
Management of agricultural labor force: The case of foreign workers

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Abstract: On the conditions of foreign workers in the agricultural sector in Chiang Mai province, the study showed that the current tendency on the number of foreign workers from Myanmar was increasing. This were attributed to the following causes: the agricultural labor comprising of senior people is increasing; educated young agricultural workers are moving to the industrial sector; agricultural production costs, local labor wages are increasing. Therefore, the farmers chose the option of importing foreign workers so as to decrease the investment costs for agricultural production. On the factors affecting management of foreign labor in the agricultural sector the study showed that foreign workers in the agricultural sector which are Shan Tai of Myanmar were classified into three types according to the labor payment rates as follows: 1) monthly salaries, 2) daily wages, and 3) contractual payment. Assigned work were mostly planting, spraying with chemical pesticides, and harvesting. Foreign workers in majority moving toward agricultural sector came to work legally and another number came illegally. The employer in majority registered them at the Labor Department, however since registration was costly and entailed rigorous processing some employers protected themselves from laborers already registered and moving to another workplace by avoiding the registration process. The guidelines that were formed in solving problems regarding management of foreign workers in the agricultural sector were as follows: 1) farmers employing foreign workers should have knowledge on general principles of law on foreign labor employment; 2) as to the extension workers, they should take part in training these workers or extending agricultural technology and innovation that can be used practically in the area /farm and, 3) as to the government sector, they should support registration of the workers, passports possession and proven citizenship to attract more foreign workers to work legally in the agricultural sector.

Keywords: management, labor force, foreign laborers

Introduction

For the past two decades in the Upper Northern Region of Thailand, there have been changes in the labor conditions in the agricultural sector. The trend in the labor force has been declining due to several factors as follows: 1) the Thai population is on a continuous decreasing trend, 2) the young or working

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population is on a decreasing trend, 3) the senior population is on an increasing trend and the young population working in the agricultural sector is ignored and developed into a major problem or a challenge (Office of Economic Development and Social North, 2005). At the same time there is an increasing demand for foreign workers during the planting and harvesting seasons which has caused concern/anxiety to the farmers. Majority of these workers are employed on a contract work basis through an agent who manages workers in the community/area. At present, Chiang Mai province is on the trend of receiving more foreign workers continuously. Based from statistics, in the year 2014; foreign workers from Myanmar totaling 64,497 individuals were registered and the demand for them is increasing continuously (Department of Employment, Office of Foreign Workers Administration, 2012). In addition, local agricultural labor has the tendency to be in crisis in the future, the educated new generation is less likely to work in the agricultural sector. This can be an impediment to agricultural development as well as science and technology needed for improved agricultural production.

Based on the said conditions, lack of local workers is causing a severe labor shortage in the agricultural sector. The employer, therefore, employ foreign laborers to solve or meet the demand for agricultural laborers and in consequence, more foreign laborers enter Thailand steadily. This research, therefore, aims to study the issue on management of agricultural labor force in the case of foreign workers in order to study the conditions or situation, problems, causes and effects of employing foreign laborers in the agricultural sector of longan farms in Chiang Mai. Methods of data gathering included, interviewing farmers or agricultural entrepreneurs, foreign workers, public and private sectors involved as well as forming guidelines and measures/standards in solving the incurred/subsequent problems on management of foreign workers in the agricultural sector in Chiang Mai.

Objectives were to study the condition of foreign workers in the agricultural sector in Chiang Mai province, the factors affecting management of foreign workers in the agricultural sector in Chiang Mai province, the attitudes of farmers employing foreign workers toward management situation of agricultural labor force in Chiang Mai and guidelines and measures/standard in solving problems on management of foreign workers in the agricultural sector in Chiang Mai.

Materials and methods

Population and sample group: Target populations were classified into two groups: 1) representative of employers or farmers group employing foreign

workers and 2) foreign workers group in the chosen districts in Chiang Mai who were registered with the Labor Dept in the limited time frame. The chosen five districts from a total of 25 districts with the highest number of registered foreign workers were as follows: 1) Fang, 2) Mae Ai, 3) Mae Rim, 4) Chaiprakarn, and 5) Chiang Dao. The set number of samples of employers or farmers group employing foreign labor in the agricultural sector totaling 100 samples and the set number of samples of foreign workers group totaling 350 samples were done using quota sampling.

