

Children affected by migration in ASEAN Member States

COUNTRY BRIEF: CAMBODIA

Southeast Asia is a major migration hub comprising countries of origin, destination and transit – with some countries being a mix of all three – for a large number of migrants. Migrants include displaced persons moving both within and between countries for diverse and mixed purposes. In 2020 alone, there were 1.3 million (1,266,009) child migrants in ASEAN and in 2021, around 630,000 (627,390) refugees from ASEAN countries in the world were children. Natural disasters and conflict led to more than 2.5 million (2,522,801) internal displacements of children in 2021. Millions more children remained behind while parents migrated for work, leaving many children at risk.¹

Data snapshot: Cambodia migration trends

- According to Cambodia's most recent Population Census (2019), 21.5 per cent of the population had migrated, the majority from other locations within Cambodia; 64 per cent involved rural to urban or urban to urban migration.²
- The extent of international (child) migration from Cambodia is unknown, as a large proportion of this migration is undocumented – data indicate that up to 74 per cent of Cambodian migrants in Thailand and Malaysia had migrated through irregular means.³
- In 2015, 22.4 per cent of migrant households reported having at least one child who had remained behind.⁴ Children who remain behind are more likely to be young: in 2015, 63 per cent of girls and 65 per cent of boys who remained behind were under 12 years of age.⁵
- A 2019 study found that 75 per cent of children who remain behind have their grandparents as their primary caregiver, and that 40 per cent of caregivers are over the age of 60, and 95 per cent are female.⁶

¹ This paragraph draws from a combination of UNDESA, UNHCR and UNICEF data. For more information, see <<https://data.unicef.org>>.

² National Institute of Statistics, Ministry of Planning, General Population Census of the Kingdom of Cambodia: *National Report on Final Census Results, 2019*, October 2020, Table 6.2.1, p. 72.

³ International Labour Organization, International Organization for Migration and Rapid Asia, *Risks and Rewards: Outcomes of labour migration in South-East Asia*, 2017, p. 33: A study of over 1,800 migrant workers from Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Viet Nam in Malaysia and Thailand.

⁴ Ministry of Planning (Cambodia), *Migration and Left-Behind Households in Rural Areas in Cambodia: Structure and socio-economic conditions*, A CRUMP Series Report, December 2015, p. 16.

⁵ Ibid., p. 12.

⁶ International Organization for Migration, *Migration impacts on Cambodian children*, 2019, p. xxvi.



Bopha, 4, collects water mimosa with her grandmother near their home in Siem Reap's Kork Run village.
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Many Cambodian children are affected by migration. Every year, thousands of children move internationally or within Cambodia. While most children move with their parents or caregivers, some migrate independently. It is estimated that millions more remain at home while one or both parents migrate, usually in search of better economic opportunities. COVID-19 and government responses to the pandemic impacted on migration flows by encouraging movement from neighbouring countries back into Cambodia and reducing the ability of parents and caregivers to send remittances home to children and extended family. While migration can have a positive impact on individual children and families, particularly where States facilitate safe and orderly forms of movement, it can also expose children to higher risk movements, including smuggling and trafficking, along with a range of other protection risks.

This country brief summarizes the key findings of and is an annex to the UNICEF *Situation Analysis on the Situation of Children Affected by Migration in ASEAN Member States*, along with an in-depth study *Migration and Family Separation: Needs, challenges and access to services for children remaining behind in Battambang, Cambodia*, undertaken as specific background research to the regional study. The regional study examined the unique drivers of child migration; the ways in which children are affected by migration, including associated protection risks; and the laws, policies and services for children and families affected by migration.

It is important that the unique situation and needs of children affected by migration are understood so that more effective and targeted policy and programmatic responses can be developed. Until recently, much of the migration literature has focused on the experiences of, and the impact on, migrant adults. Children and their interests have been largely invisible, with little knowledge generated about the unique drivers or impact of migration and particular migration policies on children.

