Stockholm Environment Institute

World Vision EAST ASIA

CLIMATE CHANGE, VULNERABILITY AND MIGRATION:

IMPACTS ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Sumamry 6

1. Introduction 29

1.1 Global and regional commitments on children, migration and climate change 33

1.1 An incomplete picture 36

1.2 Research questions and analytical framework 38

1.3 Study design and methods 40

2. Climate change, vulnerability and human (im)mobility: national perspectives 48

2.1 Cambodia 51

2.2 Lao PDR 55

2.3 Viet nam 60

3. The view from the villages: economic precarity, environmental pressures and mobility 70

3.1 Debt and economic precarity in northwestern cambodia 71

3.2 Struggling with too much or too little water at the lao-thai border 76

3.3 People living upstream in the western mountains of viet nam 81

4. Parental migration and the children who stay behind 89

4.1 Why do parents migrate? 91

4.2 Journeys and destinations 95

4.3 Impacts on children remaining behind 100

5. Child migration in the context of environmental change 117

5.1 Why do children migrate? 119

5.2 Journeys and destinations 122

5.3 Impacts of child migration on development and well-being 127

5.4 Child migrants' own aspirations 129

6. Towards a brighter future: an agenda for action 134

6.1 Enhance community resilience through robust infrastructure and disaster preparedness 137

6.2 Provide flexible and fair support for sustainable livelihoods 141

6.3 Protect both parents and children who migrate 144

6.4 Care for caregivers – and the children who stay with them 148

6.5 Empower children and youth to be able to build a better future for themselves 151

References 156

Annex: Research design 168

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FOREWORD

The climate crisis is one of the greatest forces shaping our world – both present and future. None of us is immune to this fact; however, the reality is most acutely felt by those families already living precariously close to the edge, just one drought or flood away from the tipping point. In the face of an increasingly volatile environment and too few options, many are compelled to migrate in search of alternative livelihoods. In some cases, children join their parents, in others, they remain behind. And in the most desperate of circumstances, it is the children themselves who must set out to provide for their loved ones.

This report tells the stories of 92 children, young adults, parents and caregivers whose families have been disrupted and reshaped by migration. Collectively, they produce a confronting mosaic, coloured by systemic injustice, exploitation and deprivation, and contrasted by the profound love and commitment that ignites families to persist in the hope of a brighter future for their children.

We share in this hope. Since 1950, World Vision has remained steadfast in its commitment to upholding the rights of the most vulnerable children in Asia through our development, humanitarian and advocacy programs. Understanding and responding to the unique needs of children in the context of migration is increasingly critical to our ability to effectively serve the most vulnerable children in this highly dynamic, rapidly urbanizing region.

The success of our mission also relies on effective partnerships. Through this collaboration with the Stockholm Environment Institute, we have been able to present the consequences of the vulnerability–climate change–migration nexus for children, without losing the deeply moving, human elements in the analysis. As you read this report, we hope you will see each of the individuals behind the stories which have been so generously shared, and that you will be compelled to partner with us to take action.

Terry Ferrari
Regional Leader, East Asia
World Vision International

As the climate crisis deepens, its impacts on the most vulnerable are becoming heartbreakingly clear. This report reveals how environmental stressors and migration are profoundly altering the lives of young people in this region, and it clearly portrays the challenges and injustice of "life at the intersection of climate change, poverty and marginalization". The findings underscore the urgent and undeniable need for inclusive climate and migration approaches to address the root causes of distress migration and the deep social and emotional scars it leaves on vulnerable children and those who care for them.

Every child deserves a safe, secure and enabling environment in which to develop, yet the stories within this report paint a stark and very unsettling picture: children are often separated from their parents, deprived of education, and exposed to exploitation, all in a desperate hope for a better life. Whether they stay behind or migrate, their well-being, their childhood and their future hang in the balance.

At SEI Asia, we are committed to conducting research that supports evidence-based decision-making and practice, ensuring that policies and interventions protect the rights and resilience of the most marginalized. This report, in partnership with World Vision International, is not just a call to action; it is a plea to recognize and respond to the profound challenges these children face, and to empower them to build a future filled with hope.

We hope this report will catalyse deeper dialogue and stronger collaboration among national governments, international organizations and civil society to create opportunities for children and youth to thrive.

Niall O'Connor
SEI Asia Centre Director

DISCLAIMER

The views expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of World Vision International. The designations employed and the presentation of material throughout the publication do not imply expression of any opinion on the part of World Vision International concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area, or of its authorities, or concerning its frontiers or boundaries.

The photos used in this report are for illustrative purposes only and do not depict the actual villages where the research was conducted, in order to protect anonymity.

This document is the full report. To download the executive summary and the shorter version of the report, go to https://bit.ly/3Xn3rVq

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Climate change and environmental degradation affect people in profoundly different ways depending on their socio-economic class, education, age, gender, race, (dis)ability and other factors. Due to systemic injustices, the poorest and most vulnerable tend to suffer most – whether they are subsistence farmers who lose their crops in a drought, or entire communities washed away by floods.

For generations, people in Southeast Asia have migrated in search of better opportunities than they can find at home. As climate change puts ever more strain on rural livelihoods, and many families fall deep into debt, migration may increasingly seem like their only option. Yet when people migrate in distress, research has shown, they often suffer abuse and exploitation.

Migration also reshapes and disrupts family relationships. When parents go to work in the city or across the border, they often leave their children behind, especially the youngest. Low-wage migrant workers have no legal way to take their dependents to another country, and irregular migration is risky and stressful. Migrant workers also typically work long hours and endure difficult living conditions.

The children who do migrate tend to follow similar routes as adults. Some travel with their parents and end up working alongside them; some migrate alone, often because they want to help their family with basic expenses, pay off debts, or save up for a better future.

This report examines the impacts of labour migration on children in the context of climate change – whether they stay behind or migrate themselves. Through interviews with pre-adolescents and teenagers in six villages in Cambodia, Lao PDR and Viet Nam, as well as young returned migrants, migrant parents and grandparents, it portrays life at the intersection of climate change, poverty, marginalization and injustice. Altogether, 92 personal stories inform the analysis, supplemented by interviews with village chiefs, other local leaders and experts, and a review of national policies and the research literature.

The goal is to shed light on the drivers of migration, young people's needs and aspirations, and ways for national governments, donors and development partners, and international organizations to make a difference. The results will inform the work of World Vision's East Asia office, which is committed to supporting safe, orderly and dignified migration that upholds the rights, well-being and opportunities of migrants, particularly vulnerable groups such as children.

The study focuses on Southeast Asia because it is a dynamic, ethnically and socio-economically diverse region with significant migration and large disparities in human development. It is also young, with nearly 27% of its population under 15 years of age in 2022, and another 16% aged 15–24. The UN estimates that as of 2020, there were about 10.6 million international migrants in Southeast Asia, with Thailand hosting by far the largest numbers; about 1.27 million were under 18 years old.

Southeast Asia also stands out for its high exposure to natural hazards, including deadly cyclones, torrential rains and floods. Climate change is intensifying those hazards and also bringing sea-level rise, more extreme heat, unreliable rainfall and droughts. Those impacts exacerbate disaster risks and jeopardize livelihoods and human well-being. Multiple social, political, economic and environmental factors deepen vulnerability and limit people's capacity to adapt – in place or through migration.

CLIMATE CHANGE, VULNERABILITY AND MIGRATION: NATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

Southeast Asia has made significant progress on human development in recent decades, but large gaps and disparities remain, both within and across countries. Gross domestic product (GDP) per capita in 2023 was just US$1,875 in Cambodia and $2,075 in Lao PDR, compared with $4,347 in Viet Nam and $7,172 in Thailand. There are also large differences in social and physical infrastructure, education and health care, and the availability of job opportunities beyond agriculture.

Cambodia, Lao PDR and Viet Nam all have mostly-rural populations; economies in which informal employment prevails; and exposure to a wide range of climate hazards, with frequent disasters. Climate change is hindering development, amplifying disparities and pushing people deeper into poverty. Table ES-1 provides an overview of key indicators of human development and climate vulnerability.

Table ES-1. Key indicators of human development and climate vulnerability

Country	Human Development Index (2022)[a]		Multidimensional poverty rate[a]	ND-GAIN Country Index rank (2021, of 192)[b]		Children's Climate Risk Index[c]	
	Index (0–1)	Rank (of 193)		Vulnerability	Readiness	Climate & environment	Child vulnerability
Cambodia	0.600	148	16.6%	132	159	7.2	5.6
Lao PDR	0.620	139	23.1%	117	136	7.5	5.8
Thailand	0.803	66	0.6%	102	62	8.4	2.3
Viet Nam	0.726	107	1.9%	128	93	8.8	3.0

Sources: (a): UNDP, 2024; (b): Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative; (c) UNICEF, 2021. The HDI is a composite index covering three basic dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, knowledge and a decent standard of living; it ranges from 0 to 1, with countries scoring above 0.8 rated as having "very high" human development. Multidimensional poverty refers to deprivations related to health, education and standard of living, looking beyond monetary poverty. The ND-GAIN Index considers different aspects of food security, water access, human health, ecosystem services and human habitat to gauge vulnerability to climate change, and economic, social and governance measures to gauge readiness to adapt. The Children's Climate Index assesses exposure to climate and environmental hazards as well as vulnerability based on health and nutrition, education, water, sanitation and hygiene, poverty, communication assets and social protection, all on a scale of 0 to 10.

In Cambodia, as of 2022, an estimated 30.5% of the population was less than 15 years old, and 17.1% was 15–24. The country has made major progress on poverty reduction: While in 2014, more than two in five children lived in multidimensional poverty, by 2021–2022, the share was 20.5%. Rural areas saw by far the greatest gains, though many people also migrated to cities in that period. As of 2021–2022, nearly 21% of women aged 20–24 and 30% of men in that age group were internal migrants. Notably, given how many children stay behind with their grandparents, Cambodia has some of the highest disability rates in the world, reaching 57% among those aged 60 and older.

Cambodia has prioritized adaptation to climate change, recognizing its many vulnerabilities, and paid special attention to the needs of children, women, ethnic minorities and other marginalized groups. It has also sought to protect migrant youth in the workplace. However, it has not explicitly addressed links between climate change and migration in its policies and planning, or the implications for children.

