

# Exploring the Social Well-being of Migrants and Families on the Cambodian-Thai Border in the Period of the Covid-19 Pandemic



## RESEARCH REPORT June 2023



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## Disclaimers

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# Executive Summary

This report shares findings from qualitative research on the impacts of Covid-19 on Cambodian cross-border migrants. Cambodian migrant workers, comprising 92% of the overseas Cambodian workforce, often face poor working conditions and exploitation in Thailand due to poverty and migration due to limited job opportunities in Cambodia. The Covid-19 pandemic has worsened these conditions, leading to an increasing rate of return migration with a high risk of contracting the virus. This research aims to investigate the impacts of Covid-19 on cross-border migrants, explore the available social protection benefits, and to identify the risks within shifting migration patterns. The research builds upon previous studies and emphasizes the lived experiences of migrants.

The research design incorporates site selection of previous studies in Pursat and Battambang provinces while adding new research sites in the same provinces, and a new province of Banteay Meanchey was newly added. The research team interviewed 80 migrants and 40 migrant household members to document the impact of Covid-19 on their livelihoods, social protection issues, and their networks. The research methodology draws on participatory and creative methods, building on existing collaborations and research on migration in the region.

The key findings from the analysis across the four sites reveal several important insights. Firstly, the main push factors for migration were the lack of decent work opportunities, high indebtedness, and poor income from local agricultural activities. The decision to migrate was often influenced by information and support from relatives and peers who had already migrated. Secondly, migrants employed various methods to send remittances back to their families in Cambodia. Communication with families and friends was primarily through phone calls and social media platforms like Facebook. Thirdly, the Covid-19 pandemic had a significant impact on employment opportunities and retention in Thailand, resulting in job losses, reduced income, and food shortages for migrant workers. Lastly, documented migrant workers had access to health insurance and services in Thailand, while undocumented migrants faced challenges in accessing healthcare in Thailand and Cambodia due to financial constraints and their inability to register for the Cambodian ID Poor status.

Based on the research findings, this study recommends the following action items:

- **Universalize Social Protection:** Extend social protection coverage to all migrant workers, regardless of their documentation status. The Social Assistance Programs should be accessible to migrant workers and their families.
- **Enhance Information and Awareness:** Implement comprehensive information campaigns to raise awareness among migrant workers about their entitlements and how to access social protection measures. Local authorities should facilitate on-demand ID Poor information to returned migrant workers.
- **Strengthen Collaboration:** Foster collaboration between stakeholders to ensure a coordinated and comprehensive approach to social protection for migrant workers. An approach to support existing informal networks in Thailand should also be explored.
- **Improve Access to Healthcare:** Enhance access to healthcare services for migrant workers, particularly for undocumented migrants and those in remote areas.
- **Strengthen Legal Protection:** Enforce existing labor laws and regulations to protect the rights of migrant workers and to prevent exploitation. This should also include facilitating access to legal documents for migrants.

# List of Acronyms

ADIC	Analyzing Development Issues Centre
ANKO	Akphivat Neary Khmer Organization
AS	Aphiwat Strey Organization
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ATM	Automated Teller Machine
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
CARES	Covid-19 Active Response and Expenditure Support
CDRI	Cambodia Development Resources Institute
Covid-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
CRC	Cambodian Red Cross
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
IOM	International Organization of Migration
MAC	Manpower Association of Cambodia
MFI	Micro-Finance Institution
MWG	Migration Working Group
Mol	Ministry of Interior
MoLVT	Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training
MoSAVY	Ministry of Social Affairs and Youth rehabilitation
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NIS	National Institute of Statistics
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
RGC	Royal Government of Cambodia
The Foundation	The Asia Foundation
TCO	Trailblazers Cambodia Organization
UK	United Kingdom
USD	United States Dollar
WFP	World Food Programme

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# I. Background

With limited job prospects and widespread poverty in Cambodia, 1.2 million Cambodian individuals work abroad and 92 percent have migrated across the border to Thailand (MoLVT, 2023). Trapped in a cycle of vulnerability, these migrants have endured poor working conditions and exploitation along migration routes, including the constant threat of human trafficking, for decades. The situation for migrant workers, both in Thailand and in Cambodia, has been on a steady decline since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. As a consequence of Thailand's response to Covid-19, which involved business closures, an increasing number of migrants are now returning to Cambodia. However, this wave of return migration poses a grave risk to the returning workers of contracting Covid-19 during the journey, further exacerbated by limited support for their social well-being. Statistics from the Administrative Office of Battambang Province revealed that between April and June 2021 alone, out of the 4,670 returning migrants (including 2,058 women), a distressing 510 individuals (261 women) contracted Covid-19.

The relentless Covid-19 crisis in Southeast Asia, combined with the persistently challenging conditions prevailing in rural Cambodia, has pushed many individuals to undertake the perilous journey back to Thailand, defying the risks of infection and the scarcity of decent employment opportunities. This has provided fertile ground for the rise of informal recruiters or brokers who exploit the vulnerabilities of these migrants, further exacerbating the risk of human trafficking. Anecdotal evidence suggest that these circumstances underscore the urgent need for comprehensive and coordinated efforts to address the plight of Cambodian migrant workers and to combat the underlying issues that perpetuate their exploitation and endanger their well-being.





## II. Research Focus

The research conducted by the Analyzing Development Issues Centre (ADIC) in Cambodia builds upon their extensive studies on cross-border migration, with a particular focus on understanding the lived experiences of migrant workers. They have employed participatory and creative methods in their research, collaborating with institutions like the University of Sussex-led Migration out of Poverty programme since 2015. As part of their efforts, they produced a widely shared comic book, available in Khmer, English, and Thai languages (Nurick, Hak, Streeten, 2016). In recent years, the ADIC has worked closely with Mahidol University in Thailand and three local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), including Trailblazer Cambodia Organization (TCO), Aphiwat Strey (AS), and Akphivat Neary Khmer Organization (ANKO), in provinces such as Siem Reap, Battambang, and Pursat. Their collaborative research focused on promoting safe migration among temporary Cambodian migrants to Thailand (Sakulsri, Nurick, & Oeur, 2020).

The relevance of building upon this research in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic is directly linked to the increased policy attention given to cross-border collaboration between Cambodia and Thailand, with a strong emphasis on trade. The research provides timely evidence of how the pandemic has impacted migration patterns in the region, which are closely intertwined with business activities and cross-border trade. Furthermore, it sheds light on the long-standing collaboration within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in managing migration. By examining if and how new patterns of migration emerge in relation to social protection issues, this research also holds significant policy relevance in addressing the evolving needs of migrant workers in the wake of the pandemic.



