In Southeast Asia, the connection between migration and development can mean different things in varied national settings. For some countries, most notably the Philippines, exporting workers and receiving the financial remittances they send back home has been a longstanding and well-established source of foreign exchange, government revenue and livelihood support. In other places, such as Vietnam, emigrations have occurred in waves and have created an overseas diaspora that is increasingly supporting livelihoods and investments in the homeland. In several cases, however, such as Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore, international labor migration is predominantly an in-bound flow, with large (and sometimes undocumented) populations of workers who have moved across borders within the region. Here, low-wage and sometimes highly exploited migrant laborers have been central to the competitiveness and development of their host economies.

The past 20 years have seen a period of growing optimism about the potential of international migration, and the remittances that it generates, as a development strategy for the Global South (Sharma 2011; de Haas 2012). This optimism has grown in direct proportion to the volume of remittances flowing to developing countries, which reached an estimated US$431 billion in 2014 (Ratha et al. 2016). Financial flows in the form of remittances now far exceed foreign aid flows and have even reached a similar order of magnitude to foreign direct investment. Their potential as a source of poverty alleviation and development financing has been widely trumpeted. A range of benefits are pointed out by proponents who see them as: an efficient means of addressing household needs directly; a source of investment in productive activities in a variety of sectors; a countercyclical insurance against economic crisis and natural disaster; a potential source of skilled human capital in the form of returning migrants; and a boon to government revenues, foreign exchange earnings and national sovereign debt ratings (Maimbo and Ratha 2005; Bakker 2015).

There is also, however, a pessimistic view on the role of migration and remittances in development (Gamlen 2014). This view emphasizes the costs associated with predicating development on the departure of migrant labor. These costs include: the social consequences of separated families, especially for children with absent parents; the selectivity of access to migration opportunities, meaning that the poorest are unable to leave and inequalities may actually be exacerbated in sending areas; the loss of talent in specific technical job fields; and the disenfranchisement and exploitation sometimes experienced by migrant workers in overseas contexts who live without the rights and protections of full citizenship (Ahsan 2015).
This chapter will examine the basis for migration-development optimism or pessimism in the context of Southeast Asia, drawing upon empirical studies conducted in the region. The first section outlines the main channels of international migration and remittance flows in Southeast Asia, including both cross-border migrant flows within the region, and international migrations further afield. The second and third sections tackle, in turn, the evidence for positive and negative outcomes from across the region that are attributable to migration as a development strategy. The chapter concludes that the positive-negative binary usefully sets up the issues that need to be addressed in questioning migration as a strategy for enhancement of individual well-being and macro-economic prosperity, but actual outcomes are highly contingent and rather resistant to generalizations.

**Mapping migration and remittance flows in Southeast Asia**

Reliable data on migration and remittance flows in Southeast Asia are not easily available. Migrants are undoubtedly undercounted in almost every context, and in some places more than others. In part this is because some migrants may be living and working without legal documentation, but it is also due to inconsistencies in definitions and counting systems. Remittance data are also rife with inaccuracies, as money moves in a variety of unrecorded channels. The real flow of resources along migration corridors is therefore likely much higher than formal accounting suggests. In the case of the Philippines, for example, Ducanes shows how widely varying totals for remittances can be achieved depending on whether the data used are from local surveys (US$6.7 billion in 2006), the Central Bank of the Philippines (US$12.8 billion in the same year) or the World Bank (US$15.3 billion) (Ducanes 2015).

While the exact magnitude of migration flows and stocks, and remittances, may be uncertain, it is not difficult to identify several distinct migration corridors in Southeast Asia. Thailand has by far the largest number of non-citizens living within its borders, mainly arriving from its neighbors in mainland Southeast Asia. Of the 3.9 million non-Thais recorded in 2015, 96 percent came from Myanmar (1,978,348 people), Laos (969,267) and Cambodia (805,272) (UNDESA 2015). Another major magnet for migrants is Singapore. Among a total population of approximately 5.5 million, the city included over 2.5 million migrants in 2015, of whom just over 1.5 million were classified as non-residents. While many migrants in Singapore are from South Asia and China, large contingents also come from Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines. Malaysia is also a significant migrant destination, especially in East Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak) where Filipino and Indonesia migrants work in oil palm plantations and other resource industries. The Commission on Filipinos Overseas estimates that almost 800,000 Filipinos are living in Sabah, many of them undocumented (Commission on Filipinos Overseas 2014).