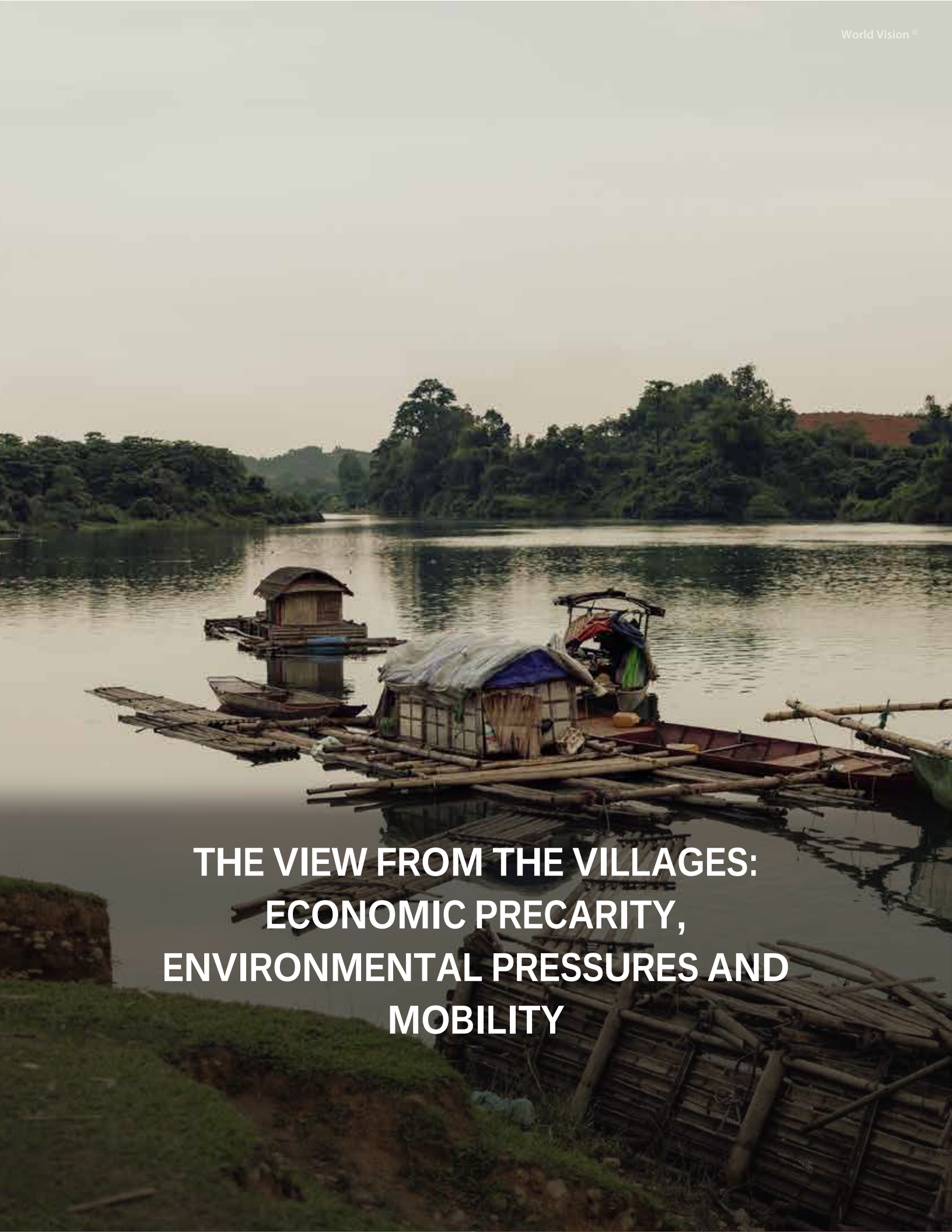
Lao PDR is even younger than Cambodia – 31% of its population is under 15 – and very ethnically diverse, with more than 49 officially recognized ethnic groups. Agriculture accounts for an estimated 70% of employment, and as of 2023, an estimated 7.6% of employed people 15 and older lived on less than US$2.15 per day. Lack of education is a key factor: just under 19% of women aged 25 and older, and just over 30% of men over 25, had any secondary education at all as of 2022.

Lao PDR's climate plans and policies have not significantly addressed gender disparities or the specific needs of children and youth, and do not address links to migration. However, other policy instruments have sought to promote gender equality and protect children. Policies to protect labour migrants have focused on adults, while efforts around child migrants have mainly focused on preventing trafficking.

Viet Nam is well ahead of Cambodia and Lao PDR in terms of economic growth and diversification. Its GDP has more than quadrupled since 2000, the extreme poverty rate dropped from nearly 30% to 1%, dependence on agriculture has declined significantly, and human development has greatly improved. Still, there are large regional disparities, and internal migration has soared, particularly towards the southeast.

Of the three countries profiled, Viet Nam faces the most daunting climate hazards, including extreme heat and major flood risks linked to sea-level rise and coastal storms, which have led the World Bank to identify northern Viet Nam as a likely climate migration "hotspot" by 2050. The country's national adaptation plan (NAP), focused on 2021–2030 with a vision to 2050, explicitly mentions migration as both a likely outcome of climate change and a factor that exacerbates vulnerability. The NAP seeks to contribute towards improving social justice by focusing on disadvantaged groups. Viet Nam is also ahead of its neighbours in advancing child protection, including around disaster risks and pollution.

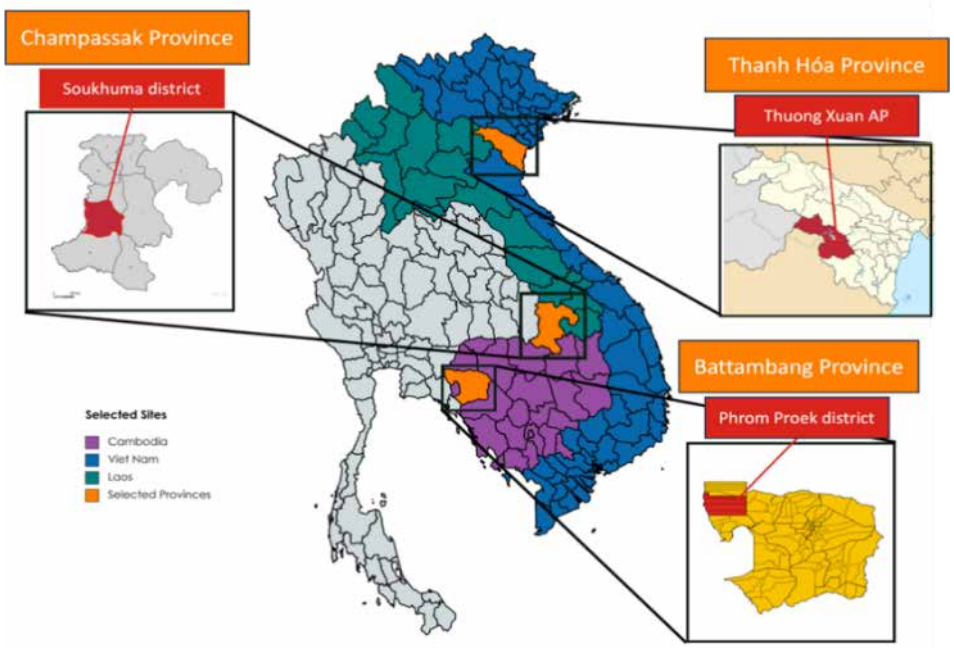
Notably, in all three countries, development has improved conditions – for instance, by making irrigation more widely available, adding roads and expanding electricity access – but also created new vulnerabilities. It is common for projects to result in significant displacement, and major infrastructure projects have also affected flood risks and other conditions in surrounding communities.



THE VIEW FROM THE VILLAGES: ECONOMIC PRECARITY, ENVIRONMENTAL PRESSURES AND MOBILITY

The field research focused on two villages in one district in each country. The sites, shown on Map ES-1, were chosen to reflect not a cross-section of society, but the perspectives of those in the greatest need of support to cope with climate change. From a justice perspective, if existing efforts do not make their lives better, they are not good enough.

Map ES-1. Selected case study districts



Source: Authors' own work.

PHNOM PROEK DISTRICT, BATTAMBANG PROVINCE

Phnom Proek district is in northwestern Cambodia, bordering Thailand. It is one of the main sites for irregular border crossings. Migrants go to work in agriculture, construction, domestic labour and other occupations, seasonally or long-term. Internal migration is also common.

The area was a stronghold of the Khmer Rouge during the civil war, which left lasting impacts on the environment and infrastructure. The disability rate in Battambang is among the highest in the country, and there are notable gaps in access to basic services such as safe drinking water and sanitation. Two-thirds of workers are employed in agriculture, fishing or forestry, and over three-quarters are self-employed or unpaid family workers. Families face severe economic pressures from debt, poverty and climatic shocks.

In the first village, labelled C1, low-income farmers grow maize, potatoes and other vegetables and rely on microfinance to help pay for farm inputs and land. Several floods, droughts and storms have caused crop failures, exacerbating economic and nutritional insecurity and driving people deep into debt. Floods also disrupt children's education, as roads become inaccessible. Persistent struggles have led many people to migrate, mainly for industrial jobs in the city or for construction and plantation work in Thailand.

The second village, labelled C2, has experienced disruptive floods as well as droughts, both of which affected crops, and storms that damaged housing. Large debts to microfinance providers are also a significant problem, and farmers lack direct access to markets, instead depending on middlemen who set low prices for their crops. As in C1, floods disrupt children's education. Migration is also common here, but increasingly, people are moving to the cities to work in industry instead of crossing into Thailand.

SOUKHUMA DISTRICT, CHAMPASACK PROVINCE

Champasack province, in southwestern Lao PDR, borders both Thailand and Cambodia. Soukhuma district is in a floodplain at the Thai-Lao border and is overwhelmingly rural. More than a fifth of residents lack a road connection, so they cannot readily travel to school or to jobs outside their villages. Access to basic services is minimal, and across Champasack province, only about a quarter of all people over the age of 6 have completed even primary school.

Livelihoods in Soukhuma district are mainly agricultural, such as growing rice or cassava and raising livestock and poultry. This makes households very vulnerable to climate change and variability. Rainfall is becoming more extreme, with heavy rains and wet spells alternating with dry spells. Farmers in the district have been growing cassava to improve their livelihoods, but mono-cropping poses a threat to long-term soil health and to people's nutrition. Hunger is common.

The first village, L1, is in a low-lying area next to a river, highly exposed to floods. There is no bridge, and when the waters rise, people cannot travel by boat, and the village is isolated. Residents are part of the Suay ethnic minority and mostly poor farmers.

Floods often damage or destroy crops, and in 2019, the flooding was so severe that villagers were temporarily displaced. The poorest people are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of floods. Many migrate to Thailand after hearing about job opportunities.

The residents of village L2 are also farmers, growing crops such as cassava and vegetables and fishing. Floods are not frequent there, but there are droughts, and conditions are hot and dry, made worse by climate change and deforestation. Storms and strong winds also often damage homes. Most migration from this village is long-term, mainly to Thailand, for everything from domestic work to construction jobs. The households that have not resorted to migration usually own land and are relatively wealthy.

THUONG XUAN DISTRICT, THANH HOA PROVINCE

Thuong Xuan is a mountainous district in Thanh Hoa province, in north central Viet Nam, that borders Lao PDR. Much of the district has no significant roads and is very rural and remote. It is also one of the poorest in Viet Nam, with about a quarter of households living in poverty as of 2019. The area has well-developed industrial and service sectors, however, so there are viable alternatives to farming.

Thanh Hoa as a whole has a tropical monsoonal climate, and its coastline is frequently struck by tropical storms and typhoons. Thuong Xuan district is inland, but still experiences heavy rains, floods and landslides. It is also the site of the Cua Dat project, Viet Nam's largest hydropower and irrigation dam, on the Chu River. Past typhoons have affected the stability of the reservoir, and some vulnerable households that were resettled by the original project could not afford land that was safe from flood risks.

The combination of heavy rains and increased reservoir water levels has led to severe floods and loss of arable land, jeopardizing livelihoods. Amid economic struggles, many people have migrated. Viet Nam has high rates of internal mobility, and Thuong Xuan district is just about 200 km from Hanoi.

About 30% of households in village V1 are part of the Thai ethnic minority, and the rest are mainly Kinh, the largest ethnic group in Viet Nam. They grow rice, acacia and vegetables and tend to buffalo. The village lies next to a river, and when water levels are high due to heavy rains and/or dam discharges, it is unsafe to cross, so no one can leave, and children cannot attend school. Since the dam was built, the availability of irrigation has shielded local farmers from the impacts of droughts, but flood risks have worsened. A growing number of people in the village have thus migrated internally for factory work.

The people in village V2 are better-off overall than those in V1, and they have greater access to off-farm job opportunities, such as factory work. In a fairly rural region with large ethnic minority populations, V2 also stands out for being about 95% Kinh and heavily urbanized. With little arable land available and good alternatives, it has become common to commute daily to nearby companies and factories, or else to migrate. Women in the village tend to engage in daily wage labour locally, while many men work farther away in cities, though many women have also migrated.

PARENTAL MIGRATION AND THE CHILDREN WHO STAY BEHIND

Parents in the six villages migrated under different circumstances, but all wanted to earn more than they could at home. Some were struggling to feed their family due to low crop yields, crop failures, and/or a lack of stable work. Many households, especially in Cambodia, faced crushing debts, often linked to climatic events such as floods, droughts or storms. Medical bills and the need to support elderly parents also motivated migrants. Some were pursuing aspirations such as to purchase land, enable their children to study, or otherwise improve their lives – but distress migration was very common.

Migration patterns were shaped by gender norms. Mothers often stayed behind and cared for the children if they could find jobs locally, while men undertook longer-distance migration. However, many mothers and fathers migrated together, particularly in the poorest families. Several women had also migrated on their own, internally or across borders, reflecting the growing feminization of migration in Southeast Asia. Children stayed behind with the other parent, grandparents or other trusted caregivers.