Photo provided by ADIC



# III. Objectives

1. To investigate the impacts of Covid-19 on cross-border migrants through documenting and analyzing the lived experience of migrants; and
2. To explore the types of social protection benefits and risks within these shifting patterns of migration in the context of Covid-19.

**Overarching research question:** How has Covid-19 impacted the patterns of migration of Cambodian migrant workers and what, if any, are the implications on their families with a focus on social well-being?

# IV. Research Design and Methodology

## 4.1 Introduction

This section is an overview of research design and methodology. The section provides an overview of the migration context in Cambodia by illuminating cross-border migration. It presents the rationale of the site selection and data collections methods. This section also provides the details of the fieldwork instruments, selection of research participants, data analysis, and research ethics. It is important to take note that this research was done along a similar line of another research funded by the University of Sussex, UK, on migration and child labor in the same areas and similar respondents. So,

the advanced information received from the previous Sussex-supported studies helped to inform and refine the methodologies of this study.

## 4.2 Context Review

Cambodia has experienced remarkable economic progress since adopting a market economy, encouraging domestic and international private investment. The country has actively engaged in economic cooperation throughout the region, fostering integration within the ASEAN Community. This improved economic performance has resulted in an impressive annual growth rate of 7.7 percent between 1998 and 2019 (WB, 2023). Cambodia has successfully transitioned from an agriculture-dependent nation to one with a more prominent industrial and services sector. However, despite these achievements, the country still faces significant challenges. The industrial sector continues to rely heavily on labor-intensive practices, and there is a low valuation of work in garment and footwear factories (WB, 2023). The labor market remains dominated by workers with limited education and low skills (CDRI, 2013). Moreover, while poverty rates have decreased, income inequality remains a pressing concern (So et al., 2015). Additionally, the country has experienced population movements, particularly out-migration to neighboring countries, which has attracted many rural Cambodians (CDRI, 2009; FitzGerald and Sovannarith, 2007; IOM, 2010).



Photo provided by ADIC



Migration has played a critical role in numerous households, aiding them in coping with financial crises, improving housing conditions, covering food expenses, and contributing to poverty alleviation (Tong, 2012; Roth et al., 2014). Consequently, migration has had a significant impact on household decision-making and labor market dynamics. In recent years, migration patterns and remittances have become more dynamic, complex, and diverse, resulting in an overall increase in migration. While many individuals work within the country, others opt to migrate abroad in search of better employment opportunities and higher wages due to a lack of job prospects in Cambodia. As of 2018, approximately 1.23 million Cambodians were working overseas, with 1,146,685 individuals in Thailand alone (995,371 of whom were legalized workers) (NIS, 2020). Thailand serves as the primary destination country for Cambodian migrants, followed by South Korea, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, Saudi Arabia, and Hong Kong.

A significant portion of Cambodian migrants choose to migrate through informal channels, often without proper travel documents, making them undocumented or illegal migrants. Thailand, due to its proximity and accessible land-based travel routes, has the highest number of undocumented migrants. According to CDRI (2009), migrants resort to informal channels primarily due to the simpler and less costly migration process. Legal migration, on the other hand, involves a cost of approximately US\$700 and takes three to six months to complete, while illegal channels cost only around US\$100 and takes only a few days. However, in recent years, there has been an increase in the number of migrants opting for legal or formal migration channels through recognized recruitment companies or Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) between sending and receiving countries. The use of legal and recognized migration channels to Thailand has risen from less than 10 percent in 2012 to approximately 87 percent in 2018 (Tunon and Khleang, 2013; NIS, 2020).

Most seasonal migrants work without employment contracts and are typically engaged in agricultural activities, allowing them

to switch employers or return home as desired. Construction and manufacturing sectors also employ a significant number of Cambodian migrants (OECD/CDRI, 2017). The migration journey is often facilitated by brokers or experienced migrants who may currently work in Thailand or have already returned to their birth villages. Informal networks, such as friends or fellow migrants, play a vital role in assisting individuals in their journey to Thailand, with these networks being built upon existing relationships among migrants and potential migrants. The number of migrants reported by authorities, whether documented or undocumented, may be underestimated because some individuals migrate through informal channels for short-term work, such as seasonal migration.

According to the Manpower Association of Cambodia (MAC), from January to May 2022, approximately 15,000 Cambodian migrant workers officially traveled to Thailand, which is roughly consistent with pre-Covid-19 numbers. MAC anticipates an increase in these numbers once the Thailand Pass is discontinued starting July 1, 2022.

During the Covid-19 outbreak, migrant workers, especially those who are undocumented or engaged in seasonal work, became highly vulnerable to job losses. Anecdotal evidence emerged in early 2021, suggesting that the conditions for migrant workers in Thailand and in Cambodia had consistently deteriorated since the pandemic began. As businesses closed in response to government measures to combat Covid-19 in Thailand, the rate of return migration to Cambodia increased. The ongoing crisis in Southeast Asia, combined with challenging conditions in rural Cambodia, compelled many individuals to embark on the dangerous journey back to Thailand, despite limited opportunities for decent work. This pattern of precarious migration in both directions increased the potential for brokers to exploit migrants, thereby raising the risk of human trafficking.

To provide social protection to its citizens, Cambodia has implemented various measures, including providing free Covid-19 vaccinations and vaccination cards, offering quarantine facilities and free treatment, distributing food and essential items to lockdown areas and families affected by Covid-19-related deaths, and establishing a social security fund for workers and public-civil servants (police and armed forces).

The Government of Cambodia implemented a comprehensive plan to address the health and economic challenges caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2020, the Government allocated US\$829 million, which accounted for 3.2 percent of the country's GDP. The funds were distributed across various sectors, including health response (US\$60 million), social assistance through the IDPoor program (US\$300 million), and economic recovery measures (US\$455.8 million). In the 2021 budget, the Government further increased its allocation for pandemic response, raising the original budget of US\$719 million to \$1,162.0 million. This increase was primarily driven by a significant rise in health spending (US\$30 million to US\$724 million) to procure vaccines and medical equipment. Additional funds of US\$88 million were earmarked for cash transfers to support the poor and vulnerable affected by lockdowns and reduced economic activity. To ensure fiscal prudence, the Government implemented

measures to streamline the national budgets of both years and directed all ministries to reduce spending in non-priority areas (ADB, 2023).

## 4.2 Site Selection

This study utilized data from two previous studies conducted in 2015 and 2018, involving some of the same respondents. The initial study in 2015 was conducted in the village of Bakou, as well as two adjacent villages in Kandieng District of Pursat Province. The second study, conducted in 2018, maintained the original villages from 2015 and included additional villages in Prek Norin District of Battambang Province. For the current study, the research focused on the same provinces, Pursat and Battambang, as the main study sites.