Source countries differ in the profile of their overseas populations. Among the 1.3 million Lao recorded as living overseas in 2015, almost 1 million are in Thailand, many having crossed the Mekong to work in low waged jobs. The majority of other overseas Lao are part of well-established immigrant communities in the United States (just over 200,000) and France (42,000), having fled wars, political unrest or persecution in the 1970s and 1980s. The profile of Cambodians overseas is very similar, and for the same set of reasons. Unlike Lao and Cambodians, Vietnam’s diaspora is predominantly located in wealthier countries. From a total of about 2.5 million, just over 2 million overseas Vietnamese are living in North America, Europe and Australia (UNDESA 2015).

Although its overseas migration remains low as a proportion of total population, Indonesia has deployed increasing numbers of overseas workers in the last decade. In 2005, 2.7 million Indonesians were living abroad, but by 2015 this figure had risen to 3.9 million. Of these, just
over 1 million are located in Malaysia, where linguistic and religious commonalities make integration into agricultural and resource industries relatively easy. A further 1.8 million are living as contract workers in the Middle East, with 1.3 million Indonesians in Saudi Arabia alone.

The Philippines is a unique case because of the long history, scale and geographical dispersal of its diasporic and contract worker populations. American colonial power (1898–1946) led to early twentieth century Filipino migrations to work in agricultural and resource industries in Hawaii and the West Coast of the United States. Enlistment in the US Navy also led to the emergence of large Filipino communities in California in particular (Espiritu 2003). Changes in immigration policies in the late 1960s in the United States created opportunities for large numbers of Filipinos to immigrate. Emigrants have also moved to other countries that have programs allowing permanent settlement, including the UK, Australia and Canada. The result, in 2015, was the presence of almost 2 million Filipino immigrants in the United States (in addition to a locally born Filipino-American population of about the same number), and over 500,000 in Canada.

In addition, the Philippines has an extensive and well-documented set of institutional structures for the deployment of temporary contract workers around the world (Rodriguez 2010; Tyner 2009). Well over 1 million temporary migrant workers are now deployed on new contracts every year. These deployments range from the plantation workers in Malaysia already mentioned, to domestic workers in Hong Kong and Singapore, to construction labor in the Middle East, to entertainers in hotels and cruise ships around the world, to crew members and officers aboard ocean-going freighters (Aguilar 2014; Fajardo 2011; McKay 2012). While there is a long history of nursing migration from the Philippines, Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) are also increasingly found in other professional, technical and managerial fields. In total, the UN recorded 5.3 million Filipino migrants worldwide in 2015, while the Philippine government estimates a total overseas population of 10.2 million (including, in this figure, permanently settled emigrants and, in some cases, their descendants too) (UNDESA 2015; Commission on Filipinos Overseas 2014).

These patterns of migration are reflected in the remittances returned to migrant-sending areas in Southeast Asia. Table 16.1 indicates the magnitude of remittances in 2014, and their importance relative to national economies as a whole. Because of the size of their diasporas in high income countries, the Philippines and Vietnam have by far the largest flows of remittances. In the case of the Philippines, the US$28 billion sent back in 2014 represents the third highest remittance flow globally after China and India, and accounted for one-tenth of the Philippine economy. Other countries, such as Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia have relatively little formal dependence on remittance incomes, although given the cross-border and often informal migrations occurring in those cases it is fair to assume that far more money crosses the border than is officially recorded.

It is important to note, however, that studies of the migration-development nexus can all too easily be reduced to the mapping of these kinds of flows. This can lead to a lack of reflection on who migrants are, why they move, the circumstances in which they live, and what development might mean for them and for their communities. Several points can be made here. First, migrants’ experiences are importantly shaped by class, gender, ethnic and religious identities and other axes of difference. Gender, in particular, defines migrations, and can itself be redefined in the process of mobility. The jobs that migrants go to are usually deeply marked as masculine or feminine (domestic maid, nurse, construction worker, seafarer, etc.), but the very act of migration can also redefine the performance of gender roles, both abroad and back at home (Belanger and Linh 2011; Lukasiewicz 2011; Silvey 2006).
Migration, development and remittances

