

BEYOND WAGES

SURVEY ON KEY RETENTION FACTORS FROM CONSTRUCTION WORKERS IN THAILAND



ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

Established in 2002, Baan Dek Foundation (BDF) is a not-for-profit, non-governmental organization with the mission to improve the fundamental well-being of vulnerable children living in urban slums and construction camps by supporting their immediate needs, empowering their families and communities through a peer-to-peer approach, and creating sustainable change in the Thai construction sector. Through partnerships and win-win collaboration with key stakeholders in the Property and Construction Sector, BDF aims to contribute to improving access to services for the estimated 60,000 children connected to the construction sector in Thailand.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Construction workers connected to the construction sector in Thailand frequently relocate from one project to another with their children and live in construction camps. The living conditions in those workers' camps can present various challenges. Therefore their access to essential public services is hampered by their continuous relocation and other challenges, such as a lack of information or Thai language proficiency. As a result, many of these children live in unsuitable conditions, are often out of school, and lack access to social protection, healthcare, and social services.

BDF has extensively provided direct support to construction workers and their children in camps to access essential services, with most groundwork taking place in Chiang Mai. To tackle this issue on a larger and sustainable scale, BDF launched the Building Social Impact (BSI) Initiative in 2022. The BSI Initiative is a collaborative effort, powered by Baan Dek Foundation and supported by UNICEF and Thai construction leaders, to improve the living conditions and access to services for workers and their children living in construction camps across Thailand. The BSI Initiative assists developers

and construction companies by offering free training and a toolkit that includes Guidelines and a Self-Assessment Tool. These resources are based on the BSI Framework for Action, which comprises 12 recommendations for companies to implement improvements in four key areas within construction camps.

By implementing the Framework for Action, contractors and developers stand to generate a positive impact both for their business and workers and their families in their supply chain. The increasing attention to sustainability and human rights in Thailand, the Asia-Pacific region and beyond, have greatly increased the stakes for businesses in terms of exposure to reputational and legal risk. By identifying, addressing and mitigating human rights risks in supply chains, businesses can proactively avoid public relations fallout, reputational damage and litigation. Being able to attract and retain workers is an oftcited business benefit of respecting human rights, as such this survey aims to test assumptions concerning the relationship between business' respect for worker welfare and retention.

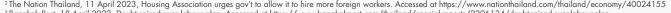


LABOUR SHORTAGE IN THAI CONSTRUCTION

Procurement and retention of a migrant workforce is a challenge well acknowledged by the Thai construction sector. The Federation of Thai Industries (FTI) estimates that Thailand is short of 700,000 workers, with the construction sector being one of the most affected. The FTI called on the Ministry of Labor to ease restrictions for importing labor from neighboring countries as well as to pardon employers for hiring irregular workers. 1 Similarly, the Home Builders Association of Thailand called on the government to lessen requirements for importing workers to work in construction in order to support the recovery of the sector.² The political situation in Myanmar prevented Thailand from importing Burmese workers since the beginning of COVID, and only

in early 2023 has the system reopened; however, it has been constrained by the ongoing civil war. Meanwhile, the MoU system with Cambodia and Laos does not adequately address the current labor shortage, especially for construction.3 This situation, combined with the exodus of workers who were forced to leave Thailand, combined with the exodus of workers who had to leave Thailand during COVID, means that construction companies have little choice but to make do with the current stock of migrant workers currently in Thailand and make efforts to attract and retain them in order to complete projects on time as well as save on training costs associated with hiring new workers.

¹ National News Bureau of Thailand, 07 March 2022, FTI says Thailand faces a 700,000 labor shortage. Accessed at https://thainews.prd.go.th/en/news/detail/TCATG220307172329297 ² The Nation Thailand, 11 April 2023, Housing Association urges gov't to allow it to hire more foreign workers. Accessed at https://www.nationthailand.com/thailand/economy/40024155 ³ Bangkok Post, 18 April 2022, Doubt raised over labour plan. Accessed at https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/special-reports/2296134/doubt-raised-over-labour-plan





SURVEY OBJECTIVE

This short survey was conducted to determine what are the most important factors for migrant workers living in construction camps when it comes to choosing to remain with the same company (principal construction contractor/owner of the camp). This objective serves to better understand the workers' perspectives and the extent to which different aspects of their living and working conditions influence their decision-making to remain in camps owned by the principal contractor.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

Carrying out a worker retention survey in a highly subcontracted and informal sector presents several challenges as there is a lack of knowledge about the extent of information workers have about the conditions of camps before they arrive, as well as the ease or difficulty they have in changing employers, companies or subcontractors. This survey was therefore conducted under the assumption that workers are free to change employers, subcontractors and principal contractors when they are unsatisfied with either living or working conditions. Secondary data was included in the survey to support the analysis of the findings.