Research tools: Questionnaires were used for farmers group employing foreign workers and foreign workers group in the agricultural sector of Fang, Mae Ai, Mae Rim, Chaiprakarn and Chiang Dao districts in Chiang Mai province. In-depth interview of longan farmers group and discussion groups with the participation of organizations and various agencies involved on the issue on management of agricultural labor were done. Finally, a set of guidelines and measures/standards for management of foreign labor/workers in the agricultural sector was produced

Data analysis: For quantitative analysis, the computer program SPSS/PC was used and while for qualitative analysis, content analyses were done on four issues such as 1) conditions of foreign workers in the agricultural sector, 2) factors affecting the management of foreign labor in the agricultural sector, 3) attitudes of the farmers employing foreign laborers toward conditions of management of foreign labor in the agricultural sector and 4) guidelines and standards in solving problems on management of foreign labor in the agricultural sector.

Results

Conditions on the management of foreign labor in the agricultural sector in Chiang Mai

On the conditions of foreign workers in the agricultural sector in Chiang Mai, the study showed that at present, the tendency is that the number of foreign workers is increasing continuously. Based from statistical data in year 2014, the number of registered foreign workers mostly from Myanmar was 65,497 individuals. Due to the rapid economic progress in Chiang Mai as the center of government, business, and northern culture the demand for foreign workers in Chiang Mai is increasing (Department of Employment, Office of Foreign Workers Administration, 2012). Furthermore, situations such as the following: lack of agricultural workers in Chiang Mai and increasing number of elderly agricultural workers (aging society); educated young people moving to

the industrial sector; decreasing interest in conventional agricultural practices could restrict agricultural development involving science and technology for improved agricultural production in the future. When the agricultural production costs have increased due to the soaring prices of chemical fertilizers, pesticides and labor costs that farmers had to sustain, input of foreign labor was triggered in order to decrease production expenses and replace Thai workers wages. However, problems on management of agricultural labor still occurred, especially when foreign workers come to work following the season and daytrips under the condition of unclear ministerial regulations. Thus, problems that followed included employing foreign labor in the agricultural sector illegally and avoiding registration in the Labor Dept. Also, foreign labor has entered stealthily into the country and continuously for a long period of time. Traveling into and out of the country is done easily in the agricultural sector which is the sector that hired a lot of registered laborers that are migrants or in majority transnational from neighboring countries, mostly from Myanmar, replacing Thai workers. Therefore, the increasing demand for labor and competition in the agricultural sector caused the inevitability to rely on cheap labor from neighboring countries.

In the target area of five (5) districts, namely, Fang, Mae Ai, Mae Rim, Chaiprakarn, and Chiang Dao in Chiang Mai province, the study showed that majority of the people engage in farming/agriculture producing economically vital crops/products such as oranges (honeysuckle variety), longan, lychees, big onions, rice, etc. Fang district in particular, is a district that produces a lot of oranges and a leading producer in the country. Under the prevailing conditions of continuous decreasing number of local workers in the agricultural sector and the losing interest in agricultural work of the young people, the farmers hired workers mostly from Myanmar during seasons of planting and harvesting, at the same time. These workers aging 18 years and above can speak some Thai words and get hired for work such as planting or sowing and spraying chemical pesticides. They are staying in the accommodations provided by the employer and local workers in the area or nearby small longan farms. And also, workers are hired on contractual basis by big farms or farm owners who have no time for harvesting their produce which in majority require workers during harvesting time.

Various factors affecting the management of foreign labor in the agricultural sector

On the factors affecting the management of labor force in the agricultural sector in the target area of five districts comprising Fang, Mae Ai, Mae Rim,

Chaiprakarn, and Chiang Dao in Chiang Mai province the following were realized:

Employment of foreign workers by Thai farmers

Employment of foreign workers in the agricultural sector is classified into three types of workers namely, 1) first type of workers paid on a monthly basis are hired by the employer/ farm owner/farm proprietor or recommended by workers who have worked previously with the farm owners. Majority of the employers are big farm owners who do not manage their farms thoroughly. Rate of labor wages depends on experience or expertise of the workers where majority of them are acquainted with the farm owners. Some farm owners allow the workers to bring their families to stay with them; 2) second type is paid on daily basis which is popular among farmer groups or employers who employ depending on the type of work where rate of labor wages is irregular; and 3) third type is contractual employment in which work is brought by an agent or middleman.