JOURNEYS, DESTINATIONS AND OUTCOMES

Thailand is the wealthiest and most developed country in the Greater Mekong Subregion, and thus a top destination for labour migrants, with average wages that are double those in Cambodia and Lao PDR. However, regular migration is not always affordable or feasible. For long-term, low-wage work, migrants from Cambodia and Lao PDR must follow a process laid out in memoranda of understanding (MOUs) with their respective governments. Permits are good for two years and can be renewed once. For short-term work, such as seasonal farm labour, migrants can obtain temporary non-citizen cards known as “pink cards”; Cambodians are also eligible for 90-day border passes, usable only in border areas.

These options are meant to provide a safe, regular channel for workers to enter Thailand, but there are significant restrictions. They are tied to a specific employer, for instance, and usually must stay in a single province. This limits workers’ ability to rotate across multiple plantations or construction sites.

For parents, a key issue with both the MOU and short-term pass systems is that migrants are not allowed to bring their dependents. This means if they migrate regularly, they must leave their children behind. Alternatively, they can migrate through irregular channels, which can be dangerous. Irregular migrants also remain vulnerable at their destination and must hide from the authorities.

Migrants interviewed in Phnom Proek district in Cambodia had crossed the border through irregular channels and worked mainly in agriculture (e.g., longan and mangosteen plantations) and in construction. Due to the risks associated with irregular migration, they could not travel back and forth, so longer-term stays were the norm. Several said they had been exploited, but had no recourse. Internal migration was also common, to Phnom Penh and other cities.

In Soukhuma district, Lao PDR, the migrants in the households interviewed had all gone to Thailand. Women often went to serve as domestic workers, and some became fruit sellers. Both men and women, often from relatively wealthy households, also migrated for construction jobs, which paid better. Those who had engaged in irregular migration were very vulnerable to exploitation, forced labour and potential violence. Both in Lao PDR and in Cambodia, however, people who had migrated via regular channels also reported being abused and feeling they could not complain without jeopardizing their work permit.

In Thuong Xuan district, meanwhile, most migration was internal, with people travelling to cities such as Hai Phong, Hanoi and Quan Hoa or to the country's southeast. They took jobs in construction, industry and services. Some older women moved to Hanoi to be domestic workers.

The conditions that internal migrants faced on their migration journey and at their destination were often less precarious than if they had migrated irregularly across borders. However, internal migrants in Viet Nam and Cambodia still faced wage theft and other abuses and had difficulties accessing essential services such as health care. Viet Nam's social protection infrastructure, for instance, is based on household registration and residency, and this hinders access to key public services for non-residents.

IMPACTS ON CHILDREN REMAINING BEHIND

Whether they stayed in their country or crossed the border, many migrants found the financial benefits fell short of their expectations. Often they could not send as much money as they wished – or send it consistently. Remittances might just cover debt payments or basic expenses, and did not significantly improve their family's socio-economic situation or enhance their resilience to climate change.

The economic gains from remittances also came at a high cost. When parents left, the lives of those who stayed behind were often dramatically altered. The interviews revealed profound emotional impacts on children, particularly when their mother migrated. Caregivers were often overwhelmed, and some grandparents felt that they could not provide the support children needed. Many households struggled financially, and some children did not have enough to eat. In some cases, the absence of parents was associated with worse educational outcomes and school dropouts.

Very often, children – especially elder siblings, and especially girls – took on substantial household and caregiving responsibilities after their parents left. Some boys took on physically dangerous farm and household tasks. Working to earn money for the household was common as well. These duties left little time for studying or for leisure and affected children's mental and physical health. In Cambodia, some children reported being afraid that debt collectors would hurt them.

CHILD MIGRATION IN THE CONTEXT OF ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE

Despite the many challenges, every year in Southeast Asia, countless families choose to migrate with their children, and many children also migrate on their own. As noted above, by official estimates, there were about 1.27 million international child migrants in the region as of 2020 – about 40% in Thailand. However, given the high prevalence of irregular migration, the number of migrant children in Thailand living without domestic legal status has been estimated at 1 million to 2.5 million.

Children interviewed for this study said they had migrated for a variety of reasons, such as to pay off household debts, cover their siblings' school fees, cover medical expenses, and generally help improve their family's situation. Each story was different, but in all six villages, the drivers were closely linked to the broader socio-economic context and the impacts of climate and environmental changes.

Cultural norms also played an important role. Many children felt compelled to do their part for the family, particularly if they were struggling to meet basic needs. This might mean anything from helping out on the farm, to working outside of school hours, dropping out of school to work, or migrating to work in the city or abroad. Reflecting established gender roles, boys were particularly likely to feel a duty to help provide for the family and repay debts.

JOURNEYS AND DESTINATIONS

Most of the interviewees who had migrated as children had travelled with one or both of their parents, though several had gone by themselves. Their journeys typically followed commonly used pathways, often involving significant risks. Only one child migrant described having been trafficked, though this may have been a matter of perspective, as brokers and smugglers were usually involved.

For children as for adults, internal migration tends to be easier and less risky than cross-border migration, though young migrants are still highly susceptible to exploitation and abuse. Many migrant children in the villages in Cambodia and Viet Nam had only migrated internally, but some in Cambodia had crossed into Thailand. In Lao PDR, cross-border migration predominated.

Lack of legal status often keeps migrant children in Thailand from accessing education or health care. Thailand allows children of irregular migrants to obtain a non-Thai identity card, and even without one, they may attend public school, but many migrants are unaware of this, or else afraid to reveal their status to the authorities. Schools are also not equipped to teach children who do not speak Thai.

More commonly, children who migrate with their parents work alongside them. Informal employment predominates across the region, and migrants are particularly likely to be informally employed. The legal working age is 14 in Cambodia and Lao PDR, and 15 in Viet Nam and Thailand, with some exceptions. The minimum age for labour migration to Thailand is 18. All this limits job options for children, steering them into poorly regulated sectors with lax labour law enforcement.

Several child migrants in the villages had worked on plantations and on construction sites; some had done domestic labour, or worked in factories and in service jobs. Like migrant parents, child migrants often said they had been exploited, forced to work long hours, and sometimes cheated out of their wages. While some had accomplished their objective, many had returned home determined not to migrate again.

IMPACTS OF CHILD MIGRATION ON DEVELOPMENT AND WELL-BEING

Given the challenges of child migration, with or without parents, children in the households interviewed had generally only migrated if their family faced a very difficult situation. Many children had already been working outside of school hours, and some had dropped out even before migrating. Still, migration often imposed further deprivations and stressors that affected their health and well-being.

Educational disruptions were particularly common. Cross-border migration was often, but not always, associated with dropping out of school, while internal migration more commonly resulted in missed weeks or months, with children more easily returning to school afterward. Some child migrants only migrated during school breaks, though they often stayed for at least some time beyond the break.

Several children who had migrated described getting sick or being injured on the job, and not all had access to health care services – or if they did, some had to pay high fees. Some said they had felt isolated and sad, and missed their loved ones. The emotional impacts of these experiences can be severe and long-lasting. Moreover, the disruption of their education, exposure to hazardous working conditions and other factors could have long-term consequences for children's personal development and future opportunities.

CHILD MIGRANTS' OWN ASPIRATIONS

While families' economic distress, exacerbated by climate and environmental change, was clearly a key driver of child migration, it is important to recognize children's own perspectives, including their hopes and aspirations. The child migrants interviewed said they had made the decision to migrate. Some were focused on helping their household cover basic needs or pay off debts, but several, particularly those facing long-term poverty, also hoped to be able to purchase land for themselves or their family. In other words, they wanted to achieve better socio-economic conditions.

At the same time, children recognized that migration was not the best pathway out of poverty, even if it was their only option at the time. They were aware of the precarity of the journeys and the exploitative conditions that were common at their destination. As a result, if they were able to stay with their family, many chose to do so, even if they could earn more by migrating. Sometimes one sibling worked so that others could stay home and attend school.

2

TOWARDS A BRIGHTER FUTURE: AN AGENDA FOR ACTION

As the climate crisis worsens, children and youth in Southeast Asia face mounting threats to their health, education, livelihoods and economic prospects. Climate change impacts, compounded in some cases by infrastructure development such as dam construction, are deepening poverty and inequality and making people ever more vulnerable to distress migration and, through it, to exploitation and abuse.

This study thus ends with a call to action: to address key drivers of distress migration in communities of origin; make migration safer, more humane and more just for parents and children alike; provide more support for those who stay behind; and empower children and youth to shape a better future for themselves, whether they choose to migrate or stay home. It identifies specific support needs and makes recommendations to national governments, donors, development partners and international organizations. Only highlights are presented here; see Section 6 for details as well as future research needs.

ENHANCE COMMUNITY RESILIENCE THROUGH ROBUST INFRASTRUCTURE AND DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

A recurring theme in interviews was the lack of basic infrastructure in the villages, which the research teams also witnessed: rough, barely passable roads that become unusable after heavy rains; bridgeless river crossings; school buildings that are frequently damaged or inaccessible; a lack of safe drinking water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) infrastructure.

With this in mind, national governments should prioritize the construction of robust, climate-resilient transportation infrastructure; upgrade schools and health care facilities; allocate funds to local authorities to use for investments prioritized by community members; and strengthen social protection systems so they can quickly expand both vertically (providing more support) and horizontally (reaching more people) in the wake of disasters.

Donors and development partners, international humanitarian NGOs and UN agencies should scale up grants and other highly concessional finance for investments in infrastructure and in social protection programmes; provide financial and on-the-ground support for participatory processes to identify and prioritize local resilience-building needs; support educational ministries to address climate risks in school; and supplement governments' social protection programmes by facilitating access to food, cash, medicine, water filters and/or bottled water, and other urgent needs during and after disasters.

PROVIDE FLEXIBLE AND FAIR SUPPORT FOR SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS

Many adults and children said they did not wish to migrate – particularly not if it meant risky border crossings and long-term separation from their families. Most said they would happily stay, if they could just have decent work (and/or a viable farm) and not have to worry about going hungry, being unable to cover health costs or other basic needs, or being buried in thousands of dollars of debt.

With this in mind, national governments should enhance agricultural extension services to better support adaptation; sponsor small-scale crop insurance schemes or other forms of social protection for farmers; increase access to formal loans with low interest rates to improve financial inclusion; and work to expand non-agrarian livelihood options in villages and within commuting distance, taking into account the differentiated needs of women and men.

Donors and development partners, international humanitarian NGOs and UN agencies should support government efforts to increase farmers' resilience; support livelihood diversification through training programmes and resources for establishing small enterprises; provide financial literacy education; and support community regulation of predatory lenders, including through engagement in protection boards.

PROTECT BOTH PARENTS AND CHILDREN WHO MIGRATE.

Parents and children who migrated described difficult and even traumatic experiences. Many interviewees reported being exploited, abused and defrauded, on their journey and at their destination. Irregular cross-border migration is especially challenging, and regular channels do not allow low-wage workers to bring their families. Child migrants who travel alone are particularly vulnerable.

With this in mind, national governments should work to make regular migration channels more accessible, flexible and just; enable parents migrating under bilateral MOU schemes to bring dependents; improve oversight of industries that employ many migrants, with migrant-sensitive approaches to reporting abuse and exploitation; and improve emotional and social learning support for migrant children.

Donors and development partners, international humanitarian NGOs and UN agencies should sponsor gender-responsive and child-friendly programming in communities of origin to help adults and children avoid trafficking and exploitation; collaborate with governments and the private sector to ensure migrants can migrate safely; support mobile units that provide assistance along known irregular migration routes; and develop targeted programmes to support returned migrant children.

CARE FOR CAREGIVERS – AND THE CHILDREN WHO STAY WITH THEM

The grandparents and single parents caring for children of labour migrants spoke about them with love and devotion. They were clearly committed to their well-being, but they also struggled. To

improve outcomes for children, it is thus essential to support caregivers.