In 2015, the study primarily examined the impacts of returned migrants resulting from changes in Thai government policies, with a specific focus on undocumented migrants who were selected for the study. The subsequent study in 2018, with an expansion of study sites to a few villages in Battambang Province, was also on safe migration. While the current study kept the two areas in the provinces of Pursat and Battambang, additional sites were added including villages in Kamrieng District of Battambang and villages in Malai District of Banteay Meanchey Province. These last two districts are located right along the border areas.



Photo provided by ADIC



**Table 1:** Number of respondents and location of the three studies, 2015, 2018, and 2021

	2015	2018	2021
Location	Bakou and its two adjacent villages, Pursat	Bakou Village and neighboring villages next to Bakou  a few villages of Prek Norin Commune, Battambang Province	Maintained the same study sites of the study 2018  Added two more sites in Kamrieng District of Battambang and Malai District of Banteay Meanchey Province  One study on the impact of migration on child labor supported by FCDO through the University of Sussex  This is supported by The Asia Foundation, but with a focus on migration and social protection.
Number of respondents	15 migrants were interviewed about their experiences of being undocumented migrants and their forced return to Cambodia	40 respondents from across the two provinces were selected (20 were from Pursat Province, and 20 from Battambang)	80 respondents (54 female) were selected, including some of those from 2015 and 2018 as they were present in the villages
Collaborative study	Collaborative research between three local NGOs (ADIC, ANKO, and TCO) and Sussex University Research Grant	Regional collaborative research, covering four countries such as Cambodia, Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar, between ADIC, Mahidol University in Thailand, World Vision, and MWG in Thailand. The Research Grant was provided by the Republic of Korea (ROK)	Collaborative research between three local NGOs (ADIC, ANKO, and AS), with support from a Sussex University Research Grant from FCDO through IDS of Sussex University

Pursat, Battambang, and Banteay Meanchey provinces were selected as the target areas for the study for several reasons. First, the three provinces are located in migratory flow areas along the Thai-Cambodian border. The improvement of infrastructure and border relations have contributed to increased rates of migration, particularly among villagers of the three provinces. Secondly, migrants were mostly undocumented and seasonal. This may be due to the fact that a large number of migrants or potential migrants coming from these destinations are mainly unskilled or from economically depressed areas. Of note, these three provinces are mainly agriculture provinces, thus, seasonal migration is likely a supplemental livelihood activity for some households.

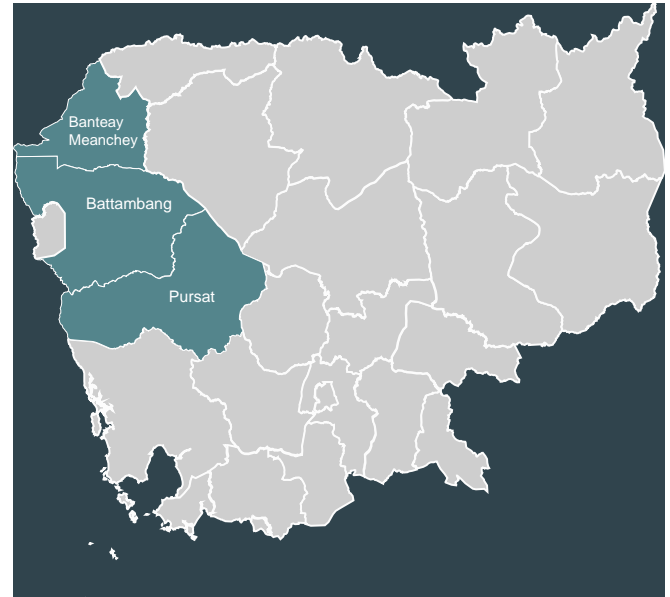
The research took place in four areas in three provinces along and near the Cambodian-Thai border:

- Bakou Village and two adjacent villages in Kandieng District of Pursat Province: Data collected in 2015 was re-analyzed. This included the life stories of cross-border migrants (adult migrants) who work in Thailand in both formal and informal migration patterns. By returning to the same villages, the research team sought to understand the current situation of these migrants, how Covid-19 has impacted them, and any emerging patterns of social protection issues. The team collected 20 life stories of migrants, among these only three of them were respondents the team had interviewed in 2016 and 2018. In addition, the team also interviewed another 20 respondents who are heads or members of migrants' households.
- Prek Norin Commune of Ek Phnom District in Battambang Province: Through the collaboration with Mahidol University in 2018 on cross-border migrants, the research team revisited the data to build a baseline against which to compare current conditions and to assess the impact of Covid-19 on this

population. The research tried to return to the same (approximately 20) migrants to document how Covid-19 has impacted their livelihoods and any relationship to social protection issues and child labor. Similar to Bakou, the team also interviewed another 20 respondents who are heads or members of migrants' households.

- Selected communities were added in Kamrieng District of Battambang Province and Malai District of Banteay Meanchey Province as new research sites. Border corridors allowed migrants access even during the pandemic and were found to be hotspot locations of increasing movement. In these two districts, there were initial observations that migrants have been less able to access to social protection benefits and the team found patterns of child labor linked to family migration.

**See figure 1** for the map of the study sites which are located in northwest Cambodia along the Cambodia-Thailand border.



**Figure 1:** Map of the study provinces in northwestern part of Cambodia



## 4.3 Data Collection Methods

Secondary and primary data collection and analysis were used for this study, as described below.

### 4.3.1 Secondary Data Collection

Government documents including data and statistics, NGO and multilateral agency reports, and academic papers were reviewed to better understand migration patterns and the impacts of Covid-19. This review focused primarily on Southeast Asian countries.

Information from the Government of Cambodia on relevant policies and announcement of cross-border migration, in particular between Thailand and Cambodia, was also reviewed. Government documents on migration rates, particularly return migration rates during the Covid-19 pandemic, were also gathered for this study. The research team also reviewed NGO reports, other government reports, journal articles, and other credible sources of information.

The secondary data review aimed to identify specific gaps with regards to policies and practices on migration (cross-border migration), policy gaps to address Covid-19's impacts on migration and migrant livelihoods/economic wellbeing.

### 4.3.2 Conducting the Pre-Visits

Pre-visits were conducted to collect a list of names and contact details of migrants through the village chiefs. There was also pilot testing of 2-3 interviews in each location to inform the design of the interview instruments. The lists of participants from the 2015 and 2018 studies were available and were verified with village chiefs. For the new areas in Kamrieng and Malai districts, the field team discussed with the

community representatives and village chiefs to identify participants according to the set criteria. The team conducted pre-visits to data-collection sites on the following dates:

- Malai District, Banteay Meanchey Province from 24 to 26 November 2021.
- Ek Phnom, Battambang Province from 27 to 29 November 2021.
- Kamrieng District, Battambang Province from 30 November to 1 December 2021.
- Bakou villages and adjacent ones, Kandieng district, Pursat Province, 30 November to 1 December 2021.