Foreign workers in the study area are mostly Shan Tai from Myanmar who enter Thailand thru Fang district where facilitators collect travel costs including ID cards at 3,000 baht per person. Seeking employment relied upon mouth to mouth communication or by telephone telling relatives or friends. Majority of the foreign workers registered legally with Labor Dept annually through the company receiving foreign workers costing registration fee of 200 baht per person. Work for foreign workers in the agricultural sector included sowing or planting, spraying with chemical pesticides and harvesting and mostly by hiring male foreign laborers at rate of 300-500 baht per day and female foreign workers at the rate of 150-250 baht per day. Payment based on daily wage basis depended on the agreement with the farm owner who also gave benefits as drinking water and food etc.

In the case of employment on a monthly basis, male foreign workers receive daily wage of 200 baht and female foreign workers are paid daily wage of 180 baht and both are not paid if they did not work whereby farm owners give social welfare benefits as accommodations, water and electricity facilities. At present the foreign workers can choose work that gives higher pay such as harvesting agricultural produce that pays proportionally or work that complies with life necessities of the workers such as young people roaming about and have families from other areas or provinces. Aside from problems of labor shortage in the target area another new problem arose characterized as pulling the same workers (like the tug of war game) between two employers wherein the agricultural sector the first employer that brought the foreign workers registered these workers then they worked for one month only then another

employer pulled or snatched away these workers by giving them higher pay as an example or etc.

Movement of foreign labor into the agricultural sector

On the movement of foreign workers to the agricultural sector the study showed that the journey of foreign workers from Myanmar to work in the five districts, namely Fang, Mae Ai, Mae Rim, Chaiprakarn and Chiang Dao in Chiang Mai province was achieved legally and at the same time, a number of workers flee from Myanmar and come into Thailand. Once they arrived into the Thailand border, an agent or employment seeker was waiting at the Thailand coast. A discussion or dialogue with the agent that took place was dealt on type of work, number of workers the agent demand or need as well as rate of wages. When both sides were satisfied the workers traveled with the Thai agent using a pick up vehicle for transporting / traveling.

The middleman who bought contractually farm produce of longan or orange farms in Fang district had foreign workers where some of them entered Maehongson province to come into Chiang Mai province. The middleman was also inviting relatives and friends working already in the area where the longan farm employer had the need to use a large number of foreign workers during the harvesting season. Farm owners also contacted directly with the workers who came across the Thai border and negotiate on labor wage, type of work, and number of workers required just as what an agent does. In the case of the farm owner contacting directly with foreign workers himself, the study showed that working in the farm is work that foreign workers would rather prefer to work in the other agricultural farms such as cassava farm, planting corn. Because work at the longan farms /orange farms/ planting ornamental flowers are not hard work compared with other agricultural crops in the same area. Moreover, by working at longan farms or orange farms or planting ornamental flowers the employer allowed the workers to bring their whole families with wife and children to reside in the same area including helping in the work as well so that the female foreign laborer that followed the husband could have income from the same work.

Knowledge on the management of foreign labor in the agricultural sector

Employment of foreign workers legally to replace Thai workers which can be good thing or a model /prototype for entrepreneurs is expected to increase. Wage rate and social welfare benefits for agricultural workers that are similar outside the agricultural sector including giving support in the registration, passport release, and proven citizenship should be considered in

order to attract more foreign workers to enter Thailand legally and work in the agricultural sector. Thus, if the agricultural sector in Thailand adapt slowly as in the past, it will be losing the marketing opportunities, and shortage of workers will continue. In the long run, relying upon the foreign labor will be difficult instead of solving the problem sustainably.