### Table 16.1 Migration and remittances in Southeast Asia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Migrants living overseas in 2015 (UNDESA figures)</th>
<th>Overseas population as % of domestic population</th>
<th>2014 migrant remittance inflows (US$millions)</th>
<th>Remittances as a share of GDP in 2014</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>5,316,320</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>28,403</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>2,558,678</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>12,000</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timor-Leste</td>
<td>37,311</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>1,187,142</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>382</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>854,327</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>5,655</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>3,876,739</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>8,551</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laos</td>
<td>1,345,075</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>1,835,252</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>1,565</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myanmar</td>
<td>2,881,797</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brunei Darussalam</td>
<td>46,237</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>313,884</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: UNDESA 2015

A second point is that migrants move with varying degrees of coercion and live with differing kinds of (non-)citizenship status in their place of work or settlement. The circumstances of Burmese migrants working in slave-like conditions on Thai fishing boats has, for example, been the subject of recent media scrutiny (Hodal 2016). But equally, portrayals of human trafficking can sometimes be misleading. Parreñas, for example, notes that in 2004 the US State Department declared Filipina hostesses in Japan to be the world’s largest group of sex-trafficked individuals, but this was based on assumptions about the type of work they were performing (Parreñas 2011). Parreñas argues that, in reality, such women live in a paradoxical position of ‘indentured mobility’ with elements of both personal freedom and subjugation.

Third, it is important to think about development in a broader sense than the financial flows that contribute to the mainstream, monetized and countable economy. For better or worse, the experience of migration is often transformational for both individual migrants and for their family members. These changes in social relations and cultural meanings often require a detailed and qualitative understanding of the implications of migration. Indeed, all of these considerations—from gender identities, to citizenship status and working conditions, to the non-economic dimensions of development—mean that it is important to pay attention to the lived experiences of migrants and not just the quantifiable dimensions of the phenomenon they represent.

**Evidence for migration-development optimism in Southeast Asia**

Optimism about the positive developmental role of migration is, not surprisingly, articulated primarily by international financial institutions and national governments. Nevertheless, there are also qualitative studies based on personal experiences and ethnographic research that speak to positive gains.

**National economic growth**

A key argument of migration-development optimists is that remittances boost government revenues, foreign exchange earnings and national sovereign debt ratings. Increased revenues (through visa and passport fees, clearance certificates, placement fees, taxes on incomes and
expenditures. etc.) are then used as part of a government’s resources to provide public goods and services. Remittance flows are also a source in increased aggregate demand in the domestic economy, thereby increasing overall wealth, and a source of foreign exchange earnings, which allow imports. Economic analyses have found these connections to hold true, but a given increase in remittances does not translate directly into a commensurate rate of growth in the national economy. Across a range of countries, the Asian Development Bank has found that a small but generally positive correlation exists between remittances and overall growth in the developing economies of Asia (Vargas-Silva et al. 2009). They suggest that a 10 percent increase in overseas workers’ remittances translates into approximately 2 percent of real GDP growth per capita.

While these figures are aggregated at the national scale, there is also evidence of remittances driving growth even more intensively at smaller, urban scales. In the Philippines, for example, it is estimated that 30 percent of all remittances are spent on real estate, and almost half of all residential construction in recent years has been concentrated in and around Manila (Cardenas 2014). Remittance dollars have therefore driven a localized form of economic growth in the national capital.

**Poverty reduction and welfare gains**

Perhaps the strongest argument laid out by remittance optimists is that a direct flow of funds to households provides an efficient and incorruptible channel to reduce poverty and increase household incomes and well-being. The World Bank’s lead economist on migration and development issues, Dilip Ratha, argues that remittances constitute “a powerful anti-poverty force in developing countries” and that “the presence of remittance income in a household strongly and significantly corresponds with positive health outcomes, especially for children” (Ratha 2013, 4, 5).

In Vietnam, Pfau and Giang used the Vietnam Household Living Standards Survey to show that by 2004, 7.3 percent of Vietnamese households were receiving international remittances, almost two-thirds of them coming from North America (Pfau and Giang 2009). Using data from four installments of the survey from 1992 to 2004, they found a significant role for remittances in reducing the incidence of poverty, and even a slight effect in reducing income inequality (perhaps because the increased income from remittances is offset by the greater likelihood that the recipient household head will not be participating in the waged labor force).

