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The Challenge of Education Policy for Migrant Children in Thailand from Security Standpoints *

Premjai Vungsiriphisal**

The education opportunity has been open up to migrant children of unskilled migrant families and displaced persons in Thailand. Education is considered as a protection mechanism for these children from the risk and exploitative situation as well as the development mean for their future. This issue raise different debates which arises from different perspectives, My argument is that Thailand existing policy towards migrant children is based on national security but not yet enough consideration for the security of the children. Thus has led to the imbalance of the country benefit and the benefit for the children.

Migrant Children in difficult circumstances in Thailand

The migrant children considered to be in difficult circumstances in Thailand comprises of children from unskilled migrant worker families and displaced children from Myanmar.

The first group of children of unskilled worker's families, majority has no identity verification and many are born in Thailand, though some of the parents have temporary work permit. In year 2003, the official record from the Thai Ministry of Public Health stated that there were approximate 14,000 migrant children born in Thailand annually. The first registration of unskilled migrant dependent was in 2005 and the figure of registered 93,062 migrant children under 15 years old was estimated to be much lower to the actual number. The estimation of this group of migrant children is between 200,000-250,000¹. The second registration in year 2009 was only 9,500². Over 80% of these children were from Burma, the rest were from Cambodia and Laos. Some of these children include those who are born in Thailand has no birth certificate, though the birth registration is promoted, which will lead them to apply for other legal status.

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¹ Archavanichkul, et.al, 2002. The status of knowledge on migrant worker in Thailand and future research trend. Institute of Population and Social Studies, Mahidol University.

² Ministry of Interior, Thailand.

Without legal documents, migrant children will become stateless persons and expose to difficulties in the future. Many of them are born of parents entering Thailand illegally, and according to Thai Law, child borne to illegal migrants are illegal. The illegal status of their parents make these migrant children less chance to access to public services like vaccination, health care and treatment. Not that the services is not provided for them but their parents are reluctant to bring them from fear of being arrested. Moreover, this group of migrant children are vulnerable to various forms of exploitation: as being victim of trafficking, sexual harassment, forced labour. According to Thai labour law, children under 15 years are prohibited to work, children from 15-18 years can work in certain kinds of jobs. In reality, many reports³ indicated that migrant children at younger age than 15 years have been found working in different sectors, many are working in poor working condition without or with little welfare. They are found in the worst forms of child labour: sex entertainment sector, small factories, agriculture, construction, etc.

The second group of migrant children in this paper is displaced children escaping from conflict and violence in Burma. These children are residing in 9 camps along Thai-Myanmar border, western side of Thailand. In year 1984 when the first camp was established, the number of displaced persons was only approximate 8,000 but has increased to over 130,000 in year 2009⁴. Proportion of children makes up to one-third of total population. The major ethnic is Karen, follows by Karenni, Tavoy, Shan, Pa-o and other ethnics. As Thailand is not a signatory to the 1951 refugee, this group has not been granted refugee status but the term “Displaced persons fleeing fighting from Burma”⁵ is applied to them. On one hand, their movement is restricted, not to go beyond the shelters but the other hand there will not be forced repatriation and basic humanitarian assistance: food, shelter, education and healthcare are provided. The conflict between ethnics rarely occurred in the camps. There were reports of domestic violence, rape and sexual harassment(source: UNHCR), premature marriage, abortion, psychosocial difficulties were problems among the camp youths, etc.⁶. For younger one, The new born in the camps are over 3,000 annually⁷ apart separate and unaccompanied children staying in orphanages homes in the camps.

Education Opportunity for migrant children

³ Premjai Vungsiriphisal, Supang Chantavanich and Siriporn Eusalung. 2000. Migrant children in difficult circumstances. Asian Research Center for Migration, Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University. Bangkok. pp.24, International Labour Organization. 2006. The Mekong Challenge. ILO. Bangkok. pp.20.

