



# **Consequences of Internal and Cross-Border Migration of Adult Children for their Older Age Parents in Cambodia: A Micro Level Analysis**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Cambodia provides a unique setting in which internal and cross-border migration in search of employment has become an increasing reality inescapably linked to the processes of development and globalization occurring throughout Southeast Asia. In Cambodia most of this migration emanates from rural to urban areas within the country as well as to rural and urban destinations outside of the country, especially in Thailand. Yet little research has been conducted to examine the consequences of such migration for the families involved.

Our paper examines migration at the family level with a focus on the variable effects of internal and cross-border migration for rural older-age parents who remain in the areas of origin. The analysis is based on quantitative and qualitative data from a study conducted in June and July 2010 in two communes of Battambang Province. One commune is located relatively near the Thai border while the other is off a national highway that connects the province to the capital Phnom Penh. The quantitative data comes from a survey of 265 respondents aged 60 to 70 with information they provided about themselves and their 1,268 children. The findings from the survey are richly supplemented by qualitative data from 30 open-ended follow-up interviews conducted with a sub-sample of the elderly respondents. The research findings include analysis about exchanges of material support, contact between migrants and parents, and associations of internal and cross-border migration with the material and psychological well-being of parents. The modest contrasts associated with internal and international migrations for families found in our study sites underscore that such findings are very much conditioned by specific settings thus making unqualified generalizations difficult.

## INTRODUCTION

The movement of people from rural areas in developing countries to cities and across borders, primarily in search of employment, is an inescapable consequence of development and the globalization process. Labor migration has become a persistent and accelerating reality in many developing countries, including Cambodia. How this impacts on family members including intergenerational solidarity is a matter of considerable debate (Knodel et al, 2007). Moreover, the impacts of internal and cross-border migration are rarely considered together. This study examines consequences of migration at the family level with a focus on the variable effects of internal and cross-border migration for rural older-age parents who remain in the areas of origin. Of main concern is to examine the extent to which material and social support to rural older-age parents from internal and cross-border migration of adult children differs as well as to compare associations between these two types of migration with various aspects of parents' well-being. The study also addresses several related questions: What is the prevalence of internal and cross-border migration? What are the destinations of the internal and cross-border migrants? What are the reasons why children migrate from the study sites? What are the risks associated with migration? The data on which our study is based permit us to describe actual experiences associated with internal and cross-border migration. However, the analyses are descriptive and not suitable for establishing relationships of causality.

Cambodia experienced nationwide demographic movements during the Khmer Rouge and post-Khmer Rouge eras, which resulted in the resettlement of large groups of people in both urban and rural areas. These migrations culminated in the 1990s with the repatriation of thousands of Cambodian refugees from the Thai border and the government takeover of the final Khmer Rouge strongholds. As the conflict-induced migrations subsided, economic and social change provided impetus to market-driven migration out of rural areas into cities, principally Phnom Penh, and across international borders, mainly Thailand. In the 1990s Cambodia's transition to an open market economy spurred the rapid rise of the garment industry, growth in tourism and construction and further integration with regional and world markets. These developments generated large-scale labor demand facilitated by expanding communication and infrastructure networks. Meanwhile several factors encouraged young adults to migrate out of their parents' homes in search of work. These included high population growth, low productivity in agriculture, successive crop failures from droughts and floods during 2000/05, rapid decline of natural resources, loss of traditional access to natural resources, and the lack of rural industry (Murshid, 2007; FitzGerald et al, 2007; Analyzing Development Issues, 2005; Ang et al, 2007; Ballard, 2007; Lim, 2008).

Internal and cross-border migration from rural areas in Cambodia is characterized by diverse patterns. With respect to internal migration, agricultural laborers travel to other provinces to transplant and harvest rice, work in plantations, grow cash crops, or raise poultry and livestock. Domestic migration to Phnom Penh provides higher paying jobs for young women in the garment factories and for the men in construction work. With regard to cross-border migration, agricultural laborers work seasonally at the Cambodia-Thailand border transplanting rice, picking cotton, and harvesting cash crops such as corn, sweet potatoes, sugar cane and pineapples. Some Cambodian migrants venture further into Thailand to work in construction, transport services or work on Thai fishing boats. More recently Cambodia international migrants

have found work in Malaysia and South Korea (Murshid, 2007; FitzGerald et al, 2007; Chan, 2009).