### 4.3.3 Limitation of the Study

The main challenge was the inability to interview many of the same participants from the previous studies, which limits the team from being able to examine the changes over time from the same respondents. The Covid-19 restrictions also delayed the field work.

### 4.3.4 Primary Data Collection

This qualitative study applied in-depth interviews with migrants, key information interviews with local government officials, participant observations, and site observations. The interviews were conducted mainly in the first quarter of 2022. There were a total of 80 migrants and 40 migrant households interviewed. Respondent names have been changed to maintain anonymity and follow strict data collection methodology practices. The guiding questions, focused on social protection which covered on nine main themes including reason for migrating, formal or informal migration, recent stricter Thai migration regulations and your future plans, your journey to Thailand, your work experience in Thailand, experience living in Thailand, sending money and goods home, communication with family and friends back home, and returning to Cambodia.

## a. Selection of Respondents for In-depth Interviews

Migrant respondents were selected based on the following criteria:

- Short term or long-term<sup>1</sup> migrants who are working or have experience working in Thailand.
- Short term or long-term migrants who returned to their birth village due to Covid-19 (either due to lockdowns, political chaos, or loss of jobs due to the pandemic).
- Migrant households who have at least one child who migrated to Thailand, focusing on the Bakou villages in Pursat Province and Prek Norin commune in Battambang Province.
- Participants who are willing to talk with the researcher for 60 to 90 minutes uninterrupted.
- Children who migrated were included to better understand their situation.

Participants for the key informant interviews included:

- Agencies/informal brokers who facilitated and connected migrants and (potential) employers.
- Local authorities and government officials in Pursat, Banteay Meanchey, and Battambang. Community leaders and local government authorities play an active role in the migration process, particularly in monitoring and enabling legal, documented migration. The research team also engaged selected leaders by keeping them informed of progress and involving them in the dissemination process.

## b. Process and Duration of the Interview

Each interview lasted for about 60 to 90 minutes. At the start of the interview, the respondents were provided with clarity of the purpose of the interview, and emphasized the importance of their participation in the interview process.

## c. Guiding Questions and Field Notes

The questions centered around migrant experiences with the Covid-19 pandemic, especially on social well-being, remittance, motivation, decision-making for migration, the impacts of Covid-19 on migration, and how returned migrants have coped and adapted their livelihoods upon returning.

The questions were asked flexibly in Khmer language. Voice recorders were used to record the interviews with informed consent from respondents. The voice records were transcribed.

## 4.4 Field Work Schedule and Training for Field Researchers

The process of data collection took place from January–May 2022. The data collection timeframe was divided into three phases: pre-visits which were completed in December 2021 as mentioned above, and actual fieldwork and the follow-up data collection. The pre-visits were conducted by partners and ADIC staff members.

One training session was provided to researchers prior to actual fieldwork. The training focused on the procedure of data collection, field note write-up, familiarizing the researchers with the guiding questions, and orienting them on research ethics.

## 4.5 Data Analysis

The transcription notes were used by sorting them into key themes based on actual information provided by the research participants. Some quotes were included to substantiate the analysis but used pseudonyms. The main theoretical framework used to guide the analysis included (1) State Protection and Citizen Rights—focusing on what should be covered by the state as stipulated in the existing laws and policies; and (2) Social Capital & Social Networks focusing on available formal and informal support structures.

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<sup>1</sup> Long-term migrant referred to any worker who used to work and mostly stay in Thailand more than 5 years.



# V. Key Findings

In this section we present the key findings through a synthesis of the themes that emerged.

## 5.1 Characteristics of Respondents

The 80 respondents, 54 of whom are females and 26 are males, ranged in age from 15 to 58 years old. The research team sent the names of respondents to village chiefs to facilitate appointments. Appointments with respondents were made prior to the field visit, however, the most of the respondents were females because many of the men who fit the criteria were away from the home working.

Of the 80 respondents, 33 are ID Poor and 47 are non-IDPoor households. It is important to note that of the 33 ID Poor households, half of them said the cards were not valid by the time of their migration. ID Poor is the Cambodia national poverty identification program used to identify poor and vulnerable households to receive free services and assistance. The ID Poor identification is done every two years. Households who met the criteria will receive ID Poor cards (or equity cards) which they can use to claim free public services (especially health services) across the nation.<sup>2</sup>

In terms of marital status, a large number of respondents are married (63 out of 80), of which 45 were females. The participants who were not married were almost equal in number male and female. A large number of married migrants (50 out of 80 respondents) reported migrating as a couple, husband and wife, leaving their young children with family in their home villages, while few migrant couples brought along their young teenage children (aged 15 to 17).

In short, a large number of respondents were female, married, and aged between 15 to 44 years old. This indicates that despite the traditional perception of women working domestically,<sup>3</sup> there are many women who migrate for work.

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<sup>2</sup> [www.IDPoor.gov.kh](http://www.IDPoor.gov.kh)

<sup>3</sup> “Women could not turn around the stove” is a proverbial saying expressing traditional society of Khmer in which women are considered to work around the house, taking care of the household, household members, child caring, and chores (<https://thmeythmey.com> accessed on 10 April 2022)



Photo provided by ADIC

**Table 1. Characteristics of migrant respondents**

Particulars	Female	Male	Total
<b>Gender</b>	54	26	80
<b>Age</b>			
15-17 years	3	0	3
18-24 years	2	5	7
25-34 years	25	4	29
35-44 years	15	12	27
45-54 years	8	3	11
55-64 years	1	2	3
<b>Total 15-64 years*</b>	54	26	80
<b>Total 15-24 years**</b>	5	5	10
<b>Education level</b>			
No schooling	9	2	11
Primary level (1-5)	24	9	33
Lower secondary level (6-9)	16	16	32
Upper secondary level (10-12)	4	0	4
<b>Marital status</b>			
Married	45	18	63
Single	7	6	13
Separated/Divorced	1	0	1
Widow	1	2	3
<b>Migration duration***</b>			
Less than 1 year	1	4	5
1 – 3 years	21	7	28
4 – 6 years	14	4	18
7 years and above	18	11	29
<b>Poverty Status</b>			
ID Poor card/equity card holders	21	12	33
Non-ID Poor card/equity card holders	33	14	47
n= 80			

Source: from direct interviews

Notes:

\* 15-64 years old is the working-age population (RGC, 2019)

\*\* Based on the definition of the United Nations, youth refer to those whose aged is between 15-24 years old (Secretary-General's Report to the General Assembly, A/36/215, 1981; Secretary-General's Report to the General Assembly, A/40/256, 1985).