With this in mind, national governments should expand social protection programmes to provide additional support to single-parent and elder-headed households; tailor child well-being and food security programmes to meet the needs of older caregivers and young mothers; and engage with grandparents as key actors for improving the adaptive capacity of families in their communities of origin.

Donors and development partners, international humanitarian NGOs and UN agencies should promote "intergenerational dialogues" to help reduce risks to children from changing caregiving roles; support programmes for caregivers, such as the Grandmother Inclusive Approach; provide targeted support to migrant households where children may lack supervision or access to educational support; and help families stay connected – for instance, by being able to have video calls.

EMPOWER CHILDREN AND YOUTH TO BE ABLE TO BUILD A BETTER FUTURE FOR THEMSELVES

The first four objectives focus on addressing the conditions that drive distress migration in rural Southeast Asia and trap millions of children in poverty, compromising their health and well-being and making them deeply vulnerable to climate change. Those actions are urgent and essential, but young people deserve more. They also deserve a chance to participate in decisions that will shape their future.

Around the world, youth are increasingly leading the way on climate justice, through advocacy from the grassroots to the global level, including a formal role in the UN climate regime; engagement in climate change adaptation planning and project implementation; and innovation and entrepreneurship. Young people have also engaged in discussions about migration in the context of climate change.

Yet very few children and youth get such opportunities, particularly in the poorest communities. Adults need to do much more to empower migrant children and youth to meaningfully engage in debates and policy-making at the intersection of children's rights, migration and climate change.

With that in mind, national governments should integrate climate change into school curricula, starting in early grades and continuing through secondary school, and create spaces for children and youth to engage in policy-making and planning processes on children's rights, migration and climate change at all levels, including regional forums and global processes.

Donors and development partners, international humanitarian NGOs and UN agencies should improve the integration of children and youth considerations across non-child focused agencies and organizations; provide financial support and capacity-building to facilitate child and youth engagement in migration and climate forums; legitimize diverse forms of knowledge-sharing for children and youth, such as through drawings, videos and other forms of creative expression; and enable the leadership of child and youth environmental defenders by providing protection for them and facilitating their safe participation.

Children and youth are inheriting a world filled with injustice and needless suffering, that is likely to become even more inhospitable as climate change intensifies. Migration could help them and their families become more resilient, rise out of poverty and improve their living conditions. That is only possible, however, if they can migrate safely – not in distress – and avoid exploitation and abuse. Those who stay behind also need stronger support and opportunities to thrive in their home communities.

These young people deserve a better future. It is up to adults – especially those with resources and power – to start building that future, and to empower them to actively participate in shaping it.

1. INTRODUCTION

Climate change and migration highlight the profound inequalities in our world. The impacts of climate change and environmental degradation are felt by all, but they affect people in profoundly different ways depending on their socio-economic class, education, age, gender, race, (dis)ability and other factors.[1] The poorest and most vulnerable, who have contributed minimally to global greenhouse gas emissions, often suffer disproportionately: from subsistence farmers whose crops wither and die from lack of rain, to entire communities destroyed by extreme weather events.

As climate change impacts intensify, more and more people may need to move to find safety and viable livelihoods – though not all will choose to, and many will be unable to migrate even if they wish to.[2] In other words, climate change is a driver of migration, but complex and interconnected social, economic, environmental and other factors determine who does or does not move, whether they benefit from migrating, and if so, how much. Research shows that climate change impacts can impede movement by depleting people's assets.[3] People who migrate in distress, in turn, are highly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, as well as environmental risks, both on their journey and at the destination.[4]

This report examines migration in the context of climate change from a perspective that is seldom represented in research: that of children and youth.[5] Migration deeply affects young people's lives,[6] but their interests and agency are often overlooked.[7] Like adults, children and youth migrate for diverse reasons and under a wide range of circumstances. They may accompany their parents when they seek economic opportunities in other parts of their country or abroad. Some children migrate alone, to pursue an education, work, find safety from abuse, or for other reasons. They may also flee persecution, conflict or violence, alone or with their parents, or be displaced by disasters.[8] Much larger numbers, however, stay behind in their communities while one or both of their parents migrate for work.

Parents' labour migration can benefit children and youth if the remittances sent home increase their family's overall income and help pay for their education, a common priority for parents.[9] It can also help them become more independent.[10] Both education and greater agency can strengthen young people's resilience to climate change. However, being separated from one or both parents has been found, not surprisingly, to have adverse psychological impacts and even affect children's physical health.[11]

Many factors can also limit the benefits of parental migration and even leave children worse off. Often children are left with their grandparents, who may struggle to provide and care for them, especially if they are older or in poor health, with a limited ability to work.[12] Indeed, there is evidence that children who stay behind are more vulnerable to malnutrition.[13] Children may also be called upon to assume duties previously performed by their parents, such as farm labour and, especially in the case of girls, household chores, child care and elder care, all of which can disrupt their education. Even if one of the parents also stays behind, the children may need to help to shoulder the missing parent's responsibilities.[14]

This report focuses on Southeast Asia in particular[15] because it is a dynamic, ethnically and socio-economically diverse region with significant levels of both internal and cross-border labour migration, as well as large disparities in human development. It is also a relatively young region, with a median age of just 29.8 years as of 2022, and only one country exceeding 35 (Thailand, at 39); the median age was just 24 in Lao PDR, 25 in Cambodia and 26 in the Philippines.[16] Also as of 2022, nearly 27% of Southeast Asia's population was under 15 years old, and another 16 percent was aged 15–24.

Moreover, Southeast Asia is a hotspot of climate vulnerability. Asia as a whole is the continent that is hardest-hit by weather-, climate- and water-related disasters, accounting for 47% of reported deaths from 1970 to 2021, with 79 hydrometeorological disasters in 2023 alone that killed over 2,000 people.[17] High exposure to natural hazards is a key factor, but so are social, political and economic factors that limit

people's capacity to cope with shocks. Climate change, combined with environmental degradation, exacerbates disaster risks and is increasingly affecting livelihoods and human well-being.[18]

Climate-related disasters often result in displacement, at least short-term and sometimes for extended periods. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), in 2023, there were 9 million internal displacements (that is, within countries) due to disasters in East Asia and the Pacific region, including Southeast Asia.[19] Over the 2010–2021 period, the Asia and Pacific region accounted for 78% of disaster-related internal displacements worldwide.[20] Children tend to make up an outsize share of displaced populations around the world; in Southeast Asia, about 2.5 million children were internally displaced by disasters or conflicts in 2021.[21]

Climate change is also contributing to what were already high rates of migration across Asia, and in Southeast Asia in particular. Globally, most climate-related migration is within countries, and there is significant internal migration within Southeast and East Asia as well.[22] For generations, however, large numbers of people have sought work in nearby countries within the region, particularly around border areas.[23] Climate-related migration is following existing migration corridors, though future climate change is expected to affect existing corridors and conditions at different destinations.

Migration is increasing overall. From 1990 to 2020, data from the UN show, the number of international migrants in Southeast Asia more than tripled, from about 2.9 million to about 10.6 million.[24] Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore were the top three destinations for migrants from the region, with Thailand alone hosting about 3.5 million. The vast majority of migrants are adults, but as of 2020, UN agencies estimated that 1.27 million international migrant children lived in the region, two-fifths of them in Thailand.[25] It is important to stress that these numbers are underestimates, as they do not fully reflect irregular migration.

Most labour migration in Asia is temporary, for low-paid work. Forced labour is common, and migrants are often assigned the most dangerous tasks, resulting in high rates of injury, illness and death.[26] Many migrant workers in Asia come from rural communities where livelihoods have been imperilled by climate change and environmental degradation,[27] and often they are highly vulnerable to exploitation. This affects not only the migrant workers, but also their children, whether they come along or stay behind.

World Vision is committed to "supporting safe, orderly and dignified migration that upholds the rights, well-being and opportunities of migrants, particularly vulnerable groups such as children, while contributing to development and social unity". World Vision also recognizes climate change as a matter of justice, and seeks to protect children's rights to a healthy, safe and sustainable future and to promote child-centred adaptation and community resilience.[28]

Guided by those commitments, this study examines how, amid climate change, migration and its counterpart, immobility, affect children and youth, and the role of gender, socio-economic background and other factors. The goal is to help fill knowledge gaps and support more effective policies and programmes that address children's and young people's specific needs and empowers them.

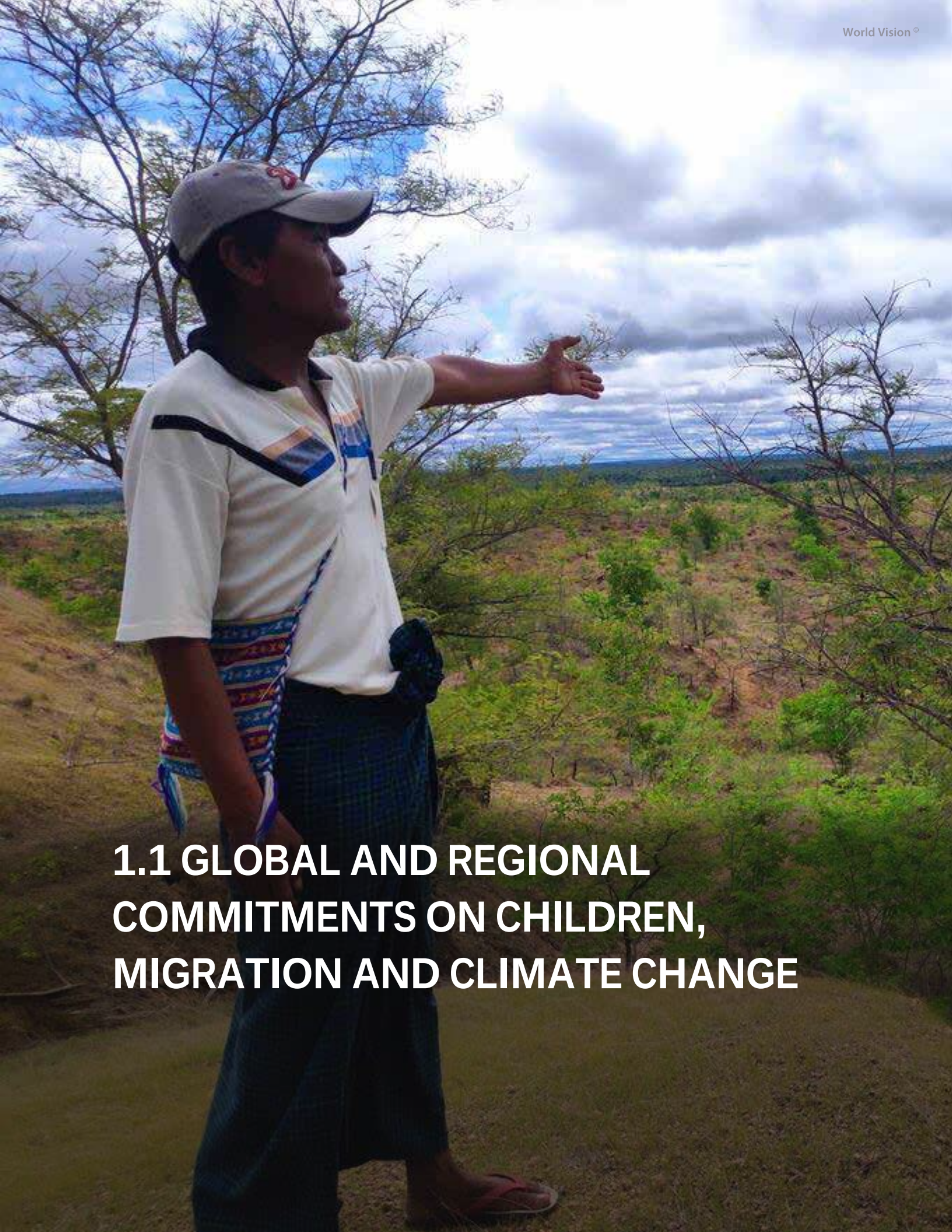
The findings will inform the work of the World Vision East Asia office and should also be useful to policy-makers, development practitioners, researchers and international organizations in Asia and beyond. The study is thus designed to align with and support key strategic priorities of major donors and international initiatives,[29] to ensure the findings and recommendations are broadly relevant and actionable.

