Overview of Internal Migration in Cambodia
Cambodia’s total population, as recorded by UNESCAP in 2016, stands at over 15 million.

Cambodia benefits from a “demographic bonus”, with 31.4% of the population under the age of 14 and only 4.3% over 65. It has the second highest population growth rate (1.6% annual increase) and one of the highest total fertility rates (2.6) in Southeast Asia (UNESCAP 2016).

Cambodia is a highly rural and agrarian society. 79% of the population reside in rural areas (UNESCAP 2016), and the primary sector employed 67% of Cambodia’s total labour force in 2012 (FAO 2014).

Rural poverty remains high, with 90% of Cambodia’s poor population living in rural areas. The agricultural share of gross domestic product has lagged in recent years, with seasonal rather than annual work (taking place over three-month periods) becoming common (ADB 2014).
Internal migrants in Cambodia constitute a significant population. In 2013, the National Institute of Statistics estimated that nearly one quarter of the Cambodian population (approximately 4.1 million individuals) had changed their location of residence. This internal movement is significantly greater in scale than international migration (Maltoni 2007): as of 2017 total international immigrant stocks (those migrating to and from Cambodia) numbered approximately 1.1 million (UNDESA 2017).

Rural-urban (24.5%) and urban-urban (12%) migration represent a significant proportion of internal migration in Cambodia (National Institute of Statistics 2013), which has led to rapid urban growth (2.8% in both 2015 and 2016) (UNESCAP 2016). Nonetheless, most migration (58.4%) is rural-rural (National Institute of Statistics 2013).

Conditions in Cambodia are conducive for rural-urban migration. Those who have received education struggle to use their skills in agrarian environments due to the slow development of the country following the civil war. Agricultural land is often divided among children, causing individual plots of land to decrease below the threshold of agricultural productivity. Agricultural livelihoods have also been undermined by deteriorating land and water conditions. These push factors create for a pool of underproductive labour in rural areas, which might be drawn to the garment, construction, tourist, transportation and service industries in urban areas (Ministry of Planning 2012).

The main migration destinations are Phnom Penh, which receives half of all Cambodia’s rural migrants, followed by other economically active provinces such as Battambang, Kampong Cham and Siem Reap (ibid.)

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1 The 2013 Cambodia Inter-Censal Population Survey defines migration (without making a difference between internal and international forms) as the process of changing residence from one geographical location to another. While estimating migration on the basis of information on place of birth, only a single movement directly from the place of birth to the place of enumeration is assumed, though individuals might have moved more than once. It is also assumed that all persons enumerated at their places of birth are non-migrants, though some might be return migrants.

2 This data is from the Cambodia Rural-Urban Migration Project (CRUMP), which had three components: the rural household component, resulting in 1,500 surveys of households designated as non-migrant and 3,000 surveys of households designated as migrant; the rural village component, resulting in 375 surveys of the village chiefs from the villages selected for the rural household component; and the Phnom Penh component, resulting in 1,000 surveys of recent migrants living in urban Phnom Penh. Therefore, the data provided by this study on internal migration to Phnom Penh cannot be said to represent internal migrants migrating to other destinations than the capital. CRUMP focused on recent migrants, which were defined as individuals that made their last move no more than five years prior to the interview but no less than three months prior to the interview.
Internal migration in Cambodia follows a classic “gravity model” (first described in Vanderkamp 1977), with out-migration rates higher for closer provinces with denser populations. Migrants to Phnom Penh come from all corners of the country, but the majority (59%) come from the four provinces near the capital large populations: Kandal, Kampong Cham, Prey Veng and Takeo (Ministry of Planning 2012).

Cambodia is especially susceptible to the effects of climate change: the Tonle Sap Basin’s flooding patterns are particularly affected by changing weather patterns. The 2000, 2011 and 2013 floods and storms around the Tonle Sap Lake were the worst in recent history, resulting huge economic and humanitarian costs (CDRI 2014a). The coastal provinces of Kampot, Koh Kong, and Sihanoukville may witness greater seawater intrusion and storms as a result of climate change, and in the Northwest, Battambang Province is vulnerable because a large part of the workforce is reliant on agriculture and there are high rates of poverty. These areas are likely to see labour outflow as a result of climate change (ADB 2012).

**Migrants’ Characteristics**

- Men are more migratory than women and are dominant in rural-rural migration (60.3% of all rural-rural migrants are men, compared to 56.5% of women). However, women outnumber men in both rural-urban (25.5% compared to 23.5%) and urban-urban migration (12.9% compared to 11.1%), and comprise 49.6% of the total internal migrant population. (National Institute of Statistics 2013). They also make up 57% of all migrants to Phnom Penh (Ministry of Planning 2012).