In the Philippines, Ducanes provides perhaps the most rigorous answer to the question of how remittances can impact poverty and inequality (Ducanes 2015). Using several detailed surveys, he shows that 24 percent of all households in 2006 had some contribution coming from abroad, and 7 percent of households had at least one Overseas Filipino Worker. Ducanes argues that households who send a migrant worker overseas rapidly increase their total incomes and their expenditures on food, clothing, education, real estate, medical care and recreation. He also finds a spillover effect among other households, as contributions and gifts are extended to those without a migrant worker. This does, however, still leave open the question of whether the family is uplifted economically in the long term, and whether there are significant economy-wide effects. Ducanes concludes that:

At least in the short term and for overseas workers’ own households, overseas labor migration confers many economic benefits (e.g., increased income and spending, reduced poverty), which appear to far outstrip its costs (e.g., possibly higher overall inequality). All else being equal, average household economic welfare in the country would almost certainly be lower in the absence of migration of labor overseas.

(Ducanes 2015, 103)
Overall, Ducanes finds that a household with an overseas worker is three to six times more likely to escape poverty, depending on the statistical technique used. He also points out, however, that this should not be taken as an argument in favor of governments actively promoting migration as a development strategy, because overseas migrants generally come from households that were already better-off (a point we will return to later). Ducanes also notes that we should expect the poverty reduction impact of migration to be significantly higher in cases where the poor are more likely to be migrating – as in the case of cross-border migration to Thailand from Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos.

**Capital for productive activities**

The role of remittances in providing capital for investment in new productive activities has been a matter of debate for some time. Some research suggests that remittances are generally used for consumption items, although the expenditures on education and healthcare noted above can be seen as investment in human capital. There are, however, cases where remittance funds do provide capital for new or expanded productive enterprises at the household scale. In Vietnam, the Central Bank estimates that about 70 percent of remittance inflows to Ho Chi Minh City went into production and business investment, and 22 percent to the real estate sector (Ratha et al. 2016).

In the Philippines Lukasiewicz examines the ways in which female spouses deploy their husbands’ remittances in the expansion of agricultural holdings (Lukasiewicz 2011). Using research from the town of Lucban, in Quezon Province, he shows how the purchase of expanded landholdings for coconut trees or the construction of a pig-raising enterprise represent both strategic investments and a renegotiation of women’s roles as they become both managers of new farming enterprises and employers of agricultural laborers. In earlier research from the 1990s in the northern Philippines, Deirdre McKay described a situation in which women from her case study village in Ifugao Province were drawn into international contract labor migration (primarily as domestic workers in Hong Kong and Singapore), and so capital became available to purchase both land and crop inputs. This contributed to a shift away from rice cultivation and toward bean gardens (McKay 2005; McKay 2003).

Aside from investment in mainstream enterprises, migration and remittance flows have also opened up the possibility of alternative economic practices that might be financed through collective remittances. A pioneer in this effort has been Unlad Kabayan Migrant Services Foundation Inc. in the Philippines, a social economy NGO that originated with a group of domestic workers in Hong Kong. By collectively saving, they were able to provide access to a rotating capital fund for their own enterprises back home in the Philippines, or to facilitate social entrepreneurship and pro-poor local economic growth (Gibson et al. 2010). J.K. Gibson-Graham describes some of the examples that emerged, including food processing enterprises using local crops, a transportation cooperative, and a group making and renting out ceremonial garments for school graduations and weddings (Gibson-Graham 2005).

**Insurance against economic crisis and natural disaster**

Remittances have been widely promoted as a form of insurance against income loss or natural disaster in poor and rural areas of the Global South (Ratha 2007). Where possible, relatives overseas will often increase their support if family members back home are facing sudden difficulties because of unemployment, emergency medical expenses, crop losses or environmental disasters.
such as typhoons, drought or flooding. This will both help to maintain income levels for recipient households and will prevent them from having to sell off productive assets (such as land or livestock) that are important for future income. There is some evidence that remittances do play this kind of insurance role. In one study from the Philippines, Yang and Choi used localized meteorological and income data to examine whether remittances seem to replace household incomes when rainfall ‘shocks’ (that is, much more or much less than usual) cause a disruption (Yang and Choi 2007). They found that when household incomes decline, roughly 60 percent of the shortfall is replaced by remittance inflows in those households that have a relative overseas.