The rest of this section provides an overview of the research questions that guide the study and the methods used to explore them, along with the global and regional policy context and some of the main findings of prior research on these issues. Section 2 then briefly profiles the three countries of focus – Cambodia, Lao PDR and Viet Nam – from a socio-economic, environmental, mobility and policy

perspective. Section 3 focuses more closely on the villages selected for field research, which have high rates of out-migration, but also many children and youth who stay behind; it examines local socio-economic and environmental conditions and the factors that influence mobility and immobility.

Section 4 presents the perspectives of parents who migrate as well as the children and caregivers who stay behind, drawing on interviews in all three countries to provide a multi-faceted understanding of the impacts of parental migration on children and youth. Section 5 then focuses on children who migrate, with their parents or alone, and their experiences and needs. Section 6 concludes with a call to action for the humanitarian community, UN agencies and donors, policy-makers and researchers, built around six interlinked objectives to improve the lives of vulnerable communities affected by climate change, make migration safer and more beneficial, support children and their caregivers, and empower young people.

It is important to stress that, in line with World Vision's mission, this study deliberately focuses on the people in greatest need: the poorest of the poor, who are struggling the most to cope with the impacts of climate change and find a way forward. The personal stories shared in this report do not represent a cross-section of Southeast Asian society, but rather, the communities that most urgently require support. If our approaches to climate change and migration do not make their lives better, they are not good enough.



1.1 GLOBAL AND REGIONAL COMMITMENTS ON CHILDREN, MIGRATION AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Policy-makers around the world have long agreed that children deserve special care and protection. This recognition is most clearly embodied in the **Convention on the Rights of the Child**, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1989, the most widely ratified international human rights agreement, with 196 signatories.[30] The Convention lays out governments' duties to protect all children and act in their best interests, "without discrimination of any kind", and highlights the importance of the family, which "should be afforded the necessary protection and assistance" to fulfil its child-rearing responsibilities. In 2023, General Comment No. 26 on the Convention explicitly recognized a child's right to a clean and healthy environment and called for streamlining this right into policies, including on migration.[31]

The non-binding **Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration**, formally endorsed by the UN General Assembly in 2018,[32] is the first intergovernmental agreement covering all dimensions of international migration. It aims to support cooperation on migration governance, help Member States address pressing challenges around migration, and strengthen the contribution of migrants and migration to sustainable development. One of its 10 guiding principles is to be "child-sensitive", recognizing children's legal rights and always upholding their best interests, including for unaccompanied and separated children. Periodic regional reviews are conducted to support implementation of the Global Compact in different contexts, including in the Asia and Pacific region.[33]

The Global Compact is aligned with target 10.7 of the **Sustainable Development Goals** (SDGs), which commits to "facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies".[34] The SDGs also explicitly address climate change and environmental sustainability, as well as poverty, inequality and many forms of discrimination that hinder human development and exacerbate vulnerability to climate-related shocks and stressors. Children feature prominently in the SDGs as well, and 35 of the 232 SDG indicators focus on children, including around child labour, nutrition, health, poverty and violence.[35]

The **Paris Agreement**, a legally binding treaty adopted by 196 Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 2015,[36] notes in its preamble that climate change is "a common concern of humankind", and actions to address it should "respect, promote and consider [Parties'] respective obligations on human rights, the right to health, the rights of indigenous peoples, local communities, migrants, children, persons with disabilities and people in vulnerable situations", among others, as well as gender equality and intergenerational equity. This means climate strategies that do not protect migrants and children would fall short of the Parties' collective commitments.

Children and youth have been involved with UN working groups around these frameworks, starting with the UN Major Group for Children and Youth, established in 1992.[37] Youth engagement has been particularly strong with regard to climate change and intergenerational justice.[38] However, although formal working groups have helped to enable children and youth to participate in UN processes, the groups have tended to focus on individual issues. This has left little opportunity for young people to discuss and share insights on the links between climate change and migration, for example. More work is needed to raise awareness of those linkages and support inclusive, rights-based approaches.

KEY ASEAN POLICIES ON CHILDREN AND MIGRATION

The 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have worked together on many major policy challenges, including migration and climate change, though not the two combined. They have also collaborated to apply global standards and agreements to their regional context. In 2019, after all Member States had ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, they issued the **ASEAN Joint Statement on Reaffirmation of Commitment to Advancing the Rights of the Child**, pledging to "fully implement" the Convention.[39] They tasked the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Social Welfare and Development with supporting implementation. The statement also recognized "new and emerging threats" to children's rights, but also new opportunities to realize those rights, amid "global trends such as climate change, online safety, protracted conflict, mass migration and demographic shifts, among others".

Also in 2019, the 10 countries issued the **ASEAN Declaration on the Rights of Children in the Context of Migration**,[40] which noted "with deep concern" the millions of children worldwide who are displaced by "conflict, poverty, disaster, climate change, and environmental degradation" and experience "exploitation, deprivation and discrimination on their journeys within and across borders". Recognizing the need to protect these children's rights and ensure their access to services, the non-binding declaration resolved to "provide access to basic services such as health, a clean and safe environment, and psychosocial support services for children in the context of migration".

The **Regional Plan of Action on Implementing the ASEAN Declaration on the Rights of Children in the Context of Migration (2021–2030)** outlines specific measures to operationalize the commitments made in the declaration.[41] It includes activities focused on strengthening legal frameworks, ensuring child protection systems, enhancing access to health care, education and social services, and improving data collection. The plan emphasizes collaboration among ASEAN Member States, international organizations and civil society to support implementation, and addresses the impacts of climate change in particular.

The 2023 **Declaration on the Protection of Migrant Workers and Family Members in Crisis Situations**, in turn, calls for the protection of both migrants and the people who that stay behind.[42] Reflecting a growing understanding of these complex issues, it notes the risks posed by "layered compounding natural hazards and interconnected economies which are exacerbated by the impact of growing ageing population, rapid urbanization, climate change and mobility of people".

If the commitments and ambitions laid out in these documents are fully realized, they could significantly improve the experiences of children affected by migration in the context of climate change – both those who move, and those who stay behind). It is still early in these processes, however. More work is needed to build understanding of these interconnected challenges, communicate them clearly to regional and national policy-makers, and promote effective and inclusive policies and programmes.

1.1 AN INCOMPLETE PICTURE

A key motivation for this study is that, despite a growing body of research on climate change, migration and children in Southeast and East Asia, important knowledge gaps remain, especially on the interconnections between the three. A detailed review of the research literature was undertaken to more clearly identify the gaps and provide some points of reference for this study. Some of the issues that clearly require more research include:

Differential impacts of migration: While some research has explored the impacts of migration on children and youth, not enough attention has been paid to differences due to factors such as age, gender, disability, socio-economic status and location. It is important to examine how these factors affect children's vulnerability to climate change and other stressors, how they shape young people's aspirations around migration, and what kinds of support would be most beneficial.

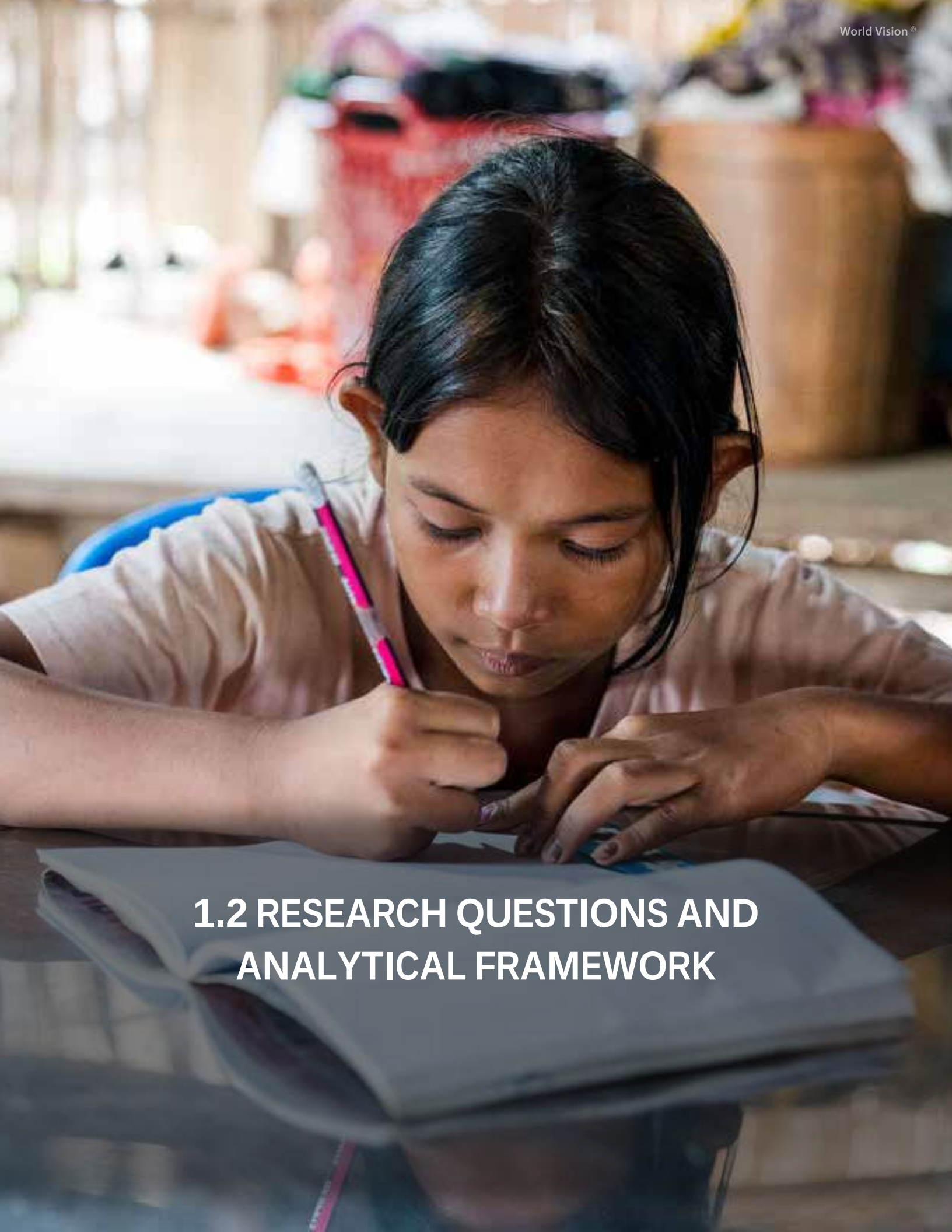
Perspectives of those who stay behind: Research on migration, including in the context of climate change, tends to have a "mobility bias",[43] focusing mainly on those who leave, not those who stay behind, including migrants' children. More insights are needed on their experiences and needs.

Children's resilience and adaptive capacities: Research on climate resilience and adaptive capacity tends to focus on adults, while overlooking the agency and capacities of children themselves. Children clearly need protection, but they are rarely perfectly sheltered by the adults in their lives; they have to withstand shocks and adapt as well. It is important to understand the factors that make children and youth more or less resilient, looking through an intersectional lens to capture differences based on gender, age, ethnicity and other identities. This is also crucial for recognizing young people's agency and empowering them.

Understanding children who migrate: Most migration research has focused on adults, without considering the experiences and agency of the children who migrate with them (though some research has focused on unaccompanied migrant children). It is important to take a more inclusive approach, recognizing that migrant children have their own perspectives and needs.[44]

Comparative studies across regions and contexts: While there have been individual case studies and localized research, more comparative studies are needed to examine children's experiences around climate-related migration across different regions, contexts and socio-cultural settings.

Differences between internal and international migration: There is a need to better understand how internal and international migration differ in terms of impacts on children and youth and the measures needed to ensure their well-being. International migration adds complexities related to legal status, cultural and language barriers, and access to social services and protection mechanisms. However, internal migrants often encounter major barriers even in their own country. Comparative studies can also highlight key opportunities for more inclusive interventions.