\*\*\* Based on the definition by WFP, those who migrated to work less than 1 year are short-term/seasonal migrant workers (WFP, 2019).



## 5.2 Push and Pull Factors Motivating Migration

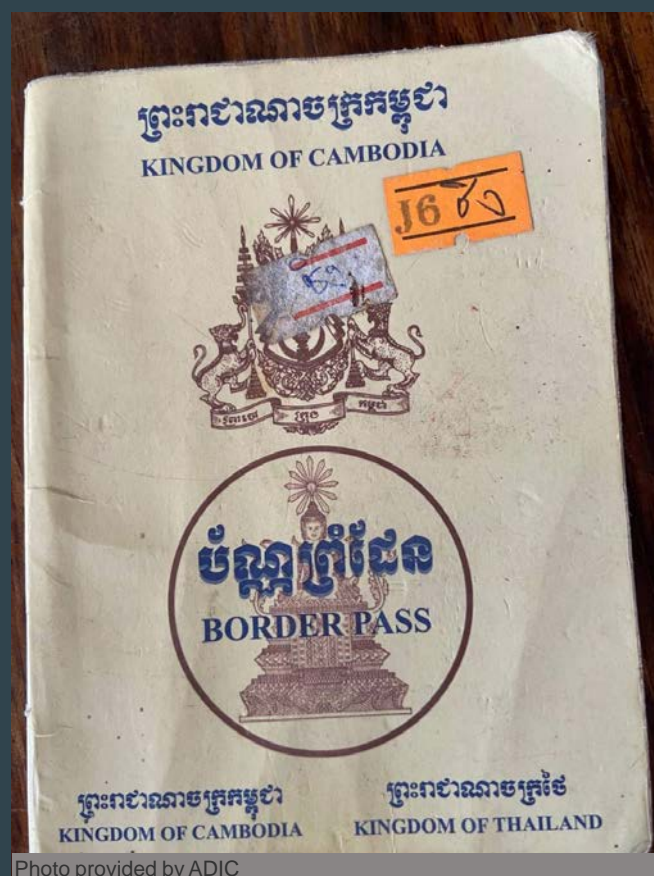
Commonly cited issues across all four sites included the lack of opportunities for decent work in their local areas. Even when there are job opportunities, the work is often precarious and the wage is insufficient to meet household needs. Another major driver is increased indebtedness to local banks, Microfinance Institutions (MFIs), and private money lenders, often with exorbitant interest rates. The study also found reported low income from rice farming due to poor yield rice, especially when damaged by droughts and floods, which is related to shifting climatic conditions in Cambodia.

Participants collected information to support their decision to migrate and choose how they could migrate based on information they heard from their peers or relatives. This information included reports of better income opportunities, working conditions, and improved lifestyle that influenced the decision to migrate.

There were also reports of several family members migrating across the border in search of work. In one family, eight children migrated to Thailand, driven by the lack of job opportunities and insufficient food supply in Cambodia. They found employment and formed relationships with fellow Cambodian workers. Each child and their spouse have different occupations and earn varying salaries. They face challenges related to visas but have improved their situation compared to being undocumented. In another family, a mother and her three children migrated to Thailand due to financial difficulties and the mother's illness. The children have valid passports, health insurance, and their work visas are renewed every two years. In another case, a mother and her two children migrated to Thailand due to financial struggles and the son's inability to continue his education. They found work in a clothing store and a cosmetics shop. Other families migrated to Thailand to escape debts, unstable income, and demands from creditors. They faced challenges in finding stable jobs due to Covid-19. Despite the challenges and uncertainties, these families continue to work hard to improve their living conditions and support their families.

## 5.3 Remittances

Migrants employed various methods to send a portion of their earnings back to their families in Cambodia. Unfortunately, specific data on the frequency of transfers for each migrant was not available. However, the migrants indicated that besides carrying cash ranging from 5,000 to 10,000 Baht upon their return home, they utilized at least three different channels for remittance: transfers including going through Thai Bank or Wing to Wing transfers, engaging brokers, and using ATMs. Each of these options incurred distinct fees, as outlined in Table 2. Among the recipients of these remittances, mothers were consistently mentioned as the most common beneficiaries. Conversely, the fewest number of recipients included spouses, sisters, fathers, and children. Interestingly, during the interviews, none of the migrants mentioned any difficulties or risks associated with transferring money to their families.



**Table 2. Remittance Methods**

Particulars	Amount (baht)	Fees (baht)
Transfer through individual Thai broker in Thailand and then Wing with code number in Cambodia	3,000	30
Transfer through broker (source 1)	25,000	150
Transfer through broker (source 2)	10,000	300
Transfer through money transfer agent (receiver gets from Wing)	10,000	40
Transfer through Kasekor Thai Bank	3,000	30
Transfer through Bank (not specified)	10,000	60-80
Boss (Thav Keh) collects the money and sends through bank (did not know the name of the bank), or money transfer agent.	5,000-7,000	50
Transfer through agent (similar to Wing)	10,000-20,000	100
Transfer through money transfer agent (whose business is currency exchange), then receiver in Cambodia gets money through Wing or True Money).	7,000	50-60
Send through ATM (box or booth) of a bank (fee was not mentioned)	x	x
Preferred options to transfer 100,000 baht through Kasekor Thai Bank; but less than 10,000 baht via agent or via ATM machine	x	x
Bring about 5,000 to 30,000 baht when return to Cambodia.	x	x

## 5.4 Communication with families and friends back home

Migrant workers make use of various communication tools to connect with their families. Phone calls, Facebook messages, and messenger apps are the most common means they employ to stay in touch. Mr. Som, a 43-year-old migrant worker, highlighted the significant changes in communication that have occurred over the past decade. He mentioned that even if someone is working far away, such as fishing at sea, they can still interact with their families through platforms like Facebook.

Through these communication channels, migrant workers are able to engage in face-to-face interactions virtually and gain a deeper understanding of the lives and work of their families back in their home countries. However,

some female respondents expressed their inability to utilize Facebook to connect with their children working in Thailand. As a result, they only occasionally communicate with them through phone calls. These individuals mentioned that they often feel isolated, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic and have genuine concerns and worries about the well-being of their children.

The findings of the study indicate that despite spending an extended period of time working as migrants, these individuals maintain positive relationships with their neighbors and fellow villagers upon their return. The returning migrants are reportedly respected and admired by the local community as they are able to secure a good living for their families through their employment wages and to repay their debts.