METHODOLOGY

During February and March 2023, a total of 179 migrant workers were interviewed across 10 construction camps in four provinces - Bangkok, Chonburi, Nonthaburi and Chiang Mai. The survey was field tested and further refined. Workers were surveyed using BDF's Worker Retention Survey Questionnaire. The questionnaire was split into four main areas: 1) living arrangements, 2) worker welfare, 3) benefits for workers, and 4) benefits for children. Within each of these areas, workers are asked to rate different aspects according to what they find the most important for them to stay with a construction company. The questionnaire also asked workers about the two principal reasons why they "left" the previous principal contractor and the two main reasons for "staying" with the current principal contractor.

Sample sizes were calculated using a 70 percent confidence level and a five percent margin of error. Due to the significant range in population size between the camps in Bangkok, Nonthaburi and Chonburi, the sampling sizes ranged from three percent to 27 percent. In Chiang Mai, where camps are much smaller in terms of population, the sampling sizes ranged from 13 percent to 50 percent with a confidence level of 80 percent. For both locations, convenience sampling was used to target sample participants. In Chiang Mai, snowball sampling was also used to leverage BDF's peer network in camps.⁴ For the Bangkok area, workers who could speak a workable level of Thai were selected; in case of low language proficiency, a bilingual worker would support interpretation. Interviews which required interpretation were given extra scrutiny in the data-cleaning process.

BDF staff from Bangkok and Chiang Mai carried out the surveys directly with workers in camps as well as over the phone. For Bangkok staff there were challenges with conducting the survey with Myanmar workers due to their limited Thai language skills. However, this did not have a significant impact on the data collection, as the majority of workers were from Cambodia. The use of secondary data sources were employed to confirm the findings of the primary data and strengthen the analysis of this report.

⁴BDF's program on Community Empowerment in Chiang Mai is based on a Peer-to-Peer model whereby BDF social workers recruit and train community members as 'Peer Educators" to support the dissemination of knowledge on migrant's rights in Thailand and access to public services



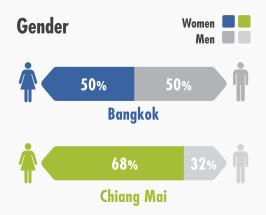




KEY FINDINGS

Due to the significant differences in the level of formality in the camps in and surrounding Bangkok and those camps in Chiang Mai, the findings are segregated between the two regional areas.

BANGKOK, NONTHABURI AND CHONBURI DEMOGRAPHICS

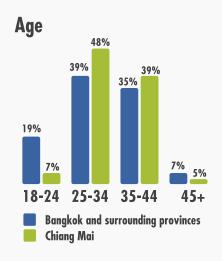


Of the 136 workers interviewed, 68 percent (n=93) were from Cambodia and 32 percent (n=43) were from Myanmar. An even gender split was achieved due to the fact that women typically make up 40 percent or less of the construction labor force. The most common age groups are 25-34 years-old (39 percent) and 34-45 (35 percent), followed by 18-24 (19 percent).

Worker's Parental Status



Over 93 percent of workers interviewed were employed by a subcontractor rather than directly by the principal contractor. This validates findings from previous research (ILO, 2016), which found extensive layers of subcontracting in the Thai construction sector.



In terms of children accompanying workers, 18 percent of workers (n=24) interviewed did not have any children. Of all parents (n=112), 84 percent have children, of those, 54 percent had at least one or more children with them in the camp and a further 46 percent had none of their children with them. Similar results were found with BDF's previous research on family unity in construction for camps situated in and around Bangkok.