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‘Children affected by migration’ is a broad umbrella term that encompasses children (those aged under 18 years)⁷ who move or have moved within their country of origin or across the border into another State, temporarily or permanently. This includes children who migrate voluntarily or involuntarily (as a result of forced displacement due to natural disaster(s) or conflict); or for economic, social, educational or cultural reasons. It includes children who move individually or to accompany parents who have migrated. It also includes children who remain behind while one or both of their parents migrate (‘children remaining behind’).⁸

⁷ This is in accordance with international definitions of childhood in particular as set out in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 1. It should be noted that in the domestic laws of some ASEAN States, such as Thailand, children who have attained majority through marriage are not included within the definition of ‘child’ in the Child Protection Act 2003. In addition, in some domestic laws, such as the Philippine Republic Act 7610, a child over the age of 18 who cannot fully take care of themselves because of a physical or mental disability or condition is included within the definition of a child.

⁸ Joint general comment No. 3 (2017) of the Committee on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families and No. 22 (2017) of the Committee on the Rights of the Child on the general principles regarding the human rights of children in the context of migration, CRC/C/GC/22 16 November 2017, para. 9. See also: UNDESA, which defines an international migrant as anyone who changes her/his country of usual residence, ‘Recommendations on Statistics on International Migration, Revision 1’, United Nations, New York, 1998; and International Organization for Migration, ‘IOM Definition of “Migrant”’, <www.iom.int/who-is-a-migrant>, accessed 6 April 2021.

1. Profile of children affected by migration in Cambodia

A substantial proportion of Cambodia’s population are migrants. Much of the movement in Cambodia is internal, with many children, families and parents/caregivers moving from rural to urban areas in search of better economic opportunities. However, there are also many children who migrate – usually with their families – to neighbouring countries that are more developed, especially Thailand and Malaysia. A large proportion of this migration occurs irregularly – that is, outside the destination country’s regular process or not in compliance with its laws. Many people choose to migrate irregularly due to the costs and complexity of lengthy, formal migration channels.⁹ This has encouraged a market for smuggling, which can place children and families at risk of trafficking.¹⁰

While many Cambodian children migrate with their parents or caregivers, many more remain behind at home. The limited opportunities for children to migrate in a lawful way with their parents can be a strong deterrent to parents taking children with them, as is the often very limited access to education and other services for undocumented children in destination countries.¹¹ The working conditions in the destination country of the parent(s), which can involve long hours with limited flexibility and limited safe and affordable day-care options, can also be a barrier to children migrating with their parents.¹²



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Cambodian migrant parent: *“At first, we brought our children with us. They were there for about a week but the [company] did not allow us to keep children there because the workplace was dangerous for children. So, we brought our children back here to keep them with my mother.”¹³*

Cambodian caregiver: *“She [the mother] does not want to take her children with her because there is no one to take care of them in Thailand. If her children were there, her husband and she would not be able to do any work. The children would become their burden.”¹⁴*

⁹ International Labour Organization, International Organization for Migration and Rapid Asia, *Risks and Rewards: Outcomes of labour migration in South-East Asia*, 2017.

¹⁰ See United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Smuggling of Migrants in Asia and the Pacific: Current trends and challenges*, Volume II, 2018, pp. 78–87.

¹¹ United Nations Children’s Fund, ‘Children “Left Behind”’, Working paper, <www.unicef.org/media/83581/file/Children-Left-Behind.pdf>

¹² Ibid.

¹³ In-depth interview with a parent, February 2022 (Parent 5).

¹⁴ In-depth interview with a caregiver, February 2022 (Caregiver 8).

2. Drivers of (child) migration

Children in Cambodia migrate and are affected by migration for a range of reasons. The figure below explains the drivers of migration in Cambodia, including individual and family drivers, along with factors that operate at community and structural levels in a child's life.



Structural drivers

- Uneven economic development and opportunities between Cambodia and neighbouring countries (Malaysia and Thailand), along with opportunities for higher wages, encourage regular and irregular international migration flows.
- Limited and poor economic opportunities in rural areas, and better opportunities in cities encourages rural to urban internal migration flows.
- Increased opportunities to obtain work permits to Malaysia and Thailand (though limited opportunities to bring children in lawfully), encourages migration but results in many children remaining behind without their parent/s.
- Social norms and beliefs that hold women responsible for providing financially for their families may be driving a feminisation of migrant labour.



