

MIGRATING PERILS

Covid-19 restrictions disparage Cambodian migrant workers, blurring legal status amid Thai border closures

Cambodian migrant workers continue to face challenges as many live in rural areas with high poverty rates, insufficient job opportunities, low crop yields, and high levels of household indebtedness. These push factors force Cambodian families to weigh meeting basic needs against personal risk as households engage in labour migration, mainly in neighbouring Thailand. Border closures worsen an already precarious journey. As formal points of entry closed, informal brokerage markets emerged.

Informal border crossings invalidated migrant travel documents, and in the process documented migrants lost their legal status, becoming undocumented. Children frequently accompany migrant parents and engage in caretaking of siblings or paid light work — the majority of whom (working children ages 5-17) have limited to no access to schooling. Economic hardships from pandemic restrictions drove many to journey back to Thailand, despite health risks and exploitive costs for informal border crossings.

Key points

- Full or partial border closures spurred informal border crossings, which invalidate legal documents in the host country. As a result, most migrants became undocumented.
- Covid-19 travel restrictions in Thailand and border closures negatively impacted access to health and food needs for laid off migrants or migrants with reduced work hours.
- Working-aged children often migrate with parents and either stop attending school or are unable to go to school. Reported child labour cases were few but typically involved light work.
- Migrant workers who returned to their villages in Cambodia are dependent on low-wage agricultural activities, pushing them further into debt and poverty.
- Migrant workers are influenced to migrate through a network of people including family members, friends working in Thailand, neighbours, and brokers.



I have all documents to travel and work in Thailand. But because I returned in July 2021 when the border was closed, I have to travel through illegal check point with the help of *maekjol* [informal brokers] to get through. My passport is no longer valid, because it was not stamped at the check point.

direct interview with a returning
Cambodian migrant **woman in Bakou Village**

Introduction

Driven to seek work across the border in Thailand for higher-wage jobs, Cambodian workers migrating to Thailand make up an estimated 92 percent of the 1.2 million Khmer who work overseas. This large and vulnerable population has faced poor working conditions for decades but now face greater risks of exploitation along migration channels, including the risk of human trafficking. Conditions for migrant workers, both in Thailand and at home in Cambodia, continue degrading as the pandemic lingers.

As Thai officials responded with efforts to control Covid-19 cases, many businesses were shut, and the rate of return migration to Cambodia increased. Thailand and Cambodia both reported first cases in January 2020 with full or partial lockdowns imposed at the border by March 2020.

Despite many Cambodian migrant workers fleeing Thailand to escape the pandemic, some find their way back to Thailand. Migrants returned home to the same social conditions that drove them to initially migrate:

- Meager employment opportunities in local areas
- Increased indebtedness to moneylenders (*often with exorbitant interest rates*)
- Low income from rice farming; poor rice yields (*crop damage from droughts and floods*)

Some returned migrants remained in their villages and worked their agricultural land, engaged in petty trade, or did wage work to survive; however, such endeavors remained insufficient to meet basic needs. Since these original push factors remained virtually unaddressed, others looked for opportunities to migrate again believing they would get better pay.

New informal migration channels emerged posing even greater risks for this large vulnerable population.

“During Covid-19, the factory reduced the available work due to reduced demand [for their goods] from clients. The working schedule was rearranged and no more overtime was provided, which meant my monthly income was less. As a result, I couldn't remit my monthly income as I'd previously done.

via direct interview with **Sokha**,
a returning Cambodian migrant

Impact of Covid-19 on migrants

Covid-19 impacted migrant employment in Thailand. Job loss directly translated to declining or loss of income for themselves in Thailand and their households in their home country.

A serious outbreak in a Thai factory in January 2021 drove migrant workers to return to Cambodia fearing infection. Thai officials ordered a lockdown in cities and implemented curfews. Thousands of migrant workers became stranded in their workplaces with already limited wages and now fewer travel options.

Thailand border closures and restrictions negatively impact healthcare access and food security as migrants faced layoffs or reduced hours. **Cambodian migrants did not qualify for vaccination programmes in Thailand.** Covid testing and other health expenses remain migrants' responsibility, posing a key challenge given migrants' reduced incomes.

Migrants returning to Cambodia

260,000
migrant workers

February 2021 to December 2021, more than 260,000 migrant workers crossed formal and informal points of entry to return to Cambodia, mostly from Thailand, as a result of the Covid-19 outbreak.

source: Phnom Penh Post, 21 December 2021

Mass return stemmed from travel restrictions, fear of subsequent lockdowns, and avoiding Covid-19 infection while in a foreign country.

Respondents from Bakou of Pursat experienced reduced hours or low buying demand resulting in layoffs. Respondents from Prek Norin of Battambang described similar employment impacts, but added that without work to do, their savings eroded and they faced food shortages — restrictions prohibited migrants from going anywhere, including marketplaces.

Upon return to Cambodia during Covid-19 restrictions, it was found that no formal assistance was available for returning migrants in terms of food or financial support. Only those who had poor ID cards received some meager food and financial assistance.

In June 2021, the Cambodian prime minister advised migrant workers *not* to return to Cambodia and remain at their workplace to reduce virus spread into communities. Cambodia officials established quarantine facilities and instructed returning migrants to self-isolate. Informal Cambodian associations provide some access to food and other basic support.