WORKER RETENTION FACTORS

LIVING ARRANGEMENTS AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Key drivers for workers in terms of living and housing conditions ranked in order of importance

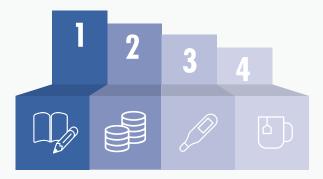


Clean and safe living conditions
 Subsidised living costs like rent and utility bills

In terms of living arrangements, workers placed equal value on the cleanliness of the camp as well as company support for subsidized living expenses. While construction companies rent the land and provide housing for workers, there is no regulatory oversight of the conditions of the housing. This leaves the quality of the housing to the discretion of the principal contractor. Maintaining a clean, safe, and well-managed camp is not only a cost-effective investment for companies, it also reduces the likelihood of harassment or gender-based violence, prevents communicable disease outbreaks, and promotes better waste management, all of which have indirect benefits.

WORKER RIGHTS

Key drivers for workers in terms of rights and access ranked in order of importance



- 1. Registration support
- 2. Payments on time
- 3. No wage deduction during sickness
- 4. Breaks for sufficient resting

Related to worker welfare, participants placed the greatest value on company support for obtaining and updating necessary documentation for gaining and sustaining their legal status. Existing research on labor migration in Thailand has indicated that gaining and maintaining legal status for migrant workers is a significant challenge, especially in construction where subcontracting obscures employers' responsibilities. Recently a report from the Migrant Working Group (2022) examining the impacts of Thailand's amnesty program for migrant workers found that 93 percent of workers needed support completing the registration process, with 46 percent of those relying on their employers. The study also found that 82 percent of those supported by employers were overcharged in the process and 81 percent fell into debt as a result.

Taking these results into account, construction companies and workers alike benefit from having greater support in obtaining and maintaining legal status. Construction companies would be better placed to attract and retain migrant workers while ensuring adherence to the law throughout their labor supply chains, thereby future-proofing themselves against corruption and reputational damage. Likewise, workers would be better protected by the law and gain easier access to social protection systems in Thailand.

In terms of benefits for workers, participants highly rated support for going to either the health center or hospital with transportation and/or language support. This was followed closely by the company providing information on social security and Migration Health Insurance Scheme (MHIS) entitlements. Previous internal surveys conducted by BDF on determining barriers to accessing healthcare found that, besides lacking healthcare coverage or knowledge of the



BENEFITS FOR WORKERS

Key drivers for workers in terms of well-being and welfare needs ranked in order of importance



- Language translation and transportation support for hospital visits
- 2. Access to Information on MHIS and social security
- 3. Continued job opportunities

extent of coverage, workers face language barriers as well as difficulties in traveling to either their assigned hospital or nearest health center. The Thailand Social Protection Diagnostic Review (2022), developed by the UN, found that the lack of available information on entitlements poses a significant barrier for migrant workers to access social protection systems. Internal surveys conducted by BDF have also found similar findings.

Fortunately for construction companies, providing information on healthcare coverage, supporting transport to the nearest hospital or health center, and supporting workers with communicating with service providers are easy and low-cost interventions.

Through BDF's BSI Initiative, construction companies can receive tools and resources, training and support on how to best accommodate the needs of migrant workers and their families and how camp management staff can facilitate better access to public services.

BENEFITS FOR CHILDREN

Key drivers for workers in terms of benefits for children ranked in order of importance



- 1. Children to stay in camps
- 2. School transport and enrollment
- 3. Access to health
- 4. Daycare facilities

Regarding benefits for children, allowing children to stay in the camp was rated the highest, followed by the company providing information on children's health insurance, installing daycare facilities and finally supporting enrollment and transport for school respectively. Most workers (parents or non-parents) valued allowing children to reside in the camp slightly more than the other factors. Family-based migration has been a trend in the Thai construction sector since the early 90s. Therefore, construction



companies that formally accept and adapt to this will be better placed to attract and maintain their migrant labor workforce. Under the Child Rights and Business Principles (CRBPs), businesses have a responsibility to respect children's rights and commit to supporting children's rights. Specifically under Principle 3 of the CRBPs, businesses "should provide decent working conditions that also support workers, both women and men, in their roles as caregivers". This means giving due consideration to payment of a living wage, length and flexibility of working hours, provisions for pregnant and breastfeeding women as well as the need for parental leave. As children also live in the camps, this also includes ensuring that workers' camps are child-friendly and promote the rights of the child, including their access to education and healthcare.