⁴ Thailand Burma Border Consortium. Available online

⁵ Source: Ministry of Interior, Thailand

⁶ Premjai Vungsiriphisal, Long Journey Home: Case study of refugee children along Thai-Myanmar border. Paper presented at the 8th IASFM International Conference, Brazil

⁷ CCSDPT. Annual Health Statistic Report Thai-Myanmar Border. 2002

There are two types of education provided for migrant children outside the camps, the first type is education in learning centers run by non-government organizations and migrant communities, the second type is education in local Thai schools.

The first type, there are various forms of learning centers and activities provided by non-government organizations and migrant communities for migrant children outside the camps. According to Ministry of Education, there are 88 learning centers national wide with 55,858 students⁸. Education provided in these learning center varies from full time schooling to part time schooling, teaching basic skills of reading and writing or other life skill learning. The learning centers comprise of schools with permanent building and teaching from kindergarten up to secondary level, school with temporary shelters or small rooms in a building. Nearly all are learning centers for children from Myanmar. There are no report of full time Cambodian or Laos learning centers, only a few open centers or drop in centers for Cambodian children in border area. Curriculum taught in full time schoolings mostly adapted from Burmese Curriculum, other curriculum or Thai curriculum⁹. Language instruction are mainly Burmese, or Burmese and English in higher level. Other ethnic, like Mon and Karen are used in some learning centers depend on ethnic of the children. English is taught in most of the centres and Thai is taught as a subject in some centers. Majority of the teachers are ethnic from Burma with a few Thai teachers in some centers. There are learning centers that give lessons as part time schooling, regulation in these centers are flexible to conditions of migrant children in term of teaching timetable, school space and student age. The lessons are taught at night instead of day time, classes are organized in children homes or shelters. There is no formal report about vocational or skill training set up in learning centers only weaving and handicraft are taught in a few learning centers. Some learning centers teach only basic reading and writing Thai language, aiming to prepare migrant children to communicate in Thai, or teaching ethnic languages in order to preserve their ethnic culture. In a few learning centers, life skill information, such as child protection, child rights, hygiene, etc. are being taught. Most learning centers provide free education and regulation is flexible, only in some big learning centers that small amount of school fees are collected. Most of migrant workers choose to send their children to learning centers to learn their own language and curriculum as the main reason. The other reasons are fearing of their children being abused, better care from the teacher, save the expense, etc. The number of learning center is increasing, an example: in Mae Sot, a border town to Myanmar, in year 2003 there are already 46 centers increases to 54 centers in year 2006 and number of student increases from 5,358 to 7,407. Many centers have only a few qualified teachers, mainly rely on external donors and are not legalized. The problems they are facing are legal status, standard and sustainability.

⁸ Sompong Sangsri, Basic Education Department. Presentation on International Migrant Day, December 20, 2007. Pangna province Thailand

⁹ Wallaya Manaskasemsirikul, 2008. M.A.Thesis Abstract. Process of Education Management for Migrant Children by NGOs: Case study of Mae Sot district, Tak Province, Graduate School, Chulalongkorn University

In Thai school, standard Thai curriculum is being taught and Thai language is the main language of instruction in all local schools. Before the year 2005, there were not many migrant children attending local Thai schools as their identification document was required for enrolment, apart from other reasons: expense, unwillingness of their parent, etc. The Thai Government new policy, launched in year 2005 was more flexible which paved way to all children, including migrant children, to enter local school easier. Although the percentage of migrant children enrol in Thai schools is still low but the number is significantly increasing after this policy was launched. The migrant children study in local school has to follow the mainstream education in term of core curriculum and language of instruction. The preparation which has been done in few schools, is mainly for the teaching of Thai language. The reasons that migrant children and their families choose local Thai schools are: chance for higher education, better ability to communicate in Thai language, acceptance from local people, chance to get jobs. There is a trial of teaching ethnic language in some local schools up to secondary level but not as a recognized curriculum¹⁰. The general acceptance toward migrant children in local schools comes from their ability to communicate in Thai language, understanding of Thai culture or being “Thai” which are among the priority attempt of education personnel in many local schools¹¹. Migrant children in local schools is not restricted to area or level but many of them will not be able to continue to higher level because of economic and family reasons.