- Migrants to Phnom Penh are overwhelmingly young, mainly aged 20-34 (64%). Females tend to migrate at a slightly younger age, as those in the 15-29 age range constitute 33.7% of all migrants, compared to only 22.4% for men (ibid.).

- Migrants are better educated than non-migrants. 41% have completed secondary school, but that figure is just over 32% for non-migrants (ibid.).

- It is the healthier members of the household that tend to migrate, and migration is less likely to happen when the household contains an elderly person in poor health (ibid.).

- Migrants are nearly three times more likely than non-migrants to be single and not to have children (ibid.).

- Most migrants that are not married at the time of migration move alone (75%). Of those who are married, 90% move with a spouse, and over 57% with both a spouse and child (ibid.).

• About half of the migrants to Phnom Penh have a contact in the capital at the time of migration. Most of the time, the contact is a relative or a friend from the migrant’s village of origin. Migrants that move without a spouse are more likely to have a contact than those moving with a spouse (60.8% compared to 37.4%, respectively). They are also more likely to receive help from this contact to either find a job or a place to live (ibid.).

• In one small-scale study, it was found that of migrant workers, 74% had helped others (relatives, friends, fellow villagers) find jobs in their own workplace and were also willing to share accommodation. Despite having found a job all participants in the study continued to receive job information from friends and relatives, as well as through TV, radio, Facebook, the internet and banners or leaflets (Open Institute 2016).

• Most migrants consider following family the primary reason for migration (42.2%), followed by marriage (21.8%), employment-related purposes (18.4%) and education (1.4%). Women are more likely to migrate to follow family and men for marriage or employment-related purposes (National Institute of Statistics 2013). However, when only considering migration to Phnom Penh, which absorbs about half of all migrants to urban areas, most migrants move for employment-related purposes (75%), followed by education (16.6%), following family (15.1%), marriage (6.6%) and calamities (4.1%). Men are more likely to migrate for work, education or due to calamities and women for marriage or “other” (Ministry of Planning 2012).

Working and Living Conditions in the New Setting

• Migrants participate in the labour market at a higher rate than non-migrants (88% compared to 80% respectively). Interestingly, female migrants have a higher labour force participation than male migrants (89.8% compared to 86.7%, respectively) whereas female non-migrants have a lower participation than their male counterparts (78.8% compared to 82.3%, respectively) (Ministry of Planning 2012).

• Over 86% of migrants moving for employment-related purposes received a job within their first month in Phnom Penh. 9.1% received a job after the first month, and 4.8% have never been employed (ibid.).

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3 This was an interview-based qualitative study with a sample size of 64, so its results cannot be taken to be representative.
4 Lost land, lost home, natural disasters, or repatriation.
5 The CRUMP Report indicates that this likely indicates following a family member.
Female migrants work primarily as garment workers, small business owners, domestic workers and entertainment and service workers. Male migrants work as construction or non-construction workers, drivers, business owners and white-collar professionals. There is very little overlap between professions occupied by male and female migrants, indicating strong gender segregation in work (ibid.). The construction sector provided the greatest average salary for a low-skilled entry-level job, followed by manufacturing, security, and hospitality (Open Institute 2016). Professions occupied by female migrants have the lowest pay (Ministry of Planning 2012).

Migrant workers in Phnom Penh are more likely to improve their financial situation than those migrating elsewhere. Overall, the economic situation of migrant workers is worse than that of Phnom Penh residents but significantly better than for those staying in rural areas (ibid.).

Only 17% of all of Cambodia’s salaried employees had a written working contract in 2008 (National Institute of Statistics 2008). The predominance of the informal sector exposes migrant workers to systemic risk of exploitation and abuse. Most labour migrants work over 10 hours per day, 7 days a week (CDRI 2007), and only 6.8% have health insurance (Ministry of Planning 2012).

Nearly half of all migrant workers have to travel a long distance for medical help (48.4%). Over 77% of them would go to a pharmacy to receive medical assistance, forgoing the idea of going to a doctor or a clinic (ibid.).

Migrants tend to live in smaller and younger households than Phnom Penh residents. On average, they live in households that have 3.78 members compared to 4.69 for Phnom Penh residents, and nearly half of migrants’ households are composed of members aged 59 and below (ibid.).