Environmentally induced migration may not, however, be just a diversification of risk in anticipation of future crises; it may also be a way of coping with present crises. In Cambodia, Bylander shows how rural households in Chanleas Dai commune, Siem Reap Province, responded to both the routinization of migrant labor opportunities in Thailand, and increasing incidence of floods and droughts after the mid-2000s (Bylander 2015). Migration became a necessary coping strategy and not just an insurance against environmental risks in agricultural production. In some cases, agricultural production was even abandoned or scaled back in order to focus on the more secure income available from migrant work across the border. As Bylander notes “rather than being used to mediate the risk of investing at home, in Chanleas Dai migration is primarily understood as an opportunity to replace investment at home” (2015, 144; emphasis in original).

Returnees with enhanced human capital

Migration and development optimists suggest that migrants may develop skills overseas that can then enhance productivity when they return home. Montefrio et al. (2014) provide an example in the form of Filipino workers from the island of Palawan who are employed in the oil palm plantations of Sabah (Malaysia). Located less than 500 km by ferry from Sabah, the Southern municipalities of Palawan have been a major source for labor in the plantations and a steady circular flow has been established (much of it undocumented). These workers have brought home knowledge of the sector and the global demand that it satisfies, as well as an understanding of the technical requirements of oil palm cultivation and processing. This knowledge transfer appears to be impacting land use decisions back in Palawan – not just in terms of practical know-how, but also in terms of ‘social remittances’ that affect attitudes toward what constitutes ‘development’ (Montefrio et al. 2014). Migrants to Sabah, and those who know them, link ideas of prosperity, progress, productivity, improvement and development to oil palm production, thereby laying the discursive groundwork for such developments in Palawan. While oil palm in Palawan is still on a small scale compared to other sites in Malaysia and Indonesia, it has grown rapidly. After the first seedlings were planted in 2007, around 3,600 hectares were harvested by 2011, with licenses issued for a further 15,500 hectares (Larsen et al. 2014). This represents around 99 percent of the cultivable agricultural land in the southern municipalities of the island, where the development is concentrated.

In many cases, however, the promise of a returning skilled workforce is not realized. This may be because there is simply no context in which to apply the skills back home. Learning how to use an advanced piece of medical machinery while working in a Saudi Arabian hospital doesn’t help if no such machinery is installed in rural or health facilities in Indonesia. It is also important to remember that overseas migrants may be working in jobs that are below, or unrelated to, their level of professional training and so they are more likely to lose skills than to gain them while overseas – the engineering graduate who works as a laborer on a construction project in the Middle East, for example, may have even fewer updated skills when he returns home.
Migrant labor and host country development

Although seldom noted by migration and development optimists, the presence of migrant workers is undoubtedly good for profitability, competitiveness and conventional measures of economic growth in the destinations where they work. In all Southeast Asian contexts where migrant laborers are used in large numbers, they are paid less than locals would work for, are concentrated in undesirable and sometimes dangerous work, and are disenfranchised from some basic labor and citizenship rights due to their temporary status. The result is a cheap, malleable and dispensable workforce that is the basis for competitive production in a global capitalist system.

Sai Latt (2011) provides an example in the case of Northern Thailand, where very large numbers of Burmese migrant workers (especially from Shan ethnic minorities) provide labor for intensive agricultural operations in Royal Development Projects. These projects are designed to be showcases for enlightened agricultural practices and have been developed since the 1960s to replace opium cultivation with cash crops as a source of livelihood for villagers. Hmong villages in the area have, however, generally used Shan migrant workers as their farm labor. These workers have never been recognized legally as persons displaced by conflict and/or persecution in Burma/Myanmar and so have existed in a precarious state of non-citizenship. Such precariousness has left them with the threat of periodic fines or deportation by Thai authorities always hanging over them. Their employers discursively represent them as ‘hardworking,’ ‘strong’ and ‘well-suited’ to agricultural work, but it is precisely because of their precarious status that they are forced to become hardworking and compliant. As Latt notes, these are not innate characteristics, but “special qualities that the Shan came to embody and perform in order to survive” (Latt 2011, 542; emphasis in original). Without these disenfranchised and discursively marginalized migrant workers, cash crops could not be cultivated in Northern Thailand with the same degree of labor intensity and cost competitiveness.