1.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

This report aims to help address those gaps and advance the science-to-policy interface with respect to the protection of children and youth in the context of climate-related migration and immobility. In particular, it shines a light on the experiences of children, whether they migrate or stay behind, seeking to bring their perspectives to decision-making spaces and support them as agents of change.

The study focuses on five main research questions:

1. How are climate change and environmental degradation affecting human well-being, livelihoods, migration patterns and immobility, and how do people's intersecting identities (such as age, gender and socio-economic background) shape their vulnerabilities and resilience? This is the focus of Section 2 (at the country level) and Section 3 (at the community level).
2. How does the migration of one or both parents, including their destinations and occupations, affect the development, health, education and overall well-being of children who remain behind? This is addressed in Section 4, which draws on field research across the three countries.
3. How do intersecting socio-economic and environmental factors influence the mobility of children and youth, including where they migrate to, the jobs they take, and the implications for their development, health, education and well-being? This is addressed in Section 5, which draws on interviews with former child migrants who had returned home.
4. How do the impacts of migration on people in different situations across the study sites affect the extent to which moving or staying contribute to (or hinder) adaptation to climate change? This question is addressed in Sections 4 and 5, focusing on parents' and children's migration, respectively.
5. How can the humanitarian community (including UN agencies, non-governmental organizations and donors), policy-makers and other actors make a difference? That is the focus of Chapter 6, which identifies key gaps and support needs and recommends ways to address them.

The design of the study, the research questions and the analytical approach taken are grounded in the research team's knowledge of Southeast Asia and the literature on climate change, vulnerability and resilience, migration and childhood, which highlights three important themes:

Overlapping drivers of migration: Migration patterns in the context of climate change are complex, shaped by extreme events as well as slow-onset environmental changes, but also by social, economic, political and cultural factors. People's access to resources, services and infrastructure in origin and destination areas can determine whether they choose or are able to migrate and affect their migration experience. This means all these factors and their interactions must be carefully examined.

Intersectionality: Even within a single community, each person's experience and the opportunities available to them will be determined to a great extent by their particular set of intersecting identities and circumstances, including gender, age, ethnicity, socio-economic status, education, health, migration status and more. Gender dynamics and norms, for instance, including power relations, control over resources and the division of labour, can significantly influence a person's aspirations and capabilities to migrate in the context of climate change.[45] An intersectional perspective can also highlight how discrimination based on different aspects of people's identity interact and can compound, exacerbating vulnerability and marginalization. For children and youth, such disparities can affect agency, opportunities and long-term prospects.

Agency and structure: This study draws on insights from "new social studies of childhood" that emphasize the social and cultural construction of childhood and recognize children's agency within structural constraints.[46] It acknowledges that children's development and mobility are situated within a family life course trajectory, and children's agency is shaped by their relationship with their family.[47] It thus treats childhood not only as a life phase, but as something that is constructed by adult society in different ways in different times and places (e.g. at school, at home, in the community).[48]

1.3 STUDY DESIGN AND METHODS

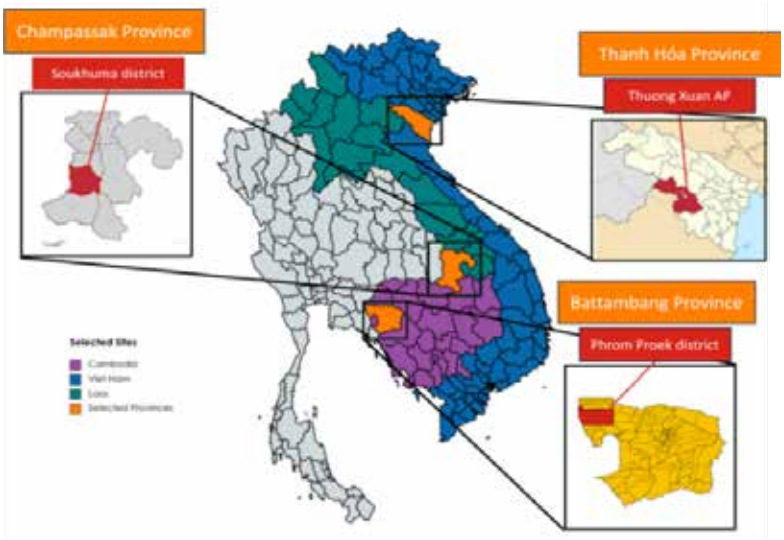
After an initial review of the literature, and in dialogue with World Vision, the authors chose Cambodia, Lao PDR and Viet Nam for field research. All three have significant levels of migration, both internal and to work in neighbouring or nearby countries.[49] They are also grappling with many other key issues relevant to the research questions, including climate change impacts, poverty and vulnerability, and large numbers of children and youth: over 30% of Cambodia's and Lao PDR's populations, and nearly 24% of Viet Nam's, were under 15 years old as of 2022.[50] These are also countries in which climate and migration issues are strategic priorities for World Vision.

Two sites and diverse households were selected in each country, aiming to represent different mobility profiles, geographic areas, socio-economic conditions and other factors. Through qualitative field research, the team examined how structures, cultures, processes, norms and institutions influence outcomes, sometimes through intricate causal mechanisms.[51] Comparison serves as a powerful analytical tool that allows researchers to question assumptions and unveil the dynamic nature of social realities, providing us with a grounded approach for programming and policy.

In particular, the field research sites were chosen to include places experiencing large environmental and climate change impacts; places where multiple complex factors shape human (im)mobility; places with large numbers of child migrants and/or children of migrant parents; and sites with different profiles in terms of vulnerability, adaptive capacity and resilience. In order to facilitate access and for ethical reasons, all the sites were locations where World Vision is already active.

As noted earlier, it is important to stress that the sites were not chosen to show a cross-section of Southeast Asia or even these three countries, but rather to provide insights on the poorest and most vulnerable communities, who most urgently need support. The districts selected, shown on Map 1, are all predominantly rural, affected by significant environmental hazards, and with high rates of out-migration. However, many of the people who migrated out of those areas went to cities. More details on the research design process and the sampling strategy can be found in the Annex.

Map 2. Selected case study districts



Source: Authors' own work.

The field research included 92 interviews with people affected by climate change and migration and 13 key informant interviews (KIIs) at the community level. The interviews with affected people sought to cover different mobility categories, identities and experiences. They were conducted with World Vision national office staff, who supported data collection and then translated transcripts. The sample was as gender-balanced as feasible within each category, while recognizing that in some communities, it is mainly men who migrate (see Annex for a table detailing the basic demographics of the interviewees).

For confidentially and analytical purposes, all the affected people interviewed were assigned a label, as were the key informants, as shown in Table 1. After the initial data analysis was completed, the findings were presented back to research teams in each case study district to confirm and validate the results.,

Table 1. Labelling system for field interviews[52]

People affected by migration					
Country	**Age**	**Gender identity**	**Socioeconomic status**	**Mobility profile**	**Interview number**
Cambodia = C Lao PDR = L Viet Nam = V	(Number)	Woman/girl = W Man/boy = M Non-binary = NB (none in sample)	Very poor = VP Poor = P Relatively wealthy = W (by village standards; all were poor)	Migrant in household = M Returned migrant = R No migration in household = I (in at least 5 years)	1, 2, 3…
Fieldwork key informants					
Country		**Gender identity**	**Role in community**		**Interview number**
Cambodia = C Lao PDR = L Viet Nam = V		Woman = W Man = M Non-binary = NB (none interviewed)	Businessperson = B Local authority/village chiefs = L Representative of school/educational department = E Women's union representative = W		1, 2, 3…

In addition to the field interviews, the research team conducted 12 interviews remotely with a range of actors working on issues of child rights, environment, and climate change, and/or migration in global forums and within Asia and the Pacific. These interviews provided insights into the policy landscape, persisting challenges, implementation gaps and good practices that informed the recommendations.

As a final methodological note, Box 1 presents an overview of key terms used in this report, with definitions drawn from the research literature. To the greatest extent possible, the report uses plain language, aiming to be accessible to all readers, but some terms carry particular meanings that are important to clarify and highlight.

BOX 1. KEY DEFINITIONS

Child: A person under the age of 18, in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.[53] The Convention allows for exceptions in countries where majority is attained at an earlier age, and in Viet Nam, the threshold is 16. However, for consistency, in this report, the terms "child", "boy" and "girl" always refer to people under 18 years of age.

Child labour: In line with the International Labour Organization (ILO), this term is used to describe not *all* work done by children, but work that is "is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful" to them and/or deprives them of the opportunity attend school; makes them leave prematurely; or forces them to balance school with "excessively long and heavy work".[54]

Children affected by migration: An umbrella term covering children who have migrated, within their country or across borders, individually or with their parent(s), permanently or temporarily, as well as children who remained behind when one or both of their parents migrated.

Distress migration: This term is used broadly to refer to migration undertaken when individuals or families "perceive that there are no options open to them to survive with dignity, except to migrate".[55]

Gender: Consistent with UN Women, this term refers to the roles, behaviours, activities, attributes and opportunities that a society considers appropriate for men/boys and women/girls, as well as expectations about relations between them. These are socially constructed, context- and time-specific and changeable, and are often associated with inequalities, such as in access to and control over resources, as well as decision-making opportunities.[56] Gender interacts with but differs from biological sex. A person's innate, deeply felt internal experience of gender, which can be fluid and may not match their physiology or sex designated at birth, is called gender identity.

Human mobility and **immobility:** Mobility is often used interchangeably with "migration", including by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). However, this report uses the term as defined in De Haas (2021): "people's capability (freedom) to choose where to live – including the option to stay".[57] Consistent with this, and for clarity, "immobility" is used only to denote the inability to move, not the choice to stay, even though some scholars apply the term to both.[58]

Migrant and **migration:** In line with IOM, and noting that there is no universally accepted definition, this report uses the term to mean "a person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons".[59] The use of "migration" is also broad, referring both to individual moves and collectively to the movement of people within countries and across borders.

Persons with disability: In line with the 2006 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability, this term denotes "those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others".[60]

Regular and **irregular migration** (or migration channels or pathways): In line with IOM, the term "regular" migration is used to mean migration that occurs in compliance with the laws and regulations of the country of origin, transit and destination.[61] There is no universal definition of "irregular" migration, but it is generally understood to be migration that occurs outside those laws and regulations. As IOM stresses, "The fact that [people] migrate irregularly does not relieve States from the obligation to protect their rights."

Safe migration: This term is used to refer to migration by individuals or families, within their own country or across international borders, in a manner that prioritizes their safety, well-being and human rights.

Endnotes

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[5] In this study, we define "child" as anyone under the age of 18, in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Most of this study focuses on children, their parents and their caregivers, but the research team also deliberately sought to reflect the perspectives of young adults up to the age of 35.

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[9] See, e.g., Vigil and Kim, 2023, "International Labour Migration in a Changing Climate: Insights from Malaysia and Thailand."

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[15] Southeast Asia is generally understood to include the 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations – Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Viet Nam – plus Timor Leste. The World Vision East Asia office covers five of those countries – Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand and Viet Nam – as well as China and Mongolia.

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[19] IDMC. 2024. "GRID 2024: Global Report on Internal Displacement." Geneva: Internal Displacement Monitoring Center. https://api.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/IDMC-GRID-2024-Global-Report-on-Internal-Displacement.pdf.

[20] IDMC. 2022. "Disaster Displacement in Asia and the Pacific." https://www.internal-displacement.org/disaster-displacement-in-asia-and-the-pacific-2022.

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[52] Socio-economic status was determined with the assistance of village leaders, who identified who were some of the poorest local residents, who was relatively poor, and who was relatively wealthy by local standards. This was then confirmed by asking interviewees to describe their own socio-economic status. It is important to stress that "relatively wealthy" might mean as little as owning a small house and cropland and generally having enough to eat.

The mobility profile label "M" denotes that the interviewee is part of a household where at least one person – not the interviewee – was a migrant, either currently away or having migrated within the past five years. "R" denotes an interviewee who personally migrated within the past five years, but had been back home for at least three months. "I" denotes that no one in the interviewee's households had migrated in the past five years. More detailed information can be found in the Annex.

[53] See https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child.