The migration process involves networks that include relatives, neighbors and friends with migration experience, and informal and formal recruitment agents. Domestic migrants rely on relatives and experienced migrant workers to help them find jobs. Often they make arrangements with informal agents and subcontractors who come into the village. Cross-border migration is decidedly more risky. Labor migration to Thailand is largely illegal and when using informal agents the costs may be high and the outcomes typically uncertain. Undocumented workers encounter problems in the payment of wages, loss of savings, police harassment and arrest (Murshid 2007; LSCW, 2007; Chan 2009).

Migrating across international borders through formal recruitment agencies is becoming increasingly more common and is generally considered to reduce risk. However a recent Asia Foundation report finds that the domestic and regional legal framework for labor migration is underdeveloped, that recruitment agencies are able to work with little regulation, and that victims of exploitation experience difficulties in prosecuting perpetrators (Holliday, 2011). A more damning report by Human Rights Watch (2011) details a wide range of abuses of Cambodian women working as maids in Malaysia, including debt bondage, underage recruitment and forced confinement by recruitment agencies, collusion between police and agencies, and physical and sexual abuse by Malaysian employers.<sup>1</sup>

Cross-border migrants into Thailand tend to be men, while garment factory and domestic service workers in Phnom Penh are virtually all young single women. The majority of migrants to Malaysia are women employed as domestic helpers, while most of the migrants to South Korea are men working in factories. Parents worry about the health and security of both their migrant daughters and sons. They worry about their daughters eating and sleeping properly and falling into bad company. They worry about their sons joining gangs, being tempted to use drugs, or becoming infected with HIV (Murshid, 2007; Chan, 2009).

A Cambodia Development Resource Institute (CDRI) study funded by the World Bank entitled *Moving Out of Poverty?* identifies migration for employment as a critical channel for improving the well-being of households and communities. At the same time the study cautions that migration is not a quick solution to poverty reduction as its impact is variable and often short term (FitzGerald et al, 2007). This observation is consistent with findings in the international literature: de Haas (2007) maintains that notwithstanding their often considerable benefit for individuals, households and communities, migration and remittances are no panacea for solving more structural development problems. Some authors find evidence of selection bias in the migration process. For example, if households with more education or income are more likely to produce migrants, then it is impossible to identify the effects of migration by simply comparing the characteristics of migrant and non-migrant households (McKenzie and Sasin, 2007). Examining the impact of international remittances on poverty, education and health in Latin America, Acosta et al, (2007) found that households with a lower propensity to migrate also have

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<sup>1</sup> On 14 October 2011 Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen ordered recruitment agencies to indefinitely stop sending Cambodian domestic workers to Malaysia following repeated reports of abuse and illegal activity. See Kuch Naren, "Gov't Suspends Sending Maids to Malaysia," *The Cambodia Daily*, 15-16 October 2011.

higher per capita incomes. Results from their counterfactual income estimates suggest that the impact of remittances on poverty is positive but modest.

A Social Science Research Council (SSRC) literature review on migrant remittances and development indicates a dearth of comparative studies on internal and international remittances. This has sparked much debate about how the effects of internal remittances – on poverty, inequality, gender and social stratification – differ from international remittances (Adams et al, 2009). One study in Mali found that international migrants are more likely to remit, and to remit more money, than internal migrants (Gubert, 2002). Results from another study in Morocco suggest that the incomes and living standards of internal migrant households are similar to non-migrant households. By comparison, international migrant households receive a major boost to their incomes from remittances, and tend to invest in housing and agriculture (de Haas, 2006).

The CDRI *Moving Out of Poverty?* study offers several reasons why migration does not easily translate into poverty reduction. Most internal labor migration in Cambodia is poorly paid and unskilled. Moreover it is largely seasonal, working conditions are often poor, and the prospect of ongoing work is uncertain. While garment factory workers receive higher pay these jobs are not for life, and young women typically return home, where they have limited prospects, or move into more vulnerable occupations in urban areas. In the study areas, tourism had limited impact except for opportunities in construction, where work was usually seasonal and often dangerous. Cross-border migrants can earn more in Thailand but undocumented workers risk losing their earnings when they return to Cambodia (FitzGerald et al, 2007).