For migrant children in the camps, free education has been provided with the assistance from humanitarian organizations and formally approval by Ministry of Interior since 1997. The teachers are the camp dwellers who have teaching experiences or secondary school graduates with approximate a year training. Formal education in the camps is up to secondary level, a few informal courses at higher level are taught like mathematics, science, etc. In addition, various vocational training, agriculture, bakery, blacksmith, handicraft, auto-mechanic, etc. are provided but attending local schools outside the camps is prohibited. Most children attend schools and trainings though the motivation to apply with the real jobs is low. Income possibility in the camps is working with humanitarian organizations as teacher, medical assistants, interpreters, etc. The curriculum taught in the camps are adapted from Burmese and other international curriculum, ethnic language, Burmese and English are the main languages of instruction and Thai language is currently taught as an elective subject. Children in the camp have limited knowledge about Thailand, as host country and very little acquaintance with local community, in spite of the fact that many of them are born on Thai soil.

The teacher turn over rate is high especially when the resettlement program has started a few years ago and most teachers left the camps to join the program. Though the

¹⁰ Premjai Vungsiriphisal, Education module and management for migrant children in border areas, 2009. Draft report submitted to Education Council, Ministry of Education, Thailand.

¹¹ Saowanee Sawangarom. 2008. Unpublished report on the development of education management for non-Thai children. Wat Sirimongkol School, Samutsakorn province.

resettlement is well accepted and the big number of them has resettled in USA, UK, Canada, Australia, etc. but the application has decreased recently. The political chaos in Myanmar and recent fighting between Burmese military regime and ethnic insurgents reflect that the repatriation of these displaced persons is not possible in the near future. The current complex situation has led to difficulties in balancing the education providing to meet the different need of the displaced persons¹².

These two groups of migrant children are similar in term of having access to education but they face different problems. Migrant children outside the camp has no restriction to area and level of education while displaced children movement is restricted and limit level of education level. The latter group has less opportunity to integrate with local community. Migrant children outside the camps has access to more alternative education modules, apart from mainstream Thai education system, which link them to their root and culture. But these modules are having problem in certification and standardization. Children in the camps have access to education mainly base on the module link to their own root and culture with no alternative to local education system.

Education policy for migrant children

Ministry of Education has circulated its policy to receive non-Thai children to study in public schools since 1992. The policy, later referring to the National Education Act year 1999 which stated that *every person has an equal right and opportunity to have access the basic quality education*. The Act requires every child in Thailand to have access to secondary level.

This Act has led to various forms of education that better respond to the conditions of different groups of children, aiming especially for those with difficulties to have access to appropriate education. Nevertheless, the implement of 1992 policy and 1999 Act did not have much benefit to children. There was requirement of identification documents for schools entrance which many of these migrant children were lack of either from their countries of origin or from Thai authority, apart of the unknown of the policy and the negative attitude of education personnel at practical level.

In year 2004, the Office of Education Council, Thailand has announced the education strategies for under-privilege groups of children which include migrant children as well.

The resolution of the Thai Cabinet in year 2005 stated clearly that every child residing in Thailand has access to education regardless of nationalities, Thai or non-Thai, document entitlement, or legal status. This policy is different from the previous as the budget will be allocated to the schools according to number of children, regardless to legal status and nationalities from primary up to secondary level. This policy is seen the most benefit to migrant children than ever, evidenced by the increasing number of

¹² Brees, Inge. 2008. Toward sustainable livelihoods vocational training and access to work on the Thai-Burmese border. ZOA Refugee Care Issue Paper no.1.

migrant children in local Thai schools. There is no restriction to levels and areas of study for migrant children outside the camps.

The latest advocacy initiated by different stakeholders, state and non-state actors is the registration of the learning centres which aim to grant these centres and students an “acceptable status” which will allow them to be in Thailand. This attempt has been approved by the Thai Cabinet in 2009 but to make the resolution into practice and apply to all government sectors need a lot of effort and challenge.