This example from Thailand emphasizes the point that Southeast Asia is a complex mix of sources and destinations for labor migrants. While migration and development can be assessed in the context of sending countries and the remittances they receive, migration is also a fundamental part of the developmental model of host contexts as well. In many ways, the case for optimism with regard to migration as a development strategy for sending countries can only exist if a blind eye is turned toward the exploitation and disenfranchisement faced by many migrant workers. This brings us to the pessimistic perspective on the migration-development nexus.

The case for pessimism

In recent years a growing body of research has highlighted the negative dimensions of migration as a development strategy. In some cases negative outcomes are the product of individual circumstances. A ‘failed migration’ due to unscrupulous recruiters, corrupt government officials or abusive employers can lead to an early return or a loss of any financial gains made through overseas earnings. Nicole Constable describes these kinds of circumstances for Indonesian and Filipino workers in Hong Kong (Constable 2015). This can be disastrous for the migrant and their family. But there are also wider systemic factors that support a negative view of migration/remittances and their developmental effects.

Unequal access to migration, and exacerbated inequalities

While migration can lead to dramatic upward mobility for some, there remains the important question of who gets to take advantage of such an opportunity. In many contexts, migration is
an expensive undertaking, with recruitment agency fees, air tickets and other costs adding up to
many times the average annual income in sending areas. Thus, while cross border undocumented
migrations (such as Cambodian, Lao and Burmese in Thailand) might be relatively accessible to
those with few resources and low levels of education, the more formalized channels of migration
are likely to be accessible to select individuals and households only.

Using the Vietnam Household Living Standards Survey cited earlier, Nguyen and Nguyen
used 2006 and 2008 data to show that international remittances tend to accrue to the wealthi-
est segments of society (Nguyen and Nguyen 2015). While 12.7 percent of the richest quin-
tile of Vietnamese households received international remittances in 2008, only 2.0 percent of
the poorest quintile were recipients. Although there may be some circularity to this argument
(remittance income may be what propelled households into the upper quintile in the first place),
it is also generally the case that international migration, especially when it involves more than
crossing a land border, is the preserve of those who already have access to resources.

Access to migration may also be selective in other ways. In most cases, it is undertaken by
those in younger age cohorts. Roy Huijsmans, for example, shows that over 70 percent of Lao
international migrants are between 15 and 25 years old (Huijsmans 2014). Access to opportuni-
ties may also be highly gendered, reflecting the segmentation of specific sectors in the global
labor market, and in some cases there has been a distinctive feminization of migration flows
over time. In the case of Indonesia, for example, around 48 percent of formally recorded inter-
national migrant workers were women in 1988, but by 2009 this had increased to 83 percent
(Randolph 2015). Finally, migrants tend to be drawn unevenly from different parts of a source
country. In the Philippines, for example, the Ilocos region of Northern Luzon accounted for
just 5.5 percent the national population in 2010, but 9.5 percent of all overseas Filipino workers
(POEA 2015). In each of these ways, then, migration is a pathway to upward mobility that is
highly selective.

**Brain drain and labor market impacts**

Aside from the question of who has the opportunity to leave, migration on a large scale has an
impact on the supply of labor in the country of origin. Given the size of its out–migration flows,
this has been most clearly an issue in the Philippines. In 2014, over 1.8 million OFWs were
deployed. Of the 487,176 within that number who were new deployments to land-based jobs
(i.e., excluding seafarers), over 50,000 were working in professional and technical fields, includ-
ing almost 20,000 nurses (POEA 2015). It is also important to note that many of those leaving
have training and professional or technical skills that will not be used during their deployment.
Filipino migrants generally represent the more educated segments of Philippine society. Among
all overseas workers deployed in 2007, for example, 35 percent were college graduates, compared
with just 14 percent of the domestic workforce (Ducanes 2015).