Participants were also asked to share two main reasons for leaving their previous contractor and the two main reasons for staying with the current contractor. Compared with the previous questions, these questions were open.

In terms of staying with their current contractor, the majority of workers referenced both clean and safe living conditions alongside timely wage payments. Other factors, such as following family members, sub-contractors, or the company supporting worker

rights were mentioned but less frequently.

In terms of why workers left their previous contractor, understandably the most common reason cited was lack of available work. This was, however, followed by wages not being paid on time.

With the timely payment of wages being rated so high, as well as being the second most cited reason for leaving a company, it can be inferred that this may be a common challenge that workers face in construction. Indeed, research has shown that as a result of heavy subcontracting and deliverable-based payment agreements, late payments to the lowest tier of the supply chain is a common challenge in the construction sector. Late wage payments can have a catastrophic impact on the socioeconomic well-being of a migrant worker family. A previous internal BDF survey found that over 63 percent of workers were in debt, with almost half having over THB 100,000 in debt. The financial precarity that migrant construction workers face can be greatly compounded by late wage payments.

Construction companies willing to improve worker retention should therefore ensure that mechanisms are in place to safeguard timely payments, especially for workers under subcontractors. Such an intervention could have significant benefits in terms of retaining migrant labor and ensuring that migrant workers are

not forced into negative coping mechanisms such as borrowing money to pay off debt which can lead to debt bondage.

The final section of the survey asked participants to rate the importance of the four areas (living arrangements, worker welfare, benefits for workers and benefits for children). Worker welfare received the highest ranking, with the other three areas receiving virtually equal consideration. While it is understandable that timely wage payment is a major determinant for workers choosing to stay or leave the current company, this particular finding demonstrates workers' expectations that the principal contractor is compliant with legal obligations. While compliance with labor law may be seen as a constraint by businesses, besides the obvious benefits of reducing legal risk, businesses should be aware that ensuring that labor suppliers observe the law can also improve the retention of migrant labor.

KEY FINDINGS

Overall areas of rights, benets and living arrangements ranked in order of value to workers



- 1. Worker rights
- 2. Benefits for children
- 3. Benefits for workers
- 4. Living arrangement





CHIANG MAI DEMOGRAPHICS

Due to the smaller sizes of construction camps in Chiang Mai, the average sample size was 26 percent of the camp population, with 95 percent of whom are from Myanmar. While this survey did not collect data on ethnicity, BDF's existing data on camps in Chiang Mai suggests that the vast majority of those workers are Tai Yai. Almost 68 percent of participants were women, with men making up the remaining 32 percent. Just about (five percent) were between the ages of (45+ years-old), almost half (49 percent) were between the ages of 25-34, while those between 35-44 comprised 39 percent; and around 7 percent were between 18-24.

In striking contrast with Bangkok and its surrounding provinces, the majority of workers interviewed in Chiang Mai were directly employed by the construction company. This is likely due to a range of factors including the much smaller scale of construction projects taking place in Chiang Mai, where projects are often villa estates and low-rise condos as opposed to Bangkok where there is a greater concentration of large projects for high-rises, commercial centers and infrastructure.

Consistent with the findings from BDF's Family Unity report, migrant worker families in Chiang Mai are much more likely to both have children and be together. Of all respondents, almost 93 percent of workers have children, of those, 84 percent (n=32) of participants stated they had all their children with them, and a further 16 percent had at least one child (n=6) with them in the camp. There were no parents who did not have at least one child with them. As stated in the Family Unity report, this is likely due to the migration pattern of Tai Yai workers who plan to settle for a longer period of time in Thailand to avoid the long-running conflict in Shan state, making them much more likely to either bring their children or keep those who are born in Thailand with them as opposed to sending them to Myanmar.