One interviewee shared that when her daughter visited their house, the neighbors not only treated her daughter differently but also developed a warm relationship with her, expressing their care and kindness by bringing fruits and vegetables as gifts. This illustrates the positive social impact and recognition that returning migrants receive in their communities.

## 5.5 Shifting Employment in Thailand

In all four case study areas, there is a widespread acknowledgment that the Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on employment in Thailand. The loss of jobs directly translates into a decline or complete loss of income for individuals and their households.

For migrants from Bakou of Pursat who primarily work in the construction and manufacturing sectors, there has been a decrease in service and buying demand. As a result, a considerable number of workers, especially migrants, have been laid off from their jobs. This has led to a direct loss of income for them and their families.

Similarly, migrants from Prek Norin of Battambang have also experienced similar impacts on their jobs. However, they faced additional challenges during the lockdown period, as they were not allowed to leave their homes, including going to marketplaces. Without work, their savings rapidly depleted, and they faced a shortage of food.

In Kamrieng of Battambang, the situation differs somewhat from the first two sites. Migrants working in the informal sector have been the hardest hit, while those employed in formal sectors, such as electronic factories, have experienced reduced working hours but continued operation. The informal sector workers, who depend on daily income for their food expenses, have been fortunate to receive some support from other migrants or informal associations of Cambodians in Thailand. Returning home has become a viable option for them. Unfortunately, this choice negatively affects their ability to repay outstanding loans and cover expenses related to their working documents in Thailand.

Overall, the Covid-19 pandemic has had a severe impact on employment in Thailand across all four case study areas. The loss of jobs has resulted in reduced income, depleted savings, food shortages, and difficulties in repaying loans and covering expenses for migrants from these areas.

## 5.6 Returning to Cambodia

Generally speaking, migrant workers with legal documents travel home twice a year for ceremonies celebrating Pchum Ben and the Khmer New Year. Before returning to Thailand, they stayed with their family for longer than two weeks or visited nearby tourist attractions. Some of them only travel home for major occasions like marriage, childbirth, end of working contract, bringing children back for school, or family member deaths. However, because of Covid-19 travel bans, city lockdowns, and job losses, the majority of them have not been back for more than two years, according to 54-year-old, Mrs. Phal.

Migrants with valid documentation can enter the country legally and travel home without using labor brokers. Some reported that their Thai boss provided free transportation from their place of employment to the Cambodian-Thai border. One respondent revealed that their Thai boss had paid for her daughter's transportation and food when she was traveling back home due to her pregnancy. But during Covid-19, some reported that they could cross the border without documents by bribing officials.

Officially documented migrant workers spend between US\$80 to \$100 on transportation, meals, and snacks on their own journey home. However, other respondents stated that if they needed to return home during the Covid-19 lockdown, they would need to spend between US\$200 to \$250 utilizing brokers.

**Sokea stated:**

***"I enter my home through an unofficial point of entry. At that moment, the border was uncontrolled and Thai border guards did not detain me either. However, I must pay US\$3 to the border police on the Cambodian side before entering. In addition, I pay a further US\$15 for a taxi from the border to my house."***



## 5.7 Social Assistance during the Covid-19 Pandemic

### 5.7.1 Health insurance and services in Thailand

Documented migrant workers are obligated to purchase health insurance, which comes at a monthly cost of approximately US\$15. By availing this service, they are exempted from paying fees for hospital visits related to minor illnesses or injuries, antenatal and postnatal care, as well as some Covid-19 vaccinations. They are also entitled to receive a sum ranging between US\$500 and \$600 as a post-birth benefit.

Nevertheless, according to other individuals interviewed, the initial antenatal visit incurs an expense of approximately US\$50, while the second visit carries a cost of around US\$20. Additionally, they are required to pay US\$35 for the first dosage of the Covid-19 immunization, but subsequent doses are provided free of charge.

In contrast, undocumented migrants are not compelled to obtain health insurance as they are employed in the informal sector, which includes roles such as fruit or vegetable sales, farm

guarding, seasonal growing/harvesting, and animal/fish feeding. Despite their involvement in the informal sector, these migrants often remained at work during the Covid-19 epidemic, restricted from leaving the living compound by their Thai employers. Although some of the migrants in this category were permitted to take a one- or two-week break during the peak of the outbreak, they still received their full salary during this period.

### 5.7.2 Assistance during Covid-19 in Thailand

The support and assistance varied depending on the employer and individual circumstances, leading to disparities in the experiences of migrant workers and their children during this challenging period.

### ដូចម្តេចដែលហៅថា អត្តសញ្ញាណកម្មគ្រួសារក្រីក្រ?

អត្តសញ្ញាណកម្មគ្រួសារក្រីក្រ គឺជាការកំណត់គ្រួសារក្រីក្រ កម្រិតភាពក្រីក្រ និងអត្រាគ្រួសារក្រីក្រ។



### តើការកំណត់ អត្តសញ្ញាណកម្មគ្រួសារ ក្រីក្រមានគោលបំណងអ្វី?

- ការអនុវត្តអត្តសញ្ញាណកម្មគ្រួសារក្រីក្រ មានគោលបំណង៖
១. កំណត់គ្រួសារក្រីក្រពិតប្រាកដ ដោយប្រើប្រាស់នីតិវិធីមួយដើម្បីប្រមូលទិន្នន័យ
២. ផ្តល់បណ្ណសមធម៌ឱ្យគ្រួសារក្រីក្រ និងជនងាយរងគ្រោះ សម្រាប់ធ្វើជាមូលដ្ឋានក្នុងការស្វែងរកសេវាគាំពារសង្គមនៅក្នុងក្រុងរាជធានីភ្នំពេញ
៣. ផលិតរបាយការណ៍ និងផ្តល់ទិន្នន័យគ្រួសារក្រីក្រ និងជនងាយរងគ្រោះនៅតាមបំណងកម្រិតនីមួយៗសម្រាប់ប្រើប្រាស់ក្នុងសកម្មភាពកាត់បន្ថយភាពក្រីក្រ។