Community drivers

- Social and family networks, particularly with previous experience of migration, provide children and families with information, access to opportunities and logistical and financial support that encourages their migration.
- The presence of brokers and agents in communities can help facilitate migration.



Family drivers

- Economic hardship and poverty in families can drive migration, particularly in the context of 'conditions of change' (saving for a wedding; paying of medical-related and other household debts).
- Increased access to mobile phones can help remove barriers to migration by enabling children/families to stay in touch with family members at home.



Individual drivers

- Children may be driven to migrate to access improved educational opportunities.
- Migrants can also be driven by a desire to improve their socio-economic status, along with a desire for independence, self-sufficiency and a general desire to explore life outside their home communities.

3. Protection risks

Cambodian children who migrate internationally, particularly those who migrate irregularly, face a range of protection risks. These can include exposure to arrest, detention and deportation in their host countries, which, in turn, can expose children to the risk of family separation; child labour and economic exploitation, including in informal or clandestine contexts and industries; sexual exploitation and trafficking; and limited access to services, including birth registration (for children who are born abroad), education and affordable health services. These risks are further detailed in the Thailand and Malaysia country briefs.

While children remaining behind may benefit from improved living conditions and access to education and other services due to remittances sent home by migrating parents,¹⁵ they may also face a range of risks and harms to their welfare and safety due to being separated from their parents.¹⁶ Most children who remain behind live with their grandmothers. This can provide stable caregiving; however, it may place a substantial burden on grandparents, particularly those who are living in poor conditions, resulting in inadequate care for children in the absence of external support.¹⁷ It can also result in children taking on heavy care burdens for themselves and their younger siblings.

Protection risks for children who remain behind in Battambang

Qualitative research carried out in 2022 titled *Migration and Family Separation: Needs, challenges and access to services for children remaining behind in Battambang, Cambodia*¹⁸ found that these children were exposed to a range of risks, including child labour, neglect and physical and sexual violence.

Cambodian parent: *“When my children lived with my mother, she did not treat them well. My older daughter was tasked to wash clothes, dishes and other cooking tools. She needed to get up at 5 a.m. to do household chores before she went to school. When I returned from Phnom Penh and met my daughter, my heart was so broken... She was skinnier. She could not attend school regularly. She had no nice clothes to wear. She cried. My mother used her as if she was a servant who was supposed to serve everyone in the house.”¹⁹*

Cambodian child: *“I teach my 11-year-old brother, help him to read and write when I am not going to school at night. I also take care of my siblings in the daytime and tell them not to go far from home as my youngest brother experienced drowning. So, I need to take care of them!”²⁰*

Cambodian child: *“My aunty and my grandmother just slapped and insulted me this morning because I got up late. I don’t like my aunt.”²¹*

Cambodian caregiver: *“We are struggling. We do not have enough to eat for three meals per day. I am too tired to look after many children as their caregiver since their parents are not around. I beat them too sometimes because I am too tired.”²²*

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 9.

¹⁶ Davis, Jarrett, *On the Border: Exploring the perspectives & experiences of street-involved children on the Thai-Cambodian border*, May 2017, p. 37; United Nations Children’s Fund, in *Executive Summary Study on the Impact of Migration on Children in the Capital and Target Provinces, Cambodia*, May 2017, p. 10, <www.unicef.org/cambodia/media/1446/file/Study%20on%20The%20Impact%20of%20Migration%20on%20Children%20in%20The%20Capital%20and%20Target%20Provinces_Eng.pdf>.

¹⁷ Ministry of Planning (Cambodia), *Migration and Left-Behind Households in Rural Areas in Cambodia: Structure and socio-economic conditions*, a CRUMP Series Report, December 2015, p. 12.

¹⁸ Background case-study to *Situation of children affected by migration in ASEAN member states*, UNICEF EAPRO, April 2023.

¹⁹ In-depth interview with a parent, Battambang, February 2022.

²⁰ In-depth interview with a child, Feb 2022 (Child 2).

²¹ In-depth interview with a child, Battambang, February 2022.

