiness and a sense of fulfilment and generosity, among other effects (Aknin et al., 2018; English, 2013). Limited social spending could place constraints on these areas. If the pandemic prolongs and if there are other shocks such as natural disasters that impact the crop yields, the ability to exchange and pay back loans and other supports would greatly diminish. These would threaten to damage social connections and access to social capital.

Added to the above situation was the policy in Laos against low-skilled workers’ overseas migration. This policy is contrary to people’s natural tendency to migrate to areas with better opportunities, more jobs, higher earnings, higher living standards or other attractions (Castelli, 2018; Mohamed & Abdul-Talib, 2020). This state’s dysfunctional behaviour (Adger, 2003) leads to exclusion and vulnerability for the population and undermines social capital, and creates fear among people who defy it. In the pandemic, illegal or undocumented migrants have tended to avoid or refuse to provide information or co-operate. This has hindered the implementation of Covid-19 measures such as quarantine or contract tracing, and could make the pandemic worse (Guadagno, 2020). After the pandemic, out-migration will continue, given the local shortages of jobs and earnings and the opportunities elsewhere. Without state protection and support, the abuse and maltreatment at work, and multiple social, economic, education and training barriers will continue. Migrant workers struggle to cope with multiple issues while working and living away from their homeland (Reed, 2018).
RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the above considerations, the state should play a stronger, better role in providing basic social security for groups in need (Adger, 2003). In this situation, the state should mobilise and provide support for returning migrants, their families and communities to cope with the pandemic. The support could include relief measures for needy families and individuals, and hygiene education to prepare for the eventuality of the virus reaching the villages. Healthcare services and supplies, and appropriate state quarantine measures would be also necessary.

Research participants suggested that the state should adopt a pro-migration policy and work with host countries such as Thailand and Vietnam to set up better services and supports for Laotian migrants in these countries. This, along with campaigns and anti-discriminatory education, would ease the mental distress for migrant workers and their families. It would promote a change in the public attitude towards migration for work, from poverty alleviation and second-class jobs into acceptable and desirable jobs in society (Sengdala et al., 2021).

Research participants wanted quality vocational training, education and scholarships, job creation and job-broker services, income support and income-generation activities, capital for business start-ups, and Covid-19 vaccinations. In order to succeed, such livelihood development would need support and guidance from the state and wider society, including non-governmental organisations and the richer communities. Development included, for example, assistance in the identification and provision of suitable training for the required skills in the labour market post-pandemic (Sengdala et al., 2021).

Critical, strategic thinking and technologies would be required to shape training and economic development targets towards meeting the needs of communities, society and the economy post-pandemic. Innovative ideas would be helpful to ensure that the villages could achieve a balanced development that gives proper attention to social, economic and environmental dimensions (Millard et al., 2016; Roy et al., 2018; Watkins et al., 2008). For example, successful community, social and economic changes can reduce poverty and enhance sustainable development.

To facilitate these changes, the drivers for change such as solidarity and networking, financial resources, governance and technologies should be enhanced. Barriers such as conflicting interests in different aspects need to be properly addressed (Millard et al., 2016). Open, democratic participation, self-regulation and sustainable resource management would help to achieve successful co-operation between the stakeholders (Agrawal, 2001).

CONCLUSION

The migrant workers have developed and maintained connections with families, friends, neighbours, private lenders and villagers in three Laotian villages prior to and throughout their migration journey. They are part of the rural social and ecological systems that support farming and forestry to produce and generate sustained income. These connections further generate and distribute these resources to their members. The connections help people to cope with and recover from major shocks and crises. These networks have been effective in assisting migrants to move and work outside their villages, as well as to return and settle during the Covid-19 pandemic. As the study shows, they sourced and used social capital from these networks to cope with work and income loss.

The pandemic exerted stresses on these networks and threatened their ability to survive, given the limited resources within the networks and diminished capacity of members to exchange and maintain the networks. The current strategies to source and use social capital, therefore, have been effective in the short term but could fail in the long term.

The situation suggests that the state and wider society should play a stronger, more supportive role. Before the pandemic, the state, with its anti-migration policies, had created difficulties for migrant workers working outside the villages. During the pandemic, the policies and the lack of support have increased their vulnerability. External support, including short-term relief and livelihood development with critical, strategic thinking and technologies and pro-migration policies in the long term, is necessary. The co-operation between the state and wider society
requires self-regulation, democracy and sustainable management of resources (Adger, 2003). Continuing monitoring of the pandemic and its impacts in the localities could help to identify and source timely support, given the known devastating impacts of the pandemic on other places in the world.

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