### សារៈសំខាន់នៃការអនុវត្ត អត្តសញ្ញាណកម្មគ្រួសារក្រីក្រ

ការកំណត់អត្តសញ្ញាណកម្មគ្រួសារក្រីក្រត្រូវបានបង្កើតឡើងនៅឆ្នាំ២០០៦ គឺជាផ្នែកមួយនៃកិច្ចខិតខំប្រឹងប្រែងរបស់រាជរដ្ឋាភិបាលកម្ពុជា និងដៃគូអភិវឌ្ឍ ដើម្បីរួមចំណែកក្នុងការកាត់បន្ថយភាពក្រីក្រ។ នៅថ្ងៃទី២៧ ខែធ្នូ ឆ្នាំ២០១១ រាជរដ្ឋាភិបាលបានអនុម័តអនុក្រឹត្យលេខ ២៩១ អនក្រ.បក ស្តីពីអត្តសញ្ញាណកម្មគ្រួសារក្រីក្រ ដើម្បីកំណត់ពីការគ្រប់គ្រង និងអនុវត្តអត្តសញ្ញាណកម្មគ្រួសារក្រីក្រ និងការប្រើប្រាស់ទិន្នន័យគ្រួសារក្រីក្រនៅកម្ពុជា។ នាយកដ្ឋានអត្តសញ្ញាណកម្មគ្រួសារក្រីក្រនៃអគ្គនាយកដ្ឋានផែនការ ត្រួតពិនិត្យ និងការវាយតម្លៃសេដ្ឋកិច្ច គ្រប់គ្រងដំណើរការអនុវត្តនីតិវិធីអត្តសញ្ញាណកម្មគ្រួសារក្រីក្រនៅព្រះរាជាណាចក្រកម្ពុជា។ ទិន្នន័យគ្រួសារក្រីក្រត្រូវបានប្រើប្រាស់ជាចម្បងសម្រាប់ផ្តល់អន្តរាគមន៍ជំនួយសង្គមផ្សេងៗ។

កន្លងមក នាយកដ្ឋានអត្តសញ្ញាណកម្មគ្រួសារក្រីក្រ នៃអគ្គនាយកដ្ឋានផែនការ ត្រូវបានផ្តល់ការអនុវត្តនីតិវិធីអត្តសញ្ញាណកម្មគ្រួសារក្រីក្រទៅលើតំបន់គោលដៅចំនួន ៨៩ រាជធានី ខេត្តក្នុងមួយឆ្នាំ។ ការធ្វើបច្ចុប្បន្នកម្មទិន្នន័យគ្រួសារក្រីក្រត្រូវបានធ្វើឡើងរាល់៣ឆ្នាំម្តង។

ឆ្លើយតបទៅនឹងការរីករាលដាលនៃជំងឺកូវីដ ១៩ រាជរដ្ឋាភិបាលបានឱ្យក្រសួងផែនការអនុវត្តនីតិវិធីអត្តសញ្ញាណកម្មគ្រួសារក្រីក្រតាមការស្នើសុំនៅទូទាំងប្រទេស នៅឆ្នាំ២០២០ ដោយបានផ្លាស់ប្តូរពីការសម្ភាសន៍ដោយប្រើប្រាស់ក្រដាស មកជាការប្រើប្រាស់ប្រព័ន្ធទិន្នន័យ ដើម្បីពង្រឹងដល់ដំណើរការប្រមូល និងផ្តល់ទិន្នន័យគ្រួសារក្រីក្រផ្នែករាជរដ្ឋាភិបាលកម្ពុជា ឆ្លើយតបនូវតម្រូវការអន្តរាគមន៍ជំនួយសង្គមសម្រាប់ប្រជាពលរដ្ឋ និងគ្រួសារប្រជាពលរដ្ឋក្រីក្រ និងងាយរងគ្រោះ។

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ក្រសួងផែនការ



យល់ដឹងអំពី  
អត្តសញ្ញាណកម្ម  
គ្រួសារក្រីក្រ





Image provided by ADIC

The interviewees revealed varying experiences regarding the support they received during the Covid-19 lockdown. While some documented migrant workers expressed appreciation for receiving US\$500 financial aid provided by Thai businesses over a three-month period, others lamented the lack of assistance from both the Thai government and their employers. These individuals shared that their children, who were also affected by the lockdown, had to fend for themselves and procure essential items independently.

In contrast to the provision of food and supplies by charitable organizations and informal Khmer Associations in Thailand, some interviewees mentioned that their children were left to navigate the challenging circumstances without any aid.

The absence of support from the Thai government and their employers placed an additional burden on these families, as they had to find alternative means to ensure the well-being of their children.

Moreover, a few interviewees disclosed that their children had to bear the cost of the Covid-19 vaccine in Thailand, which amounted to approximately US\$30. However, these individuals acknowledged that their Thai supervisors provided assistance in terms of guiding them through the necessary procedures and paperwork required to access the vaccine. This highlights the importance of personal connections and relationships within the workplace in navigating challenges faced by migrant workers in obtaining crucial healthcare services.

### **5.7.3 Health service in Cambodia**

The situation for returning migrants who lacked an ID Poor card or who were infected with Covid-19 became increasingly challenging due to the financial burden placed on them. In order to access health services, these individuals were required to pay a fee ranging from US\$0.50 to \$0.75. On top of that, they were also obligated to pay approximately US\$20 for treatment facilities, which did not cover medical care and medication expenses.

However, the scenario differed for those who possessed an ID Poor card. These individuals were entitled to free health services and received an additional US\$1.25 per day for food. Unfortunately, a significant number of returning migrant workers did not possess an ID Poor card, which created difficulties for them in accessing healthcare

services when they were financially constrained. One interviewee, Mrs. Rin, shared her personal experience explaining that her daughter used to have an ID Poor card but lost it after she built a new house. To finance the construction, her daughter took a loan from a micro finance institution, resulting in the loss of her ID Poor card.

Given the circumstances, some interviewees mentioned that they resorted to using private clinic services or purchasing medicine directly from stores for minor illnesses during the Covid-19 pandemic. This was mainly because they still had to pay for public health services and the long distances they had to travel to access them. The combination of financial constraints and the logistical challenges of reaching public healthcare facilities led individuals to seek alternative options for their medical needs.

### **5.7.4 Assistance during Covid-19 in Cambodia**

Returning migrant workers were given a mask, tested for Covid-19, and taken to a quarantine facility when they arrived at the official point of entry. They were provided with three meals a day, sleeping material, a hygiene kit, daily health checks, and free transportation from the quarantine center to their hometown after 14 days there. If they tested positive for Covid-19, they were given free service treatment and remained in quarantine facilities.

Some of them received food aid such as uncooked rice, noodles, fish sauce, sugar, and cooking oil from the village chief, the Cambodian Red Cross (CRC), and charity organizations when they returned home. The Royal Government of Cambodia provided additional funds, ranging from US\$30 to over \$100 per month, to any returning migrant workers who had an ID Poor card, depending on the size of their family. One respondent stated that the village chief used to give her US\$10 first and then \$25 afterwards, although she was unaware of the source of the money.