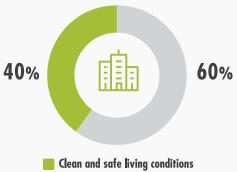




KER RETENTION FACTORS

LIVING ARRANGEMENTS AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Key drivers for workers in terms of living and housing conditions ranked in order of importance



Subsidised living costs like rent and utility bills

In terms of living arrangements, workers in Chiang Mai demonstrated a greater preference for the company subsidizing living costs such as rent and utility bills than for camps to have good, clean and safe conditions. This is particularly interesting given that from BDF's experience, the conditions of camps in Chiang Mai are much lower than those in Bangkok. This may be due to the fact that since the living arrangements in Chiang Mai are typically highly informal. In some cases, workers are expected to build their own homes from scrap materials. They have little expectation from the company in this aspect and would rather receive support in subsidized living expenses.

WORKER RIGHTS

Key drivers for workers in terms of rights and access ranked in order of importance



- 1. Payments on time
- 3. Registration support
- 2. No wage deduction during sickness 4. Breaks for sufficient resting

Regarding workers' welfare, workers placed the greatest value on timely wage payments, followed closely by not having wages deducted when workers are sick. Salary deductions when workers are sick only compound to the financial burden of being sick or ill as well as add to the practical barriers to accessing medical treatment. The aforementioned UN Social Protection Diagnostic Review found not only a low coverage rate (39 percent) for Cambodia Laos Malaysia Vietnam (CLMV) workers, but also an exceptionally low rate of claims made under the Social Security Fund (9 percent). Taking this into account and coupled with BDF's experience of workers preferring to pay out of pocket for medical expenses, it can be inferred that migrant construction workers face intersecting de facto financial penalties for being sick or ill. Employers in the construction sector, besides legal obligations, should contribute to alleviating these financial barriers in order to also reduce absenteeism resulting from untreated health conditions or illnesses. In 2022, BDF hosted a company forum with several construction and property development companies and public health officials concerning the facilitation of access to health for workers and children. A survey conducted during the forum found that company representatives support enhancing access to healthcare, which they recognized would also improve workforce retention, an issue they often find challenging.

BENEFITS FOR WORKERS

Key drivers for workers in terms of well-being and welfare needs ranked in order of importance



- 1. Continued job opportunities
- 2. Access to Information on MHIS and social security
- 3. Language translation and transportation support for hospital visits

Regarding worker benefits, participants in Chiang Mai placed greater value on having consistent work offered. This is unsurprising as construction work is project-based and so the availability of work represents a significant factor in determining where workers go. However, this question was included to understand the extent to which work availability may outweigh the importance of other factors, which contribute to worker well-being. Following this factor, participants in Chiang Mai rated the company providing information on Social Security Fund (SSF)/ Migrant Health Insurance Scheme (MHIS) entitlements as the second most important factor. A previous survey conducted by Baan Dek Foundation on access to healthcare in Chiang Mai similarly found that lack of information about entitlements as well as how to register on either SSF or MHIS was one of the key barriers that workers reported in accessing healthcare.

As previously discussed in the section on Bangkok and its surrounding provinces, providing information on SSF/MHIS represents a near-zero-cost opportunity for construction companies to make significant improvements in the well-being of workers and thereby improve worker retention.

BENEFITS FOR CHILDREN

Key drivers for workers in terms of benefits for children ranked in order of importance



- 1. Children to stay in camps
- 2. School transport and enrollment
- 3. Daycare facilities
- 4. Access to health

Regarding benefits for children, similar to Bangkok and its surrounding provinces, participants placed greater importance on allowing children to reside in the camps, followed by the company supporting school enrollment and transport to school. As previously mentioned, greater numbers of children are likely to be residing with their parents in camps in Chiang Mai owing to the migration pattern of the main ethnic group, Tai Yai. However, as BDF's research, Building Futures has shown, conditions in these camps are not suitable to accommodate children. BDF's work under the BSI Initiative has demonstrated that interventions for children, especially in supporting enrollment and transport to school require very little time or resources for the company, yet have a significant social return for the children of workers.

When participants were asked to rate the most important area overall, the results stand in stark contrast to those from Bangkok and its surrounding provinces. Participants rated living arrangements as the most important factor, closely followed by benefits for workers, benefits for children and lastly worker welfare.

When participants in Chiang Mai were asked to give the two main reasons for why they were staying with their current employer, paying wages on time was mentioned as often as the state of accommodation as well as considerations for workers' children's education (in terms of not wanting to change school). When asked for the two main reasons why they left the previous company, wage payment was mentioned at a much higher rate than any other factor, followed by working conditions and family reasons.