Enhancing efficient and effective agricultural production that entails lower production costs and increasing investment return should be given attention to. Furthermore, systematic water management for agricultural purposes should be given consideration by the government alongside with the private sector and educational institutions in order to increase productivity and build added economic value of the agricultural products through research and development of crop breeds or varieties. Suitable agricultural technology coupled with zoning for agriculture that guarantee/support contracting of crop produce and accessibility to funding sources help farmers decrease the risks of production from natural calamities/disasters. Furthermore, support should be given to the training of new generation quality labor groups to be interested in agriculture and farming since they are the ones who can adapt easily to any changes. With modern technology, then the agricultural sector or the production base can be stable and growing efficiently leading to enhancing quality of life and stability of Thai farmers or toward sustainability.

Problems arising from employing foreign workers in the agricultural sector

In the five districts of Fang, Mae Ai, Mae Rim, Chaiprakarn, and Chiang Dao in Chiang Mai province, although the majority of employers hiring foreign workers brought them for registration at the Labor Dept which entailed costs and time; some employers still avoided obeying this law requirement. On the other hand, some registered foreign workers would escape and seek another job somewhere else without the knowledge of the former farm owner or employer and this resulted to incurring damages in many aspects such as unfinished harvesting due to lack of workers and time spent for seeking new workers.

Other problems were seen on two sides as on the side of the Thai society and the side of the foreign workers: occurrence of plagues like malaria, lymphatic filariasis, etc. brought about by the migration of the foreign workers to Thailand; lack of healthcare for pregnancy cases of the foreign workers, lack of information and on the number of foreign workers that are in the country or record of health problem. On the side of the Thai society, problems that arise involve safety of lives and possessions such as petty theft, quarrellings etc. Problems can occur due to the effects on the structure of basic facilities such as

electricity, tap water, schools, hospitals, public utilities for the foreign laborers who stay in the workplace.

Attitudes of farmers employing foreign workers toward management of foreign workers in the agricultural sector

On the attitudes of the farmers employing foreign workers toward management of foreign workers in the agricultural sector, the study showed that due to the shortage of local agricultural workers most of the farmers or farm owners employed foreign workers as permanent workers to replace the lack of local workers. In the movement of foreign workers there were those entering legally and a number escaping their country of origin. Based from interviews of farmers, employing foreign workers from Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos was preferred because they were considered better workers in agricultural production than the local workers.

Other reasons why farmers/employers chose foreign workers were because of their patience, endurance and tolerance and work better than the Thai workers. Though ignorant of the labor law and are paid with lower wages cheaper than the local workers they did not engage in disputes and the employer thought that the foreign workers were more obedient than the local workers because the foreign workers lived as group, lived simply with no fusses and complaints.

Concerning registration of the foreign workers there were still some employers that understood the registration procedure was quite complicated and time consuming and therefore preferred avoiding it. Results of the interview with the foreign workers showed that the registered foreign workers in majority however considered or also agreed that registration of foreign workers help in seeking foreign workers easily, and gave stability and safety in working.

For the unregistered workers, failure to register was due to the following: lack of time for registering, lack of information on the registration procedure, and plans of moving to another address. A number of foreign workers expressed satisfaction in working with the employer in the five districts of Fang, Mae Ai, Mae Rim, Chaiprakarn and Chiang Dao in Chiang Mai province. Satisfaction of foreign workers was at high level although their wage rate was low but was provided with social welfare benefits such as accommodations, water, electricity facilities including healthcare because registered foreign workers received healthcare benefit as 30 baht card care for all diseases at the hospital in the district of residence.

Guidelines and measures/standards in solving problems on the management of foreign workers in the agricultural sector in Chiang Mai

From this study, the guidelines formed in solving problems on management of foreign workers in the agricultural sector in Chiang Mai province in the five districts, namely, Fang, Mae Ai, Mae Rim, Chaiprakarn and Chiang Dao, were as follows: 1) majority of farmers employing foreign workers recommend that government agency involved should set up rules and regulations on obliging registration of all foreign workers that enter Thailand to work legally; 2) measure should be set up on crime prevention for the safety of the Thai people, and 3) decrease the registration costs on employing foreign workers. Since the agriculture is the foundation of the Thai economy ever since in the past on various productions of crops, livestock, and fisheries etc. In the future there will be an increasing demand for foreign workers in the agricultural sector according to survey results.