[54] See https://www.ilo.org/topics/child-labour/what-child-labour. The ILO Minimum Age Convention No.138, adopted in 1973, calls for the minimum age for work to be no lower than the age of completion of compulsory schooling and generally no less than 15, with the possibility of setting a temporary minimum at 14 in countries with underdeveloped educational facilities. It allows for "light work" that does not interfere with education after age 13. See https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C138.

Cambodia and Lao PDR have set their minimum age at 14, while Viet Nam uses 15, as does Thailand. See https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:11300:0::NO:11300:P11300_INSTRUMENT_ID:312283:NO.

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[58] See, e.g.: Zickgraf, C. 2018. "Immobility." In *Routledge Handbook of Environmental Displacement and Migration*, 71–84. Routledge.

[59] See https://www.iom.int/about-migration.

[60] See https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-persons-disabilities.

[61] See IOM glossary of "Key Migration Terms": https://www.iom.int/key-migration-terms.

2. CLIMATE CHANGE, VULNERABILITY AND HUMAN (IM)MOBILITY: NATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

Southeast Asia has made significant progress on human development in recent decades, but large gaps and disparities remain, both within and across countries.[62] Economic growth and diversification are key factors: Gross domestic product (GDP) per capita in 2023 was just US$1,875 in Cambodia and $2,075 in Lao PDR, compared with $4,347 in Viet Nam and $7,172 in Thailand.[63] All four countries have significantly reduced their dependence on natural resources in recent decades, but while only 8.6% of Thailand's GDP came from agriculture, forestry and fishing in 2023, in Cambodia, it was 21.5%.[64] And while only about a third of workers in Cambodia, Viet Nam and Thailand are employed in agriculture, in Lao PDR it is 70% – unmatched in Asia, and on par with the poorest countries in the world.[65]

Climate change impacts, which in many settings overlap with land and environmental degradation, are further hindering human and economic development. Southeast Asia is very geographically diverse, with very low-lying coastal areas, deltas and river valleys, but also rugged mountains, so conditions even in a single province can vary dramatically, as exemplified by Thanh Hoa in Viet Nam, discussed below. That said, the region as a whole faces rising temperatures, more extreme heat, and more erratic and extreme precipitation, often associated with intensifying tropical cyclones.[66] Flood and landslide risks are escalating, but droughts are also becoming more common. In coastal areas and river deltas, sea-level rise and saltwater intrusion pose growing threats. The region has made significant strides in disaster risk reduction (DRR), but disasters remain common and often destroy homes, farmland and infrastructure.

The extent to which people's lives and livelihoods are affected by these impacts varies dramatically, shaped by varying degrees of poverty, inequality, and different forms of discrimination and marginalization, all of which exacerbate vulnerability.[67] Large disparities may also exist within a single community, with the poorest people, ethnic minorities, women, children, elders and people with disability, for instance, experiencing the most severe consequences of climate change.[68]

This section provides a brief overview of the three countries featured in this study, including some data on Thailand, the destination for many migrants. Table 1 provides an overview of key socio-economic data, and Table 2 provides data on vulnerability to climate change and disaster risks.

Table 1. Key economic and human development indicators

Country	Human Development Index (2022)[a]	HDI rank (of 193)[a]	% below national poverty line[c]	Multidimensional poverty rate[a]	Mean hourly wage (US$)[b]	Mean years of schooling[a]	Youth Development Index (2022)[d]
Cambodia	0.600	148	17.7% (2012)	16.6%	$1.249	5.2	0.737
Lao PDR	0.620	139	18.3% (2018)	23.1%	$1.127	5.9	0.699
Thailand	0.803	66	6.3% (2021)	0.6%	$2.615	8.8	0.785
Viet Nam	0.726	107	4.8% (2020)	1.9%	$1.716	8.5	0.785

Sources: (a): UNDP, 2024; (b) ILOSTAT; (c) World Bank; (d) Commonwealth Secretariat, 2024.[69] The HDI is a composite index covering three basic dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, knowledge and a decent standard of living; it ranges from 0 to 1, with countries scoring above 0.8 rated as having "very high" human development. Multidimensional poverty refers to deprivations related to health, education and standard of living, looking beyond monetary poverty. The YDI measures progress across six domains of youth development: health and well-being, education, employment and opportunity, political and civic participation, equality and inclusion, and peace and security. Like the HDI, it ranges from 0 to 1; the average for Asia in 2022 was 0.759, and for Europe, 0.814.

Table 2. Key climate and disaster risk vulnerability indicators

Country	ND-GAIN Country Index rank (2021, of 192)[a]		World Risk Index (2023)[b]			Children's Climate Risk Index[c]	
	Vulnerability	Readiness	Exposure	Vulnerability	Lack of adaptive capacity	Climate & environment	Child vulnerability
Cambodia	132	159	2.47	27.18	49.62	7.2	5.6
Lao PDR	117	136	0.38	20.42	60.47	7.5	5.8
Thailand	102	62	14.32	31.07	38.38	8.4	2.3
Viet Nam	128	93	26.73	22.25	40.90	8.8	3.0

Sources: (a): Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative; (b) Bündnis Entwicklung Hilft; (c) UNICEF, 2021.70 The ND-GAIN Index considers different aspects of food security, water access, human health, ecosystem services and human habitat to gauge vulnerability to climate change, and economic, social and governance measures to gauge readiness to adapt. The World Risk Index measures exposure and different aspects of vulnerability to disaster risks, all on a scale of 0 to 100. The Children's Climate Index assesses exposure to climate and environmental hazards as well as vulnerability based on health and nutrition, education, water, sanitation and hygiene, poverty, communication assets and social protection, all on a scale of 0 to 10.

Uneven economic development within countries and across the region is a key driver of migration, as poor economic prospects at home – failing crops, limited job opportunities, debt – making leaving more attractive, particularly if labour demand and wages are better in the city or abroad. Notably, as the data in Table 2 show, Cambodia and Lao PDR actually face less severe climate hazards than Thailand (though Viet Nam is the most exposed of all four). This highlights the most critical aspect of climate vulnerability in the region: It is the intensity of poverty and deprivation in these countries, and particularly in the districts and villages profiled, that makes climate change impacts so devastating.

2.1 CAMBODIA

The Kingdom of Cambodia is a tropical country bounded by Viet Nam in the south and east, Lao PDR in the northwest, and Thailand to the north and west, with a small coastline on the Gulf of Thailand. The Mekong River flows through its central lowlands before reaching the sea in Viet Nam. The north and west of the country are mountainous and more sparsely populated than the lower plains.

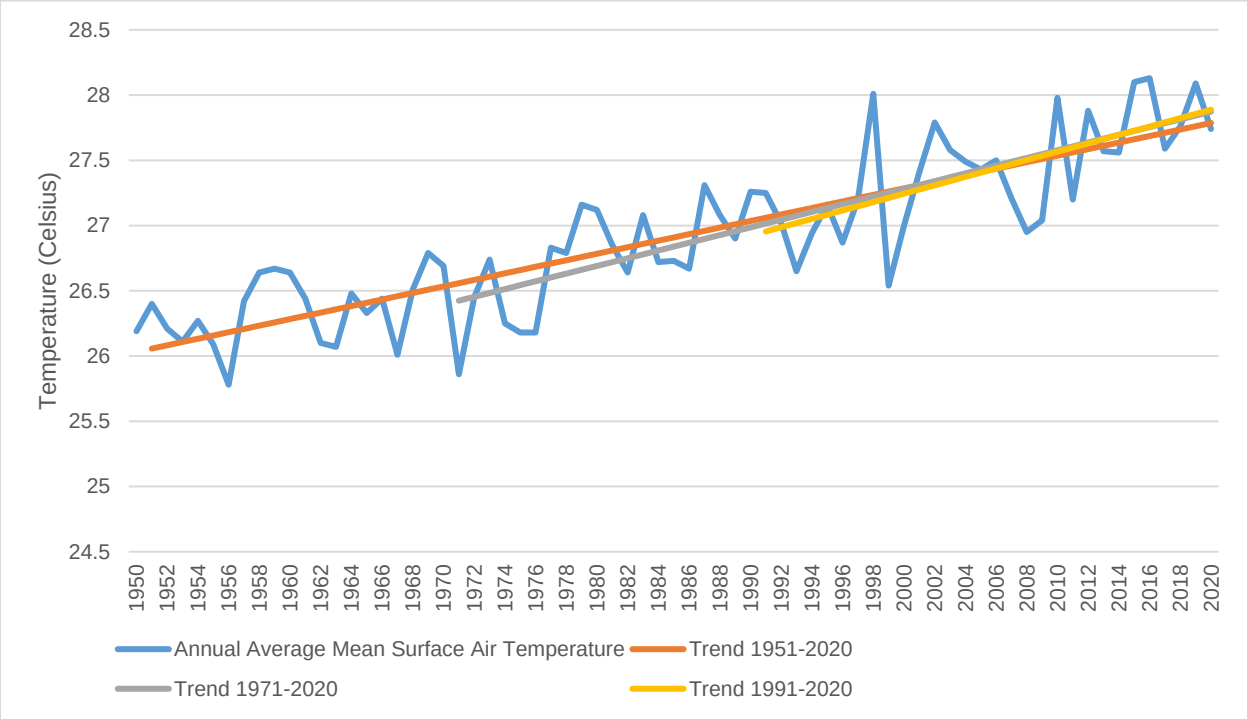
The 2019 national census estimated the population at 15.6 million;[71] UN estimates put it at 17.2 million in 2022, growing at about 1.3% per year.[72] Cambodia is predominantly rural, with an estimated 60.6% of the population living in rural areas, per the 2019 census.[73] Ethnic Khmer make up 90–94% of the population, and the rest are Cham, indigenous highland communities, ethnic Chinese, ethnic Vietnamese and smaller minority groups.[74] The government does not legally recognize Indigenous Peoples, so there are limited reliable statistics on smaller groups (the Khmer are also indigenous), and weak legal protections.

As noted in the introduction, Cambodia has a young population. An estimated 30.5% were under the age of 15 as of 2022, and another 17.1% between the ages of 15 and 24.[75] As recently as 2014, more than two in five Cambodian children lived in multidimensional poverty, but by 2021–2022, the multidimensional child poverty rate had been halved, to 20.5%, an extraordinary gain.[76] Rural areas saw by far the greatest improvements, though large numbers of people also migrated to cities in that period. Indeed, nearly 21% of women aged 20–24 and 30% of men in that age group were internal migrants as of 2021–2022.[77]

Cambodia has some of the highest disability rates in the world, particularly among older people and in rural areas, due to its history of violence, accidental detonations of landmines, and persistent poverty.[78] The 2021–2022 Demographic and Health Survey found that 21% of household members over the age of 5 had some level of difficulty in at least one functional domain (e.g., seeing, hearing, walking), and 4% had a lot of difficulty or could not function at all in at least one domain.[79] Among those aged 60 or older, 57% had a disability, and 20% had a severe disability.

As shown on Table 2 above, Cambodia is ranked as one of the most climate-vulnerable countries in the world.[80] Its high vulnerability is linked to low food security, low cereal crop yields, inadequate medical staff and poor roads, among other factors. Its readiness to adapt is most notably hindered by low education rates. As shown in Figure 1, Cambodia is also getting hotter. The mean surface air temperature increased from 26.4°C in 1951–1980 to 27.4°C in 1991–2020,[81] and by 2050, recent modelling for the World Bank showed that the mean temperature could reach 28.6°C to 29.4°C, depending on the scenario.[82] Even more concerning, the number of days with temperatures exceeding 35°C is projected to rise from an average of 46 in 1950–2014 to between 81 and 98 days, depending on the scenario.

Figure 1. Average mean surface air temperature and annual trends with significance per decade, Cambodia, 1950–2020



Data source: World Bank.[83]

The rise in extreme heat will intensify pressures on human health, livelihoods (including agriculture and other outdoor activities, such as construction) and ecosystems.[84] Projections of future precipitation are uncertain, but more extreme rainfall – too little or too much at once – is already increasingly common. This is a serious problem for rainfed agriculture. Moreover, flood risks are intensifying, with future flood dynamics potentially altered by human activities such as dam construction on the Mekong River and its tributaries. Climate change, upstream damming and deforestation all threaten the hydrological regime of the Mekong River, potentially reducing the productivity of the Tonle Sap Lake and Cambodia's fisheries. This poses a severe threat to the livelihoods and food security of many poor, rural communities.

