

## *Elderly well-being in Northern Thailand: Does migration of children matter?*

### **Introduction**

The nation of Thailand has experienced massive economic and social transformation since the 1960s and 1970s, yet the indigenous groups in the highlands remained relatively untouched by the spread of development campaigns until much more recently. As decades of opium elimination and forest conservation projects increasingly impacted upland economies and highland agriculture, however, a dramatic migration down from the mountains to the Thai lowlands began to unfold in the mid-1990s. In unprecedented numbers, highlanders began leaving their villages seeking new opportunities in work and education. At the time, however, many did not speak, read or understand Thai, and thousands had never acquired the Thai citizenship to which they were entitled (Flaim, 2008; Feingold, xx). This research will examine the effects of migration on elderly individuals in the ethnolinguistically diverse context of the Thai-Burma borderlands, an area that has long been ignored in demographic research, due both to data insufficiencies and to the geographical, political and linguistic complexities of the region.

Using data from the data from the UNESCO Highland Peoples' Survey (2010) , we plan to examine the effects of migration on older individuals who remain in the origin communities. The debate in the literature often focuses on what the prevailing effects of rural-urban migration, in particular, are on elderly people who continue to reside in rural areas. Are elderly people abandoned and left without financial or social and emotional support? Or is migration a family livelihood strategy that provides considerable benefits to the entire family, including older adults? John Knodel and colleagues have done extensive research on the impact of migration on elderly individuals in lowland communities and have found that migration can have a great many financial benefits, while advances in communication technology allow family members to remain in close contact. For example, in recent work Knodel and Saengtienchai (2007:208) find that “the relationships between rural parents and their geographically dispersed children have changed in ways consistent with the ‘modified extended family’ perspective common in discussions regarding elderly parents in developed countries.” Because the communities of interest in our research are much more remote and because migration of ethnic minorities is often complicated by issues of citizenship that are not of issue in the communities that were the focus of the work done by Knodel and colleagues, we anticipate that our findings may be more mixed, both in terms of the success of the migrants themselves, their ability to remit substantial sums to older family members, and their ability to access technology to remain in good contact, etc.

The data from the UNESCO Highland Peoples' Survey (HPS) enable us to conduct a thorough analysis of migration in the highlands, as the survey captures individual, household, and village-level data and includes information on migration histories, disability and health statuses, and extensive data on factors pertaining to both rural and urban livelihoods and remittance practices. The survey is the most extensive research undertaking of the extremely diverse indigenous groups at the political and geographical margins of Thailand. The HPS covers over 300 villages, 15,000 households, and 70,000 people along the Thailand-Myanmar border. Data from this survey allow us to link individuals to family members, as well as to the households and villages in which they reside. Moreover, the survey includes information on individual migration histories, livelihood outcomes at individual and household levels, as well as household wealth and food security measures. We ask the following questions: How do living arrangements with regard to spouses, children and other extended family and community members impact household wealth, household food security and individual labor outcomes for highland minority elderly? How does having a migrant child affect these outcomes for minority elderly? Do these impacts vary by the sex of the elderly person? And, does the distance of migration of adult children matter in this context?