

CAPTURE CHANGE STORY

Behind the Industry of Sweetness



It is not easy to find sugarcane workers now. Without those migrant workers, it is difficult for us to finish harvesting. They are even more productive than Thai laborers.

– LAMYAI PHOTON

It is the time of year again when many seasonal migrant workers cross the border from Cambodia to Sa Kaeo, Thailand. Their destinations are the sugarcane planting areas.

The season of sugarcane production is around November to April. It was forecasted to reach 85-90 million metric tons in 2022, which is roughly 20 million metric tons more than the last cycle in 2021.

“The last day of the sugarcane’s crop cycle is April 10th every year. Migrant workers need to stay here and finish harvesting. We cannot leave if it has not been done. When the milling process ends, then we can return home.” Said Nuan Wanna, Cambodian sugarcane worker.

Eight years ago, Nuan, 40, decided to stop farming in Cambodia and start working as sugarcane harvester in Sa Kaeo. Now, he is the head of the migrant workers in one of the sugarcane plantations. Nuan and his colleagues are legal seasonal workers. The Chaidan Burapa Farmers Association has helped them to lawfully obtain work permits.

“The Chaidan Burapa Farmers Association is an agent who brings migrant workers here. They coordinate with sugar mills and Sa Kaeo’s governor. Then, there will be a discussion between Thailand and Cambodia to allow Cambodian workers to come in,” Nuan clarified.

Since sugarcane is one of Thailand's major agricultural crops, sugarcane laborers are in high demand. However, it has not been a popular job for Thai laborers. Therefore, to drive sugar production and support economic growth, Thailand has relied on migrant workers from neighboring countries.

"Harvesting sugarcane is really a hard work. We need to hire migrant workers to help cut and trim it. For our 16,000 square-meter planting area, there will be bundles of sugarcane in numerous amounts. We cannot do it on our own," Said Lamyai Photon, owner of sugarcane farm in Sa Kaeo.

Lamyai, 48, had changed from corn production to sugarcane production, which is more profitable. Currently, there are more than 600 square kilometer of sugarcane planting area in Sa Kaeo, which requires more than 10,000 workers.

"Before the outbreak of COVID-19, we could pick up Cambodian workers at the border gate. There were a large number of them at that time. We made it as a day trip which is quite convenient," Lamyai explained.

As sugarcane production comprises several people and processes, better data storage and management is becoming increasingly necessary. The application "Verifik8" was developed as a smart assistant tool for farmers to record information including farm management, cultivation, and production.

Moreover, Verifik8 aims to improve migrant employees' living and working conditions in the agricultural industry. It is generally known that some workers are exploited by their employers. As a consequence, if there is accurate, easily accessible data in a reliable application, the workplace will be more transparent. For instance, online employment contracts between farm owners and migrant workers can be created conveniently via mobile phone. This can prevent unfair wages and help protect migrants' rights.

"Information that will be shown in the online employment contract are job description, period of work, working hours, and wages. All are completely clear in this application," Namfon, FairAgora staff, illustrated.

"My friend suggested I try this. While other applications are not conducted in Burmese, this one comes with various news in Burmese. That is why MAYDAY is suitable for me," Moe Oo stated.

Verifik8 also provides a questionnaire about satisfaction while working in the farm, including questions on wages, work environment, safety, and health policy. The purpose is to raise awareness about good governance and transparency in the workplace among employers and workers.

"Our questionnaire also gives them some examples of various problems, which they can use to learn and assess their own situation. If they realize that they are in trouble or being exploited, they can call the relevant organization for help," Namfon added.

Sugarcane workers from neighboring countries deserve more understanding and support to achieve a better quality of life, not only because they have highly contributed to the Thai economy, but also because they are fellow human beings.

"In the name of Cambodian sugarcane workers in Sa Kaeo, I would like to ask all employers for proper treatment of migrant workers. They have continued working for you even while sick. Please try to put yourself in their shoes. Please take care of their lives. It is really important. Thank you very much," Nuan concluded.