Research undertaken as part of CDRI's *Participatory Poverty Assessment of the Tonle Sap* indicates that the effects of migration on household welfare are mixed. The study acknowledges that garment workers are generally able to send regular and substantial amounts of money back home. However, the flow of remittances from other domestic and cross-border migrants is characterized as volatile and unpredictable. While some migrants enjoy success others return home worse off having to work or sell land to pay off debt (Murshid, 2007).

Chan's cross-country labor migration study (2009) concludes that economic benefits from labor migration outweigh the costs. The majority of migrants are able to earn money and send remittances home. Notably, the earnings of those working deep inside Thailand or Malaysia are more substantial than those working on farms just over the Thai border. However, quite a few migrants who chose to go into Thailand illegally incurred losses and fell into serious debt. The study found that legal migrants had noticeably higher earnings than illegal migrants.

The Analyzing Development Issues' study *Impact of the Garment Industry on Rural Livelihoods* (2005) illustrates the importance of garment factory work in the lives of rice farming households in Prey Veng Province as they struggle to sustain their livelihoods amid rising agricultural input costs, declining rice productivity due to successive floods and droughts, and the fragmentation of family farms resulting from the marriage of children. The remittances flowing into the rural area allowed the disaster stricken households to purchase rice and other food, settle health expenses, invest in rice production, and pay off debts. Generally, remittances were spent to support recurrent costs of subsistence rather than to start small businesses. Rural livelihoods were thus sustained, although not transformed, by the garment industry.











Significantly higher percentages of non-married children and those aged less than 30 both co-resided and lived in the same village as their parents than did percentages of married children and those aged 30 or older. These differences reflect the life stages of the children with younger and non-married children more likely to live with or nearby their parents. Moreover, significantly higher percentages of female than male children also lived in the same village as their parents.

**Table 2. Percent of children in relation to living arrangements and migration status by sex, age and marital status**

Percent of children who are	Total	Sex		Age		Currently married (a)	
		Male	Female	<30	30+	No	Yes
In parental household	31.7	29.7	33.8	49.2	16.5***	64.6	11.2***
In the village (b)	59.0	56.0	62.0*	63.5	55.1***	69.8	52.2***
In the district (c)	68.9	68.3	69.7	71.0	67.2	71.1	67.4
Ever migrants	32.6	33.0	32.2	32.6	32.7	31.8	33.5
Returned migrants	4.4	4.1	4.7	4.9	4.0	4.3	4.7
Current internal migrants	20.7	19.8	21.4	21.1	20.3	19.9	21.5
Current migrants to Phnom Penh	4.6	3.5	5.6*	6.3	3.1**	7.9	2.9***
Current migrants out of country	7.6	9.1	6.1*	6.6	8.4	7.7	7.3
Current migrants in Thailand near border	1.8	1.8	1.9	1.2	2.4	1.6	2.0
Current migrants beyond Thai border (d)	5.8	7.3	4.2*	5.4	6.0	6.1	5.2
Base number of cases	1268	627	640	589	679	443	785

Significance levels: \*=.05 level; \*\*=.01 level; \*\*\*=.001 level.

Note: References to migrants in this table include those who recently left but are away for less than one year (continuously or cumulatively).

- (a) Excludes 29 cases below age 15 and 11 cases who are monks or of unknown marital status. Married includes those who are currently married but not living with spouse.
- (b) Includes children in the household.
- (c) Includes children in the household and village.
- (d) Includes migrants in other countries as well as Thailand.

Taken together there were no significant differences among current internal migrants based on sex, age and marital status. However, taken separately current internal migrants to Phnom Penh were significantly more likely to be single females under the age of 30, reflecting the preference of the Phnom Penh garment factories for this demographic of workers. Among cross-border migrants, the only statistically significant differences were with respect to gender. Considered both as an entire group and separately as those going beyond the Thai border region, cross-border migrants were more likely to be men than women. This perhaps reflects greater concerns about the perceived risks of international migration faced by women.