Thus, the government sector or agency involved with foreign workers should formulate or seek suitable guidelines and standards/measures in the management of foreign workers. Both the government and private sectors should support more the investments, number of machinery per worker, development of technology and skills of the workers that enhance their capacity including retirement age expansion. It is also helpful or necessary to build cooperation among educational institutions, training institutes, establishments in the production sector in order to produce quality personnel to meet the demand as well as support the data/information system for the national workforce planning in the long run. Establishing the skills /standards of workforce in each group of industry or industrial sector and dissemination of data on the demand of the Thai labor market are vital information for the general public to know. In this way the educational institutions are guided and advised on the labor market demand. In this case with driven economy in the agricultural sector the interests on work of the Thai people and stability of Thailand in the future are not affected.

Discussion

Employment of foreign workers by Thai farmers

Foreign workers in the study area are mostly Shan Tai from Myanmar who enter Thailand thru Fang district where facilitators collect travel costs including ID cards at 3,000 baht per person. Seeking employment relied upon mouth to mouth communication or by telephone telling relatives or friends.

Majority of the foreign workers registered legally with Labor Dept annually through the company receiving foreign workers costing registration fee of 200 baht per person. Work for foreign workers in the agricultural sector included sowing or planting, spraying with chemical pesticides and harvesting and mostly by hiring male foreign laborers at rate of 300-500 baht per day and female foreign workers at the rate of 150-250 baht per day. Payment based on daily wage basis depended on the agreement with the farm owner who also gave benefits as drinking water and food etc. In addition, Fongmul and Kanokhong (2017) studied the management of agricultural labor of longan farmers in Chiang Mai which found that agricultural labor in Chiang Mai province were mostly foreign workers of Shan lineage which longan farmers have been hiring during planting and harvesting seasons.

Movement of foreign labor into the agricultural sector

The main cause of the movement of a number of foreign workers coming from Myanmar into Thailand is due to the economic progress of Thailand which is growing continuously compared with the economies of its neighboring countries, that gives rise to high demand of workers in the industrial and agricultural sectors. Therefore this important factor attracts workers from economically inferior countries and come in order to fill up the labor shortage in Thailand. Furthermore, foreign workers from neighboring countries with borderlines with Thailand by land and water enter Thailand illegally.

Foreign laborers enter into Thailand illegally due to the following main reasons: 1) political unrest in country of origin which affects the security of lives and possessions, 2) poor economic status of high unemployment and low minimum wage which make living difficult. Thus, foreign workers escape to Thailand in order to have better life, despite of the risk of getting caught by officers and being exploited by proprietors. Furthermore, in the research of Phuwanatwichit *et al.*, (2017) on the trend/direction of migration of migrant workers and management to support the integration of the ASEAN community: case study on Shan/Tai Yai migrant workers in Muang district of Chiang Mai province, it showed that the driving factors affecting the decision of migrant workers to work in Muang district of Chiang Mai province were as follows: 1) the problem of fighting or domestic unrest, 2) hard life and low income for daily needs, 3) Tai Yai workers work in Chiang Mai and return to create better status and family conditions, 4) migration following the trend, and 5) forced to be a soldier. At present, employers hiring foreign workers serve as an important mechanism of businesses in Chiang Mai especially in the agricultural and industrial sectors. Majority of these workers stay for long periods continuously

and do not move alone but come with family members that are increasing since arrival.

Knowledge on the management of foreign labor in the agricultural sector

Employing foreign workers to replace local workers is considered and accepted in this case as helping the Thai farmers and entrepreneurs sustain agricultural work even though the Thai farmers should hire Thai workers more than the foreign workers and forego the registration costs, communication problem, and more skillful and educated Thai workers. What also added up to the tendency toward an increased demand for foreign workers and shortage of foreign workers in the future was due to the condition that at present the farm owners are becoming senior citizens who cannot do hard work anymore Yuyuen (2011) also has studied the factors influencing the decision to hire foreign workers of entrepreneurs in the Muang district of Kampengphet province. The results of the study found that there were relationships between job types and factors influencing the decision to hire foreign workers of entrepreneur such as diligence and patience of foreign workers and labor shortage.