A key question has been whether the loss of talent through migration has affected the Philip-
pine economy. This is difficult to answer because many of these graduates had trained specifically
in fields such as nursing with the intention of working overseas. In turn, training institutions
in fields with high global demand produce far more graduates than the Philippine labor mar-
et can absorb. Hence it is not so much their loss to the local labor market that is at stake, but
rather their loss to other fields of study and employment that might have fostered productivity
and innovation. An exception is nursing, where local shortages of skilled and experienced staff
have been a significant issue. Numerous studies have pointed to the understaffing of Philippine
hospitals and clinics, and the problems of having a relatively inexperienced medical staff, when
the overwhelming propensity of healthcare workers is to migrate overseas (Kelly and D’Addario 2008; Lorenzo et al. 2007).

**Migrant working conditions**

In many contexts, migrant workers face abuse because of their disenfranchisement from the rights and protections that are, at least nominally, extended to citizens. The threat of deportation always hangs over a migrant worker, whether they are living in a host country legally or not. These vulnerabilities are especially accentuated when young women are working in domestic settings where contractual obligations are only vaguely observed, where privacy may be compromised, and where the possibilities of physical, sexual or emotional abuse are heightened.

Returning to the case of Indonesian domestic workers in Saudi Arabia, Nurchayati (2011) notes that isolation in the homes of employers can expose women to economic exploitation, physical abuse and sexual harassment, while at the same time making it hard to seek help from police or other authorities. At the same time, Nurchayati points out that the Indonesian women she interviewed were not simply passive victims. They were also, in some instances, able to resist abusive employers, negotiate the terms of their relationship and find ways of coping with the circumstances in which they found themselves. In other words, even in the most exploitative of situations, female migrant workers are not without some degree of agency (Nurchayati 2011).

**The consequences of family separation**

When migrants leave their families and communities there are emotional costs associated with separation, loneliness and homesickness. Parents in particular must somehow reconcile a contradiction in which they do their best to provide materially for their children and yet must be separated from them in order to satisfy that imperative. There are also potential long-term consequences for children in terms of their social and educational development – impacts that are often overlooked when migration is advocated as a means toward economic development (Cortes 2015; Graham and Jordan 2011; Hoang et al. 2015; Parreñas 2001, 2005).

In cases where children may eventually join a parent overseas, the problems created by separation may not be resolved through reunification. For example, Filipino migrants who arrive in Canada under the Live-In Caregiver Program can, after gaining permanent residency, sponsor their family members to join them. Reconstituting the family in a new place is, however, far from unproblematic. Children in particular have to deal with the process of reacquainting themselves with a parent they may only have known at a distance for many years, and the experience of downward mobility from a remittance-supported middle class lifestyle in the Philippines to a new family circumstance of precarious and low paid employment in Canada. Several studies have suggested that anomalously low achievement levels among Filipino youth in terms of post-secondary pathways is a product of this difficult transition (Farrales and Pratt 2012; Kelly 2014; Pratt 2012; Pratt 2008).

Migration can, nevertheless, be emancipatory. Whether separation from a family unit is painful or liberating depends on the context. For young women in particular, migration may carry with it the possibility of independent travel, escape from the strictures of gendered and generational discipline at home, and the chance to earn an independent income and enjoy the pleasures of independent consumption. As Rachel Silvey notes in the case of Indonesian women who migrate to work in Saudi Arabia, they may embody many contradictory positions, including: “global consumers, devoted mothers, victimized laborers, pious pilgrims and heroines of local
and national development” (Silvey 2006). Similarly, studies from Vietnam point to the elevated status within families of daughters who migrate and send home remittances (Belanger and Linh 2011).

**Conclusion**

Clearly there is evidence for both positive and negative developmental outcomes from migration in Southeast Asia. What is clear, however, is that some critical questions need to be asked before migration is embraced as a strategy for enhancing well-being and livelihoods in sending areas. First, although migrant remittances might boost economic growth and aggregate welfare, it is important to ask who has access to migration opportunities and how widely its benefits are distributed. Second, although migrants may return with skills and capital to invest in new economic activities, we should also be thinking of the ‘brain drain’ that skilled migrants represent, the distortions that are created in ‘home’ labor markets, and the consequences of migration for the socialization and psychological well-being of left-behind children. Third, while migration can represent a journey of personal liberation and free agency, it can equally be an experience of abuse, exploitation and coercion.

**References**


Migration, development and remittances