As for children in the camps, education activity has not been under supervision of Ministry of Education since the beginning. All activities need to submit for approval from Ministry of Interior which set up the policy for education in the camp since 1998 with the following regulation: education level was allowed up to primary level, humanitarian organizations provided technical support and material to the teaching which were handled by camp population, only temporary buildings were allowed where needed and politics was not permitted to be taught. To follow the 1999 Education Act and commitment as a member country to the Convention for the Rights of Child, the education level was expanding to secondary level in 1999 but not outside the camps. The Ministry of Education has started to provide Thai lesson in some of the camps in 2005. The education opportunity broadened up by Thai cabinet resolution in 2005 do not permit displaced children to be out of the camp, they are still required to study in the camps where they are residing.

The debate and problem of education for migrant children

The issue of open education opportunity for migrant children in Thailand raises the debate in the society. On one side, this opportunity is considered a pulling factor for more migrant children from neighbouring countries to come as it happens in some border areas and the burden for Thailand in receiving these migrant children in terms of education budget, welfare, etc. The unfavourable attitude of some local community for their children to mix with migrant children as well as the negative attitude of some government personnel, seeing unskilled migrant as a threat to country security and they need to be under control, reflect the attitude of Thai society towards migrant children at certain level. These attitudes are probably influenced by the feelings towards unskilled migrant workers, the report done by Assumption University¹³ pointed that many Thai have negative feelings against migrant workers, believing they have impact on unskilled Thai workers. In addition, Thai people find these migrant untrustworthy and disloyal which developed from negative information report by the media.

The debate, on the other side, is the necessary to support the protection for these migrant children from risk and exploitative situation, as well as using education as a development mean for these children. A report indicates that one of the risk factors of

¹³ Assumption University. 2008. Press release on the report “Thai Attitudes Regarding Foreign Migrant Workers in Thailand”.

Cambodian migrant children and women falling into victim of trafficking in Thailand is illiteracy, little education background of the children or caretakers¹⁴.

Children attendance to local school has been affected by various factors. Often, some of these children are absent from school to follow their parents who move from place to place or to avoid being arrested from Thai authority. There are not all schools, especially in urban areas that accept migrant children from unskilled families because of popularity and high competition with local children, thus make these migrant children have to travel further distance to attain other schools.

The difficulty in registration of migrant learning centers reflect the reluctant of acceptance of alternative education for these children.

The challenge of education policy for migrant children

The policy of unskilled migrant has varied according to different Governments periods but it is based on the same approach of the sovereignty security of the nation¹⁵. On the other hand, it is almost 20 years since Thailand start the formal registration of unskilled migrant workers but there are only two registration of their dependent. This reflects the lacking of interest in migrant children, especially the under privilege groups, in Thai policy makers. The issue of migrant children are relevant to many government sectors; public health, education, immigration, labour, human development, etc. The regulation at policy level related to migrant children are from education and public health sectors.

Thailand Education Policy providing education for all children is considered to be based on the rights approach but my argument is the unclear of the objectives which doubtfully lead to the benefit of migrant children or the country and the strategy of implementation which need more consideration.

In general, there is no doubt how education will benefit migrant children for their future security, in other word Thailand Education Policy is beneficial for migrant children “human security”. As Francis Abiew emphasized in his paper¹⁶ that it was necessary for the states to ensure security for their own people as much as possible, or even other international actors had to take responsibility in case the states failed to do so. The inquiry is whether Thailand includes this group of migrant children as its own people? There are many aspects of the issue to consider carefully. On one hand, the more flexible regulation of the latest policy encourages all children, especially migrant

¹⁴ Tassanee Lakkanapichachat, et.al. 2006. The analysis of trafficking situation and route in megacities in Thailand. World Vision Foundation, Thailand.