Problems arising from employing foreign workers in the agricultural sector

Other problems were seen on two sides as on the side of the Thai society and the side of the foreign workers: occurrence of plagues like malaria, lymphatic filariasis, etc. brought about by the migration of the foreign workers to Thailand; lack of healthcare for pregnancy cases of the foreign workers, lack of information and on the number of foreign workers that are in the country or record of health problem. Jintanon (1997) also stated that migrant workers and their children not receiving health care could bring in pathogenic microorganisms that could easily spread among themselves and to the Thai community. The worrisome thing is the garbage and sewage problems that can cause pollution of public canals. Cramped accommodation conditions and insufficient toilets could be the source of various pathogens.

On the side of the Thai society, problems that arise involve safety of lives and possessions such as petty theft, quarrellings etc. which conforms to the study of Sawasdichai and Korsiepom (1996) that showed that hard work of migrant workers led them to drink alcohol, use drugs and amphetamine. This kind of lifestyle of the migrant workers had caused problems on the safety of the Thai people and their possessions.

Problems can occur due to the effects on the structure of basic facilities such as electricity, tap water, schools, hospitals, public utilities for the foreign laborers who stay in the workplace. In addition, the research of Sajasit (2003) showed that illegal and unregistered migrant workers made inevitable high level of political, security, economic and social impacts. Another effect was the delivery of public service as well as on the public health policy formulation of Thailand. Because the illegal foreign workers had difficulty accessing to public health services, this had caused negative effects such as spread of communicable diseases and thus had consequently caused additional expense on the government that is increasing every year.

Attitudes of farmers employing foreign workers toward management of foreign workers in the agricultural sector

Other reasons why farmers/employers chose foreign workers were because of their patience, endurance and tolerance and work better than the Thai workers. Though ignorant of the labor law and are paid with lower wages cheaper than the local workers they did not engage in disputes and the employer thought that the foreign workers were more obedient than the local workers because the foreign workers lived as group, lived simply with no fusses and complaints. Furthermore, the research of Suriyawan (2011), was a study on factors affecting the demand for foreign workers of restaurant business operators in the Muang district of Chiang Mai province which showed that foreign workers can do hard work, dangerous jobs and some jobs that Thai workers do not like to do. Concerning registration of the foreign workers there were still some employers that understood the registration procedure was quite complicated and time consuming and therefore preferred avoiding it. In addition, the research of Phophan *et al.*, (2013) a study on foreign workers of entrepreneurs in the Eastern Industrial Estate showed that labor factors and the law affected the decision to hire foreign workers of entrepreneurs because the law is complicated and time consuming.

Guidelines and measures/standards in solving problems on the management of foreign workers in the agricultural sector in Chiang Mai

Majority of farmers employing foreign workers recommend that government agency involved should set up rules and regulations on obliging registration of all foreign workers that enter Thailand to work legally. Furthermore, the research of Tongdang (2009), on problems from hiring foreign workers following measures on hiring Thai workers of entrepreneurs in Chiang

Mai province, showed that entrepreneurs wanted to increase the number of foreign workers to replace Thai workers. Also for the convenience of entrepreneurs, there should be more places /points for registration of foreign workers besides having to register in the province.

Conclusion

The problems on foreign workers management in the agricultural sector in Chiang Mai province were due to changes in the population structure and the present status of the workforce with the tendency toward shortage of workers in the agricultural sector leading to importing foreign workers from neighboring countries to enlarge the workforce in a short period. Therefore, there is an increasing on-going movement of large number of foreign workers into Thailand especially in the northern region. These conditions have affected the Thai society in terms of stability, public health, and in various forms. Thus, this study recommends that the government sector or researcher involved should take part in the development of skills of labor force in the agricultural sector or creating tool/equipment or new innovation that can be used practically and suitable for the area. A systematic labor allocation and management of foreign workers should include development of workers' potentials in preparing them (readiness) to be good, effective, and easily adaptable to forthcoming changes.

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