34.5% of migrants live with someone that is not a spouse or an offspring (often a sibling or friend). Only 27.8% live with both a spouse and offspring, 8.7% with a spouse only and 2.6% with an offspring only (ibid.).

Migrant workers tend to exhibit high levels of stress, even though their physical health is relatively good. Among migrants to Phnom Penh, 94% worried about earning enough money and a substantial proportion (17.8%) were not optimistic about their future. 83.2% of them also worried about the health of their parents. Over 73% of female migrants and 65.5% of male migrants find it difficult to make friends when first arriving in the capital (ibid.).

Female migrants are more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation, especially those with less education. Of female migrants to Phnom Penh, 28.4% can read and write “only a little”, and 13.6% are illiterate. 95.7% of them worry about having enough money and 72.1% of them report that it is difficult to make new friends. (Ministry of Planning 2013).
The Impact of Internal Migration on Those Who Stay Behind

- Nearly all migrant workers remit. However, there is a significant disparity between the amounts that are sent:
  - Migrants to Phnom Penh and those with higher levels of education tend to remit more (Ministry of Planning 2012).
  - While female migrants earn less money, on average they remit 20% more than male migrants. They remit more regularly and a larger proportion of their income than male migrants (ibid.).
  - Garment workers remit on average 25% of their total earnings. Along with domestic workers and white-collar workers, they remit a larger percentage of what they earn compared to workers in other industries (such as construction, entertainment, education, and small business) (ibid.).

- Remittances in Cambodia are relatively small, as the average remittance from those who do remit is nearly 75,000 Riel (just under US$20) a month. However, this small amount may have a substantial impact on the receiving households. Poverty incidence declines by 3-5% in migrant households and internal migration increases total consumption of migrant households by 10 to 12%. However, for the poorest households receiving smaller remittances, the amount of money sent by migrants does not counterbalance the loss of a working family member (Roth and Tiberti 2016).

- On average, rural areas are losing 4% of their population a year, which the Cambodia Rural-Urban Migration Project (CRUMP) calls “a truly astounding rate of population loss”. This depletes rural areas’ labour pools and damages agricultural production, especially given low rates of rural mechanization. Close to half of village chiefs surveyed named “loss of labour” as one of the main ways in which their village has been hurt by internal migration (Ministry of Planning 2012).

- Internal migration generates less incentive to work among the stay-behind family members. On average, members of migrant households work 8-10% less than members of non-migrant households (Roth and Tiberti 2016).

- More than 20% of migrants with children do not take them with them. 80% of the children who stay behind live with their grandparents, changing the household structure into “skip-generation households” (Ministry of Planning 2012.).

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6 This study uses data from the Cambodian Socio-Economic Survey 2009 (CSES).
• Despite high levels of poverty, over 88% of migrant households have a cell phone and are regularly in contact with the family members that have migrated. Female migrants phone their family members more regularly than men (ibid.).

• The majority of migrants (84.1%) go back to visit their family, at least from time to time. Female migrants (84.9%), migrants in the 25-34 age group (86.7%), unmarried migrants (84.4%) and migrants with three siblings (90.7%) or more (88.6%) are more likely to visit, as well as migrant workers (86.7%), in comparison to those going to school or doing “other things”. Surprisingly, migrants with no children are more likely to visit their family than those with one or more child under 15 living elsewhere (85.6% compared to 80.0%, respectively) (ibid.).

• Migrants that return are older and less educated than those that remain living away. However, village chiefs have cited broadened experience and skills of villages, as well as decreased domestic violence, as potential benefits of seasonal and repeat migration (ibid.).

• Migration can have negative impacts on children staying behind. They are more likely than other children to drop out of school, with 15.6% of them doing so. The effect is especially pronounced for girls, as nearly half of household heads view girls as more suited for household chores than education. Stay-behind children also have a 27% larger probability of participating in economic activities compared to children in non-migrant households, with their work hours increasing by an average of 7.4 hours a week (CDRI 2014b).  

References


This research was based on a survey of 600 households in Prey Veng, Takeo, Siem Reap, Kompong Thom, Battambang and Banteay Meanchey, as well as data from the 2009 CSES.


This brief is part of a series of Policy Briefs on Internal Migration in Southeast Asia jointly produced by UNESCO, UNDP, IOM, and UN-Habitat. These briefs are part of an initiative aimed at researching and responding to internal migration in the region. The full set of briefs can be found at http://bangkok.unesco.org/content/policy-briefs-internal-migration-southeast-asia.