## Risks Associated with Migration

The open-ended interviews illuminate that older age parents are acutely aware of the risks associated with migration and express concern about the welfare of their migrant children. Most

parents appear to be reluctant for their children to leave although many see no alternative. A 64 year old widow from Talos commune with internal and cross-border migrant children voiced these sentiments:

I do not know what may happen to my children who earn their living far away. If they stayed here and could afford [to buy] food it would be all right. But they are poor.... I do not have anything so [some of] my children went away to earn their living and I stayed back with my daughter. If I were rich I would not let my children go away. But I am poor and getting old.... If I [tried to] stop them I would not be able to feed them. So I had to let them go.... I have to bear the hardship with my children.

Parents take what measures they can to protect their migrant children. A 64 year old man from Treng commune makes clear that he allowed his daughter to work in a Phnom Penh garment factory only because she stayed with a relative:

[My daughter] called a relative in Phnom Penh. The relative found her a job [in the garment factory] when she got there. I let her go because I have relatives there. Otherwise I would not have let her go.... I am happy because she earns money. If she stayed here, she would not be able to find anything.... [But] if she had to live outside, I would not let her go.

Parents also worry that their migrant children will fall into bad company. A 69 year old woman from Treng commune long separated from her husband and living with her recently returned migrant daughter from Thailand, spoke about her concern for her single son working in Kratie Province:

If the children are nearby, it is better. No matter what mistake my son makes I can give him guidance. But now that he is far away, I am worried that he will follow others and become bad.

The 60 year old village chief of Chisang in Treng commune who has children living in Battambang town expresses the conflicting feelings experienced by many parents:

The people in this village do not want their children to go away. It is because the parents are poor that the children have gone away.... Circumstances forced them to let their children go far away. The children did not want to go away from their parents either. They want to live close to their parents. But they ... had to go out to make money. For daughters to leave their parents, it is not ordinary.... Because their parents were facing such a hard time they had to migrate.... They had to look for money to help pay off their parents' debt. Their parents did not want their daughters to go but they could not help it.... When the parents ... have paid their debts, the children will come back.

Parents are particularly concerned about their daughters working abroad in other countries. Having guarantees from company recruitment agencies, and more importantly witnessing the positive experience of former migrants, helps to mitigate but not erase these concerns. A 61 year old father from Treng commune explained why he and his wife allowed his 18 year old daughter to work in Malaysia:

[My daughter] is training in Phnom Penh to work abroad in Malaysia.... She will work abroad through a company and will be able to come back home after two years.... She will serve other people cleaning the house, doing the laundry, taking care of the elderly.... My nieces have gone there and some have already come back... I let [my daughter] go because I saw other people who had gone and had earned money.... She has gone through a company which has guaranteed that nothing would happen [to her]..... [My wife and I] agreed to let her go because my nieces have gone there.

Migrating abroad through companies is generally considered to be the safer option, although unscrupulous companies have been known to take advantage of prospective migrants. The commune chief of Talos recognizes the need to be vigilant:

People go to Malaysia to work through companies. So far as a member of the authority I have been careful because I am concerned about trafficking in women and children. I have invited the companies that export labor to come and meet with the authority. Then I send them over to meet with the district governor who is responsible for women's affairs so that he can ask questions and check the documents to see if they are legitimate.

Clearly cross-border migration is more risky than internal migration. Some respondents described instances in which their undocumented migrant children were arrested and imprisoned in Thailand before being sent back to Cambodia. A 62 year old widow from Treng commune recounted this experience of a daughter who had migrated to Thailand:

[My other] daughter has also gone to Thailand, but after she was arrested and imprisoned, she never went back.... She worked at a construction site. The Thai [boss] did not pay her and when she talked to him, he informed the police and they arrested her.... She was then sent back to Cambodia.

The most heartrending stories came from two elderly women in Treng commune. Each spoke of their migrant sons who had apparently gone to sea on Thai fishing boats but whom had not been heard from again. One woman who resided in Kilo village said this about her son:

The elder son ... went to Koh Kong [Province].... We have never heard from him [since].... I heard he worked on boats.... I hope he is still alive. I am worried he might have been killed and thrown into the sea.