However, the majority of returning migrant workers who participated in the interview stated that they never received assistance from the government or a charitable organization, possibly because they did not have an ID Poor card.



## VI. Conclusions

The study shows that migration has occurred as a result of many different kinds of drivers and motivations. In their migration journeys from Cambodia to Thailand and later return, migrants and their families at home have faced challenges, one of which is the lack of social protection services. Social protection plays a crucial role in addressing the needs and vulnerabilities of migrant workers and their families, particularly during times of crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic. The discussions and findings highlight various aspects of social protection measures implemented both in Thailand and Cambodia.

In Thailand, documented migrant workers are required to purchase health insurance, which provides them with access to healthcare services. The cost of health insurance is around US\$15 per month, and it covers expenses related to hospital visits, minor illnesses, injuries, antenatal care, postnatal care, and Covid-19 vaccinations. The insurance also provides financial support to migrant workers who give birth, offering them between US\$500 and \$600. This helps alleviate the financial burden of medical expenses and ensures that migrant workers can access necessary healthcare services without facing significant financial strain.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Thai employers took certain measures to support documented migrant workers. Regular health checks and medication were provided to ensure the safety and wellbeing of workers before allowing them to enter the workplace. Some employers continued to pay full monthly salaries to migrant workers, even if their working hours were reduced. Additionally, Thai businesses, informal Khmer Associations, charitable organizations, and employers offered assistance in the form of food supplies, including uncooked rice, noodles, soy sauce, eggs, and canned fish, to support migrant workers during lockdown periods.

However, the situation was different for undocumented migrants who worked in the informal sector. Since they were not required to purchase health insurance, they often faced

challenges in accessing healthcare services. Many of them engaged in low-skilled jobs such as fruit or vegetable sales, farm guarding, or seasonal agricultural activities. Although they were typically allowed to work during the pandemic, their movements were restricted by their employers, preventing them from leaving their living compounds. Some were granted short breaks but continued to receive their full salaries. These undocumented migrants faced difficulties in accessing healthcare services during minor illnesses, as they had to pay out-of-pocket for public health services and often had to travel long distances to reach healthcare facilities.

In Cambodia, returning migrant workers faced different social protection measures. When they arrived at official points of entry, they were tested for Covid-19, and if needed, they were taken to quarantine facilities where they received three meals a day, sleeping materials, hygiene kits, daily health checks, and free transportation to their hometowns after completing the 14-day quarantine period. In cases where returning migrants tested positive for Covid-19, they received free medical treatment and were required to stay longer in quarantine facilities.

Returning migrants who had an ID Poor card in Cambodia were entitled to additional support. They received free healthcare services and an extra US\$1.25 per day for food. The Royal Government of Cambodia provided financial assistance to returning migrants with ID Poor cards, ranging from US\$30 to over \$100 per month, depending on the size of their family. Some returning migrants received assistance in the form of food supplies from village chiefs, the Cambodian Red Cross, and charitable organizations. However, many migrants without ID Poor cards reported not receiving any support.



The findings also shed light on the challenges faced by migrant workers in accessing social protection. Many returning migrants did not possess an ID Poor card, which limited their access to healthcare services and financial support. This lack of identification often resulted from factors such as building houses or taking loans from microfinance institutions, leading to the loss of their ID Poor card eligibility. Additionally, the interviews revealed that there was a lack of clarity and information regarding the availability and utilization of social protection measures, especially among migrant workers and their families.

Overall, while there are social protection measures in place for migrant workers in both Thailand and Cambodia, there are still gaps and limitations in their implementation. Ensuring comprehensive and inclusive social protection systems that cover all migrant workers, regardless of their documentation status, is crucial for addressing their needs, protecting their rights, and promoting their wellbeing. Additionally, raising awareness among migrant workers about their entitlements and how to access social protection measures can contribute to more effective utilization of these services.

## VII. Policy Implications

Five main recommendations are suggested based on the findings. These recommendations aim to promote the wellbeing and rights of migrant workers by ensuring that they have access to adequate social protection measures, including healthcare, income support, and legal protections. Implementing these recommendations requires the commitment and collaboration of multiple stakeholders at the national, regional, and international levels.

- **Universalize Social Protection:** Extend social protection coverage to all migrant workers, regardless of their documentation status. Ensure that social protection measures are inclusive and accessible to all, including undocumented migrants and those in the informal sector. This can be achieved by removing legal and administrative barriers that prevent certain groups of migrants from accessing social protection services. The Social Assistance Programs which are under the umbrella of the Social Protection Framework should be implemented systematically by extending social assistance program accessible to migrant workers and their families.



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- **Enhance Information and Awareness:** Implement comprehensive information campaigns to raise awareness among migrant workers about their entitlements and how to access social protection measures. Provide clear and easily understandable information in multiple languages, targeting both documented and undocumented migrants. This can be done through various channels, including community outreach programs, mobile applications, and online platforms. This may also include the sub-national authority to provide on-demand IDPoor information to returning migrant workers.
- **Strengthen Collaboration:** Foster collaboration between governments, employers, civil society organizations, and international agencies to ensure a coordinated and comprehensive approach to social protection for migrant workers. Encourage dialogue and cooperation among stakeholders to identify and address gaps in existing systems and to develop innovative solutions. This can include sharing best practices, exchanging information, and jointly implementing social protection programs. One of the important areas of focus is that Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth rehabilitation (MoSAVY) and Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training (MoLVT) should support existing informal networks in Thailand so that they are fully capable of assisting vulnerable migrant workers in a timely and comprehensive manner.
- **Improve Access to Healthcare:** Enhance access to healthcare services for migrant workers, particularly for undocumented migrants and those in remote areas. This can involve reducing financial barriers by providing affordable or subsidized health insurance options for all migrant workers. The Ministries of Health in Cambodia and Thailand together with NGOs may explore the possibility and mobilize resources to establish mobile clinics or outreach programs to reach migrant workers in areas with limited healthcare facilities. Strengthen partnerships between public healthcare providers and private sector employers to ensure adequate healthcare coverage for migrant workers.
- **Strengthen Legal Protection:** Enforce existing labor laws and regulations to protect the rights of migrant workers and prevent exploitation. Implement mechanisms to monitor and address labor rights violations, such as non-payment of wages, unsafe working conditions, and human trafficking. Provide legal assistance and support services to migrant workers in cases of labor disputes or abuse. Strengthen the capacity of labor inspectorates and relevant authorities to effectively enforce labor protections for migrant workers. To prevent potential labor rights abuses, the Ministry of Interior (MoI) should cooperate with Thai government and border authorities in facilitating legal documents to ensure the legality of Cambodian migrant workers to work in Thailand.



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