²² In-depth interview with a caregiver, Battambang, February 2022.

4. Policies, laws and services for children affected by migration

ASEAN Member States, including Cambodia, have taken important steps towards protecting the rights of children affected by migration. In particular, the ASEAN Declaration on the Rights of Children in the Context of Migration, which was adopted in November 2019, and the Regional Plan of Action on implementing the Declaration, provide a solid framework for the protection of children in the context of migration. Cambodia has ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which sets forth a comprehensive framework of rights, including for children affected by migration, as well as the Refugee Convention 1951 and Refugee Status Protocol 1967, which specify fundamental rights and processes for asylum-seeking and refugee persons. Cambodia has also adopted a bilateral agreement with Thailand to protect children and others from cross-border human trafficking.²³ This agreement lays out a series of rights and obligations with a particular focus on cross-border working arrangements in response to cases of human trafficking.



A young girl reads aloud in class at Prodak Primary School in Siem Reap's Puok District.
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²³ Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of the Kingdom of Cambodia and the Government of the Kingdom of Thailand on Bilateral Cooperation for the Elimination of Trafficking in Persons and Protection of Victims of Trafficking, 30 October 2014 ('Cambodia-Thailand TIP-MOU').

Children affected by migration: International and regional standards

Key international conventions: United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child; Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (the 'Palermo Protocol'); the Refugee Convention 1951 and Refugee Status Protocol 1967; the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants; the Global Compact on Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration; and the Global Compact on Refugees.

Key ASEAN declarations: ASEAN Declaration on the Rights of Children in the Context of Migration and the Regional Plan of Action on Implementing the ASEAN Declaration on the Rights of Children in the Context of Migration; ASEAN Human Rights Declaration; ASEAN Consensus on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers; Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women in the ASEAN Region; ASEAN Convention against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children; and the ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on the Elimination of Violence against Children.

The Government of Cambodia is in the process of developing a comprehensive child protection law in line with international standards. The law will extend protection to all migrant and non-citizen children present in the country.

Children who remain behind have access to various forms of support and services, delivered primarily by the provincial, district and commune social services offices of Cambodia's Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation, and a number of non-government implementing partners. While the Government of Cambodia is working on installing comprehensive case management systems and processes and building the capacity of the social service workforce at the local level to support vulnerable children, the child protection system remains quite limited in capacity, with very few qualified and properly skilled social workers and limited budgets to enable comprehensive case management and provision of services.

There are very few services available that are specifically targeted to children who remain behind. Support tends to be in the form of food, small cash payments and microcredit. More in-depth, comprehensive and sustained support is lacking. Parenting programmes are also delivered through partnerships with non-government organizations and the Ministry of Women's Affairs; however, caregivers of children remaining behind often miss out on this support, as these programmes primarily target parents and those of childbearing age and exclude grandparents.

As a result of these gaps, many children who remain behind in Cambodia live in poverty, continue to have difficulty accessing food and education, and remain exposed to protection risks such as abuse and neglect.

5. Suggested next steps



Data and research

Conduct a study on the scale and needs of children who remain behind.

Gaining a robust and comprehensive understanding of the scale, profile and needs of children who remain behind is crucial to the development of effective and targeted policies and programmes. Data on the scale and profile of children who remain behind should be collected routinely through household surveys and made publicly available.



Law and policies

Ensure that the draft Child Protection Law and Standard Operating Procedures are adopted and implemented and that they respond to the needs of children affected by migration.

Having a comprehensive and inclusive legal and operational framework for the delivery of child protection systems and services is crucial. This framework sets out the processes and services to which vulnerable children and families and children at risk are entitled – including those who remain behind and their caregivers.



Programmes

Strengthen case management processes and ensure that a comprehensive range of services are available at the local level to meet the needs of children affected by migration.

It is important to ensure that targeted services are available for children who remain behind. In particular, children and their caregivers should have access to sustained support not just in the form of cash payments and other material support but also in terms of strengthening parenting skills and providing regular support for vulnerable caregivers. Community placements, such as supported kinship care and foster care placements, should also be available to support children who are at immediate risk of harm.



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