Another woman from Chisang village shared this story:

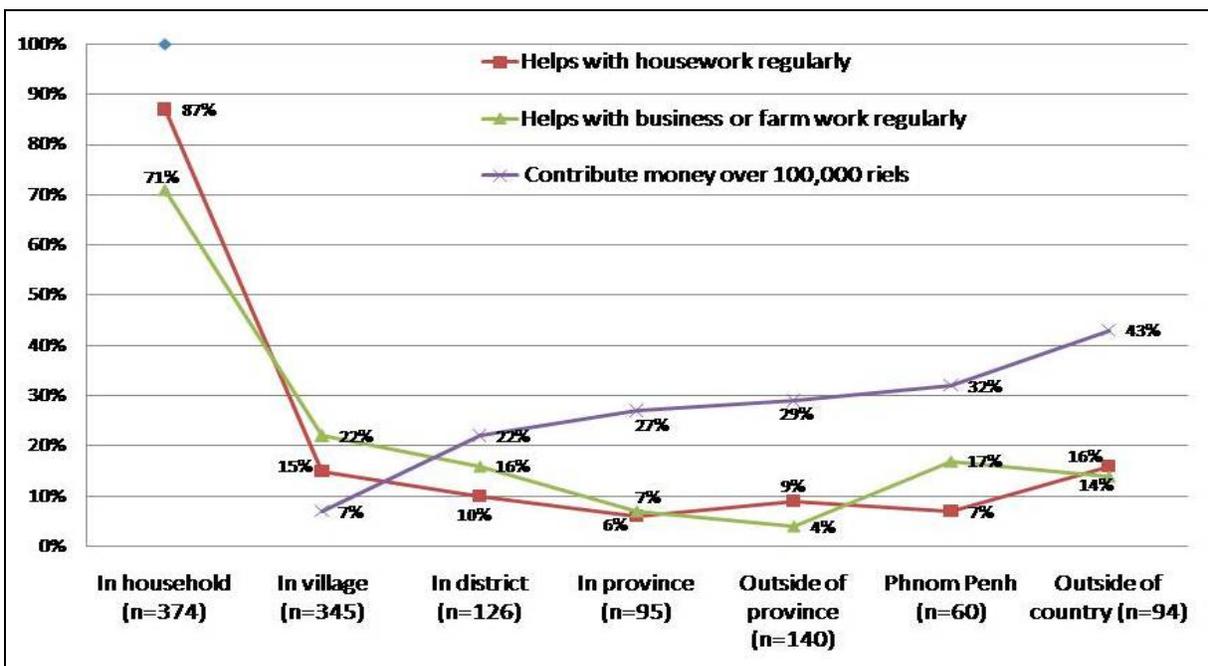
My son has gone to Thailand for six years now, and I have not heard from him. He has never sent me money or news. I do not know whether he is alive or dead.... He went to Thailand abruptly... He did not inform me.... Those who went with him have now come back already.... I asked his friends and they have not heard from him since then either. They only knew he worked on a boat.... I have no more hope for him.

### Exchanges of Support

Migration of adult children from rural areas has been said to leave elderly parents behind to work on their farms with no one to help (Murshid, 2007). This observation maintains that children who continue to live with their parents make greater contributions to them. Our study addresses this issue by correlating children’s contributions to parents with respect to regular help with housework, business or farm work and to monetary contributions. The findings show that while children who live with or near their parents provide more regular help with housework, business or farm work, children who live further away contribute more money.

Not surprisingly, co-resident children are by far the most likely to regularly help parents with housework (87 percent) and with business or farm work (71 percent). Those who live in the same village but in a different household are far less likely to do so but still more likely than other children who live further away. Given that the large majority of parents have a child in the household, this evidence contradicts the view that high rates of migration among their children leave parents behind to with no one to help. At the same time, 43 percent of the children living outside of the country contributed more than 100,000 riels (US\$ 25) in the past year to their parents. By comparison, only 7 percent of children living in the same village contributed this much (Figure 2).<sup>2</sup>