Many migrants returned to Cambodia but faced the same impoverished conditions and found their way migrating back to Thailand through informal broker networks; those who had passports and relevant documents therefore became undocumented.

Findings

Financial hardships, environmental shocks affecting crop yields, indebtedness, and lack of employment opportunities drive Cambodian households to engage in labour migration, primarily to Thailand. All respondents reported working in Thailand multiple times, averaging five years.

Covid-19 travel restrictions closed the Thai-Cambodian border resulting in Cambodian migrants embarking on the journey through informal points of entry.

Returning Cambodian migrants attempted to run petty trade, but made insufficient income to sustain their household. Thus, most were unable to support their family or pay off debts and soon decided to go back to Thailand through brokers and informal channels. Major external influences to migrate also came from relatives, neighbours, and friends already working in Thailand.

Respondents from all target areas reported child labour activities occurred in agriculture and construction sectors — however, only few cases were found. Child workers engaged in light work duties such as: picking fruit, feeding animals or guarding Thai farmland. Respondents reported children working full-time and doing adult work for wages of US\$5-\$7 per day while adults made US\$10 per day. Child workers live under threat of arrest, since Thai police patrol working areas and make arrests.

Some migrant children had access to schooling in Thailand, while others did not. Some children accompany their migrant parents at a young age for several years, but at the time of this study, most of the children had reached working-age and worked with their parents.

Peril and exploitation

Kamrieng target area

One respondent reported she and her three small children swam across a river and nearly drowned before a Cambodian soldier offered aid.

Migrants would spend 1-2 nights in the jungle risking arrest from Thai police and run to the border and pay Cambodian soldiers US\$10-\$15 to enter Cambodia.

In some cases, one taxi could take 4-5 migrants across the border per trip at a cost of US\$200-\$350 per person. In other cases, informal brokers seated people on top of each other with 10-15 people in one taxi costing US\$100-\$150 per person.

Risks of exploitation of Cambodian migrant workers not only exists in foreign lands. Regardless of the reason, if migrants return back to their native land of Cambodia, food insecurity, low income, and poor job security are ensured. Indeed, they are burdened further, instead of finding relief from foreign exploitation that migrants had originally fled.

Respondents reported migrants working in the formal economy had medical coverage packages (either partial or full) as a part of their employment contract and some had health cards provided by employers. However, undocumented migrants working in the informal economy had to pay medical expenses on their own. In some cases, healthcare expenses took a significant portion of their income, including high costs for personal protection (e.g. face masks, hand sanitiser, testing, etc.).

This research highlighted a lack of health coverage for undocumented migrants in Thailand. During the severe measures in response to the pandemic, some migrants had support from informal Cambodia associations in Thailand for food and other basic support.

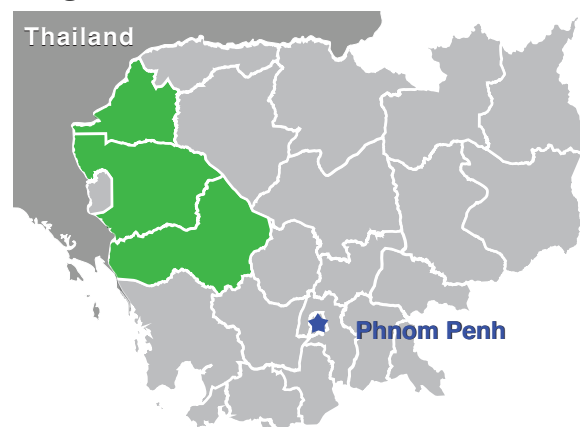
Primary data collection

The research took place in four areas in three provinces along and near the Thai-Cambodian border. Selected target areas share several similar social characteristics:

- Improvement in infrastructure and border relations contributed to increased migration rates
- Labour migration patterns mostly undocumented; regular seasonal migration
- Supplemental household income from seasonal migration; economically depressed areas; unskilled workforce

This qualitative research is based on interviews with 81 respondents (27 men and 54 women).

Target areas



source: Adapted from Free Vector Flags.
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Banteay Meanchey Province
Malai District

Battambang Province
Kamrieng District
Prek Norin District

Pursat Province
Bakou Village

Policy recommendations

Border actor engagement

Coalition-building and information-sharing

- Conduct regular meetings with border actors (e.g. provincial and local governing authorities, PoE officers, border soldiers, healthcare staff, and development partners) for sharing border movement updates and existing challenges.
- Discuss coordination mechanisms to minimise precarity of returning Cambodian migrants' legal status. Many returned Cambodian migrant workers are classified with an illegal status or are becoming undocumented, which expose migrants to exploitation if traveling back to Thailand for work.
- Border actors could be important supporters of migrant workers and can play a more active role in providing better information on safe migration.

Social protection schemes

Targeted social assistance for migrant families

- Develop health programmes for migrants as many endure shrinking household incomes and higher healthcare expenses as a result of the pandemic and as a consequence of becoming undocumented.
- Provide information to migrants or potential migrants about options to access the Thai school system or other education arrangements. A necessary step to reduce harmful child labour practices will be facilitating migrant children to continue schooling.
- Create livelihood support activities for returning migrants through public initiatives or project development partners. Development activities should focus on responding to local market needs so Cambodian families do not have to make decisions to migrate out of necessity.
- Coordinate emergency food relief to poor migrants returning to Cambodia and migrants arriving in Thailand. Request food packages from Cambodian Red Cross or other project development partners. ■

Further reading

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