¹⁵ Adapted and concluded from Supang Chantavanich, Premjai Vungsiriphisal and Samarn Laodamrongchai, 2007. Thailand Policies towards Migrant Workers from Myanmar. Asian Research Center for Migration, Bangkok pp.42-57

¹⁶ ‘Assessing Humanitarian Interventions in the Post Cold War Period: Sources of Consensus’ in Thomas, N. and Tow, W.T. The Utility of Human Security: Sovereignty and Humanitarian Intervention. Available online from <http://sdi.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/33/2/177>

children to have access to mainstream education in local Thai school. It may reflect the acceptance of these children into Thai society as the local schools taking high number of migrant children attempt to integrate these children with local children and community.

Their successful is justified by their ability to change these migrant children to be like Thai people, the host country. The history of education to socialize hill tribe along the border to be good Thai citizens was one of the good example.¹⁷ On the other hand, this also reflects the un-acceptance of the other culture and nationality as “otherness”. To change their identity to be alike the host society in order to gain acceptance is one side adaptation and part of cultural assimilation the ethnic group to the mainstream culture, according to Castle, S.¹⁸ This perspective is based on the security of the country which taking other nationality as a threat.

The policy itself has been taken from different approaches at practical level among education personnel. In border areas, the education policy is aimed to better control of these children while in other areas the education policy is seen as the tool to reduce future social problems as well as the pulling factors for more migrant children¹⁹.

Nobpaon Rabibhadana report indicated that abusive migrant children in the shelter of an NGO had low-self esteem, feeling exclusion, negative feelings toward their ethnicity because of the negative attitude from local people, the pressure and repetition of being call illegal migrant²⁰.

Information gathered from migrant children²¹ also reflected their hope to be accepted into Thai society. Better communication in Thai language has been taken as the tool for their motivation to access to local Thai school and chance to stay in the country. Their feeling of security is based on the adaptation to local society. This attitude may probably cut them off their root and discourage them to repatriate back to their original countries.

On the other hand, the alternative education modules in migrant learning centers has not integrated into Thai education system and the attempt of registration is based on the

¹⁷ Johnson-Messenger, T.P. Contradictions in Learning how to be Thai: A Case Study of a Young Hmong Woman, *Hmong Studies Journal*, 2003, 4:1-21

¹⁸ Cited in Hugo, G. 2005. Migration in society : diversity and cohesion. Paper prepared for the Policy Analysis and Research Programme of the Global Commission on International Migration. pp.16-17

¹⁹ Thai Action Committee for Democracy in Burma. 2007. The education opportunity for migrant children in Ranong, Tak and Samutsakorn Province. pp.43,65

²⁰ Nobpaon Rabibhadana. The formation of “Otherness” and adaptation process of abusive migrant children. Paper presented at the 5th seminar of Graduate Student in Sociology and Anthropology Network. November 16-19, 2005. Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University. Bangkok. pp. 127-142

²¹ Premjai Vungsiriphisal, *ibid.*

security of the country as well, may not to ensure the identity of the other culture. Is the security of migrant children to become themselves as their own “self” possible? The mainstream education seem not to give positive answer to this question. Besides, the assimilation them into Thai society may probably cut them off their root and discourage them to repatriate back to their original countries.

The security of the country is related to the relationship with neighboring country. The displaced persons from Myanmar is seen as a threat to the relationship between Thailand and Myanmar. Needless to say that the 2005 Education Policy give little benefit for displaced children in the camps. On one hand, their limit freedom of movement and limit acquaintance with local community do not allow them to integrate into Thai society but Thailand is the country of origin to many “displaced children” born in the camps. Are they able to settle in other country, like Myanmar? The Thai Education Policy, if applied to this group of children, is influence by the concept security of the national sovereignty. The responsible government sectors, the prohibition of their movement reflect this concept clearly. In comparison, many of these children stay on Thai soil much longer to many migrant children staying outside the camps. Though they are taking as a threat to Thailand security, the same as migrant children outside the camp, but there are less attempt to integrate them into Thai society.

What should be the objectives of education policy for these two groups of migrant children? The challenge of the policy is the consideration of the education objectives and the appropriate strategy. Would position of these migrant children in Thai society? Are they part of country development process? Are they really a threat to country security? All these factors have to be taken into Thai policy maker consideration.

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