Figure 2. Children’s contributions to parents by child’s location of residence



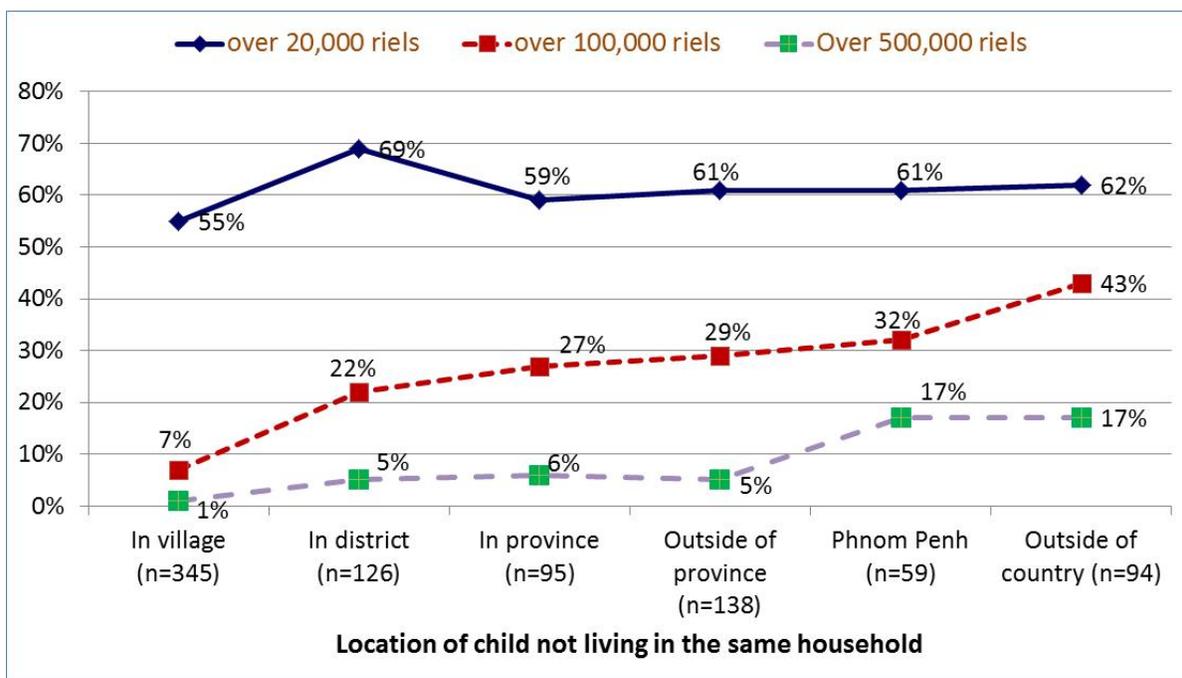
Note: The high percentages of children in Phnom Penh and outside the country helping with business or farm work regularly in the past year were due to the fact that they were recent migrants, away for less than one year.

<sup>2</sup> Monetary contributions from coresident children are not considered due to difficulties in interpretation as presumably many households have a common budget and money received from a coresident child might likely be used for household expenses that directly benefit the child who made the contribution.

These findings suggest that children make different and complementary types of contributions to their parents depending on their location of residence. Children who continue to live with their parents are available to make valuable contributions by providing regular help with business and farm work and it is crucial not to underestimate this support. At the same time children working outside of the district within Cambodia and outside of the country, while obviously not available to provide regular help with business and farm work, frequently contribute important monetary support.

Of note, the percentages of non-co-resident children contributing over 500,000 riel (US\$ 125) to their parents in the past year noticeably increases for those children living in Phnom Penh and those outside Cambodia (Figure 3). This suggests that these destinations provide higher-paying work for migrant children. Meanwhile a majority of non-co-resident children irrespective of their locations contributed over 20,000 riel (US\$ 5) to their parents in the past year. These relatively small contributions had important symbolic value bonding children to parents especially during the culturally important Khmer New Year and P’Chum Ben festivals as well as providing parents with small amounts of money to make donations at the pagoda.

**Figure 3. Children sending money to parents in past year by location of child**



Exchanges of support and services between parents and children can flow in either direction or be entirely absent. Not only do migrant children contribute monetary support to their parents. Parents often provide material support to migrant children, especially in financing costs incurred at the early stages of the migration process. Among the 344 ever migrant children away for at least one year, 48 percent received help from their parents to pay migration expenses. While international ever migrant children were more likely to receive this support than internal ever