KEY FINDINGS

Overall areas of rights, benets and living arrangements ranked in order of value to workers



- 1. Living arrangement
- 2. Benefits for workers
- 3. Benefits for children
- 4. Worker rights

CONCLUSION

This survey on worker retention was conducted to better understand which factors workers place greater importance on in their decision-making process when choosing a company to work for.

The results for Bangkok and its surrounding provinces should serve to persuade construction contractors to place greater focus on workers' welfare, assuming that workers can freely change their employer when they are not satisfied with the conditions of the camp provided by the contractor. These measures not only support businesses in meeting their requirements to respect and support the rights of workers and their children under the UN Guiding Principles, but also strengthen the ability of such businesses to attract and retain a migrant labor force needed to complete projects on time and within budget.

The results in Chiang Mai point to a similar conclusion, given that the principal contractor directly employs the majority of workers, such companies have much greater control over the well-being of workers. Considering BDF's extensive experience of working on the ground in Chiang Mai, camps are more likely to be in operation longer than in Bangkok. This observation indicates that, unlike the temporary make-shift nature of many construction camps, more long-term operations of construction camps can translate into business benefits in terms of retention of workers and better societal benefits in terms of child development and education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is envisioned that construction contractors take this survey's findings as an opportunity to gain insight into the priorities of the migrant labor force at the lowest tier of their supply chain and take action to not only improve retention of the workforce but also to realize respect for human rights of all workers and their children. Based on the results, the BSI Initiative recommends that Thai construction contractors pursue the following actions.

• Establish policies for family-friendly camps. This means:

- Officially allowing workers to have accompanying or newborn children in the camp
- Ensuring that subcontractors also register children as followers of their parents using the Tor Ror 38/1 form during Cabinet Resolutions for registering undocumented workers and dependents under 18 years of age
- Installing a Community Safe Space or childcare centers, registered via the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security
- Hiring, or assigning a caretaker in the camp to supervise children who have not yet enrolled in school to ease the care-taking burden of new mothers; companies should also consider hiring adult relatives of workers for these roles
- Invite civil society organizations and/or relevant government departments to conduct child safeguarding training for camp management staff to mitigate child safeguarding risks in the camp
- Ensuring that camp management staff are aware of school enrollment processes and implement
 a monitoring system for children's enrollment as well as provide transport for children to go
 to school
- Ensuring that workers are able to take paid sick leave days as they are entitled to under Section 57 of the Labour Protection Act .B.E 2541

Recognize the corporate responsibility to protect the rights of workers and their families throughout their supply chain by:

- Conducting due diligence with subcontractors on the documentation of migrant workers and ensuring there is a staff member to verify that all workers are in possession of valid and upto-date documents
- Ensuring that subcontractors disburse payments for workers on a timely and fair basis

Improve living conditions in camps for all workers and their families by:

 Assigning duties to the Camp Boss, or Safety Officer, to conduct Self-Assessments of their camps no less than two times a year to identify gaps regarding the conditions and safety of their camp and develop action plans to make improvements

- Ensuring that at a minimum, hazardous construction materials are safely stored away, toilets
 and shower areas are gender-segregated with working locks and lights and that residents'
 rooms are made of strong, durable materials and have working locks
- Providing information to workers and their families on their rights and how to access public services by:
 - Installing information boards in camps
 - Ensuring that camp management staff based in the camp, or alternatively the assigned Safety
 Officer, is available to provide transport when needed for workers to access healthcare if
 necessary
 - Ensuring that camp management staff based in the camp, or alternatively the assigned Safety
 Officer or subcontractors, are available to provide language support in case workers or
 children need to interact with Thai public service providers but lack the capacity to communicate
 in Thai

Most of these recommended measures can be implemented at a minimal cost while generating a high social return on investment for workers and their families living in construction camps. The survey data demonstrates that these positive impacts on workers' lives can significantly improve worker retention rates, ultimately benefiting the company indirectly.

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CONTACT US

Contact the BSI team and visit our website

www.buildingsocialimpact.org

To learn more about the BSI Framework for Action, its social risk assessment tools, and free training opportunities for your company and stakeholders in your supply chain!

The BSI Initiative is powered by Baan Dek Foundation.