Cambodia is primarily an origin country for migrants, the overwhelming majority of whom work in Thailand, with an estimated 692,000 Cambodian migrants residing there in 2020.[85] However, because as much as three-quarters of migration between the two countries is irregular, it is difficult to know the exact number.[86] As noted above, internal migration, mainly from rural to urban areas, is also common. With climate change making agrarian livelihoods more difficult every day, rural people increasingly see migration as their only option. Development-induced displacement and land grabs are prevalent as well. For example, about 18,000 people were resettled for the rehabilitation of the Cambodian railway.[87]

POLICY ADVANCES AND GAPS

Cambodia established the National Climate Change Committee (NCCC) in 2006 to develop policies on climate change, and created the National Adaptation Programme of Action to Climate Change (NAPA) for national and local integration into projects and the Climate Change Technical Team (CCTT) to provide technical support in the same year.[88] In 2011, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child urged Cambodia to budget for children in "disadvantaged or vulnerable situations that may require affirmative social measures", and protect those budgets in cases of emergency, including natural disasters.[89]

Cambodia adopted its first comprehensive climate change strategy for 2014–2023 through the NCCC. A core principle is to strengthen equity, acknowledging the need for a gender-sensitive response to climate change.[90] Strategic Objective 5 of the plan also addresses the need to improve the capacity, knowledge and awareness through targeted programmes for vulnerable groups including women, children, youth and minorities. In 2015, Cambodia adopted the Law on Disaster Management, which mentions the need to pay attention to the special needs of women, children, elders and people with disability.[91]

Cambodia's updated nationally determined contribution (NDC) under the Paris Agreement, submitted in 2020, highlights the country's vulnerability to climate change and prioritizes adaptation.[92] In particular, it notes the country's exposure to floods, droughts, windstorms and seawater intrusion, as well as the potential for climate change impacts to reduce GDP by up to 9.8% in 2050. Cambodia has also been developing a national adaptation plan. The NDC calls for enhanced coordination and implementing accountability mechanisms across ministries to reduce the vulnerabilities of women and other marginalized groups such as ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, youth and the elderly. The NDC also acknowledges the need to meaningfully engage children and youth in climate action across sectors. It does not discuss migration.

The National Youth Development Council and the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport and Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training, are responsible for supporting youth and developing awareness and skill development programmes related to climate change. Regarding child and youth migration, the Cambodian government and relevant ministries have established policies relating to youth migrants (defined as age 15–24), focused on skills development of youth and workplace protections. The Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training highlights the key roles of young migrants to the economy and the need for capacity-building so they can take jobs in emerging sectors.[93] The National Action Plan on Youth Development 2022–2026 includes action plans for migrant youth skills development, such as entrepreneurship training, counselling and awareness-raising on safe labour migration, and increased access to technical and vocational training for marginalized youth, including people with disabilities and women.[94]

2.2 LAO PDR

Lao PDR, a landlocked country in Southeast Asia, is enclosed by Cambodia, China, Myanmar, Thailand and Viet Nam. The latest national census, in 2015, counted about 6.5 million people;[95] as of 2022, by UN estimates, the country had almost 7.6 million residents.[96] As noted in the introduction, it is a very young country; an estimated 31% of the population is under 15 years old. Overall, per the 2015 census, about 2.8% of people over the age of 5 have a disability, but the rate is higher in rural areas without roads, 3.3%, and much higher among people over the age of 60: 18.4%.[97]

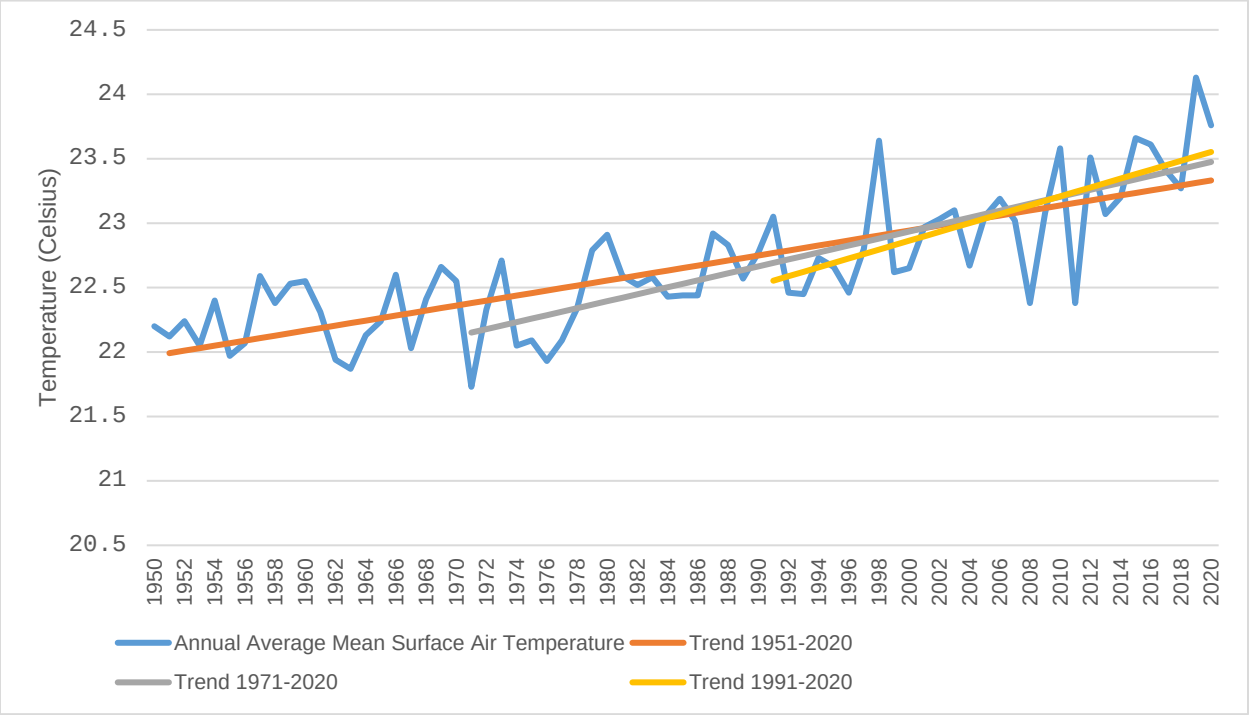
Although the share of urban residents has more than doubled since 1995, it was still only an estimated 36.3% as of 2020.[98] Lao PDR is very ethnically diverse, with more than 49 officially recognized ethnic groups, but the groups are not evenly distributed.[99] Just over half of Laotians are ethnic Lao, while the largest minorities are Khmou and Hmong are the second and third largest groups, respectively. Many ethnic minorities are concentrated in mountainous areas.[100] Notably, the government does not use the word Indigenous, instead opting to include all citizens under an umbrella of "ethnic groups".

As noted above, Lao PDR has an extraordinarily large share of its labour force employed in agriculture, estimated at 70%.[101] The unemployment rate is close to zero, but 22.5% percent of young people between the ages of 15 and 24 were not in school, training or employed as of 2022,[102] and 98.5% of male workers in that age bracket were employed informally.[103] Informal employment is the norm overall, with 90.5% of workers employed informally as of 2022.

Moreover, working does not always spare Laotians from extreme poverty: As of 2023, an estimated 7.6% of employed people aged 15 and over lived on less than US$2.15 per day in purchasing parity terms, the global extreme poverty line.[104] Almost a quarter of the population lives in multidimensional poverty, 9.6% in severe deprivation.[105] Lack of education is a key factor: just under 19% of women aged 25 and older, and just over 30% of men over 25, had any secondary education at all as of 2022.

Like its neighbours, Lao PDR is already feeling the effects of climate change, though in different ways. The country as a whole is less hot than Cambodia, with a mean surface air temperature of 22.3°C in 1951–1980, rising to 23.05°C in 1991–2020 (see Figure 2).[106] More notably, annual rainfall declined by about 64 mm per decade from 1991 to 2020. Future rainfall projections are uncertain, but the rise in temperatures is expected to accelerate, to a mean of 23.4–25.3°C by 2050, depending on the scenario.[107]

Figure 2. Average mean surface air temperature and annual trends with significance per decade, Lao PDR, 1950–2020



Data source: World Bank.[108]

Climate change is expected to reduce agricultural yields, especially for subsistence farmers growing rainfed crops such as rice.[109] Disaster risks are also projected to increase. By the 2030s, the population exposed to river flooding is expected to double, to over 80,000 people per year, with potential additional impacts from flash flooding and landslides. Poorer and marginalized communities are expected to bear the brunt of these impacts, with growing inequality exacerbating vulnerability to climate-related disasters.

As with Cambodia, however, the main reason why Lao PDR is considered very vulnerable to climate change is not the severity of the hazards it faces, but the country's socio-economic context. Key factors identified in the ND-GAIN Index analysis for Lao PDR include a projected decline in cereal yields, the country's generally low agricultural capacity, low access to reliable drinking water, and lack of medical staff, among others.[110] The country's economic growth strategy, focused on the exploitation of natural resources, is also pushing environmental limits and making people more vulnerable to climate change.[111]

Very few people migrate into Lao PDR, though some Vietnamese migrants travel through the country to reach Thailand. However, Lao PDR has significant out-migration, mainly to Thailand, with about 941,000 Laotian migrants recorded in Thailand as of 2020.[112] As with Cambodian migrants, however, it is important to note that a large share of migration from Lao PDR into Thailand – 96%, by one estimate – occurs through irregular channels.[113] Internal migration rates vary across the country, but overall, the 2015 census found 16.7% of people had migrated at some point – and almost two-fifths of Vientiane residents were internal migrants.[114] It is common for international migrants to leave their children behind, particularly if they are small; overall, a 2017 survey found about 3% of Laotian children had at least one parent living abroad, and 2% had both parents abroad.[115]

The long history of migration in the Lao-Thai border area has facilitated numerous kinship ties along the Lao-Thai border.[116]. However, labour migration arrangements are often made through ethnic Lao networks, and youth from ethnic minority and non-Buddhist households are less likely to be involved in the regular migration process. Girls and young women often migrate to Thailand to be domestic workers, as employers in Thailand tend to prefer them over other nationalities.[117] Children, especially girls, are also subject to sex trafficking in Lao contexts – although the experiences of young girls often reflect complex interactions between a desire for modernity, commodification of virginity, and marginalization.[118]

As in Cambodia, there is some degree of displacement linked to development projects as well. Resource mismanagement in the context of hydropower development and consequent disasters has led to hundreds of displacements in different localities, as shown in the cases of Xe Pian Xe Nam Noy hydropower dam collapse.[119] Historically, Lao PDR's economy has hugely benefited from the hydropower development; however, in recent years, more trade-offs between negative socio-environmental impacts including ecosystem degradation and loss of livelihoods and positive economic outcomes have been highlighted.[120] Improved efforts to meaningfully involve local people in consultations around hydropower dam construction and operations, as required by international standards, are crucial.[121]

POLICY ADVANCES AND GAPS

In 2010, Lao PDR enacted its National Strategy on Climate Change, which acknowledges that climate change will have profound impacts on water resources, ecosystems and crop production and specifies key options in the sectors of agriculture and food security, forestry and land use, energy and transport, industry and public health.[122] There has been a lack of engagement with the gendered impacts of climate change, however, particularly within data collection and disaggregation, and only minimal recognition of gender issues in natural resource access and management across wider climate policies.[123] This is evident in the failure to mention gender or children and youth within the 2019 Decree on Climate Change.[124]

The country's updated NDC also only minimally mentions children and youth – just once, in an indicator pertaining to informing communities about climate-related health risks.[125] There are gender- and urban/rural-disaggregated targets for the NDC's water resource, sanitation, and hygiene targets – but there are notable disaggregation gaps regarding age and ethnic minorities. The NDC does state that more gender-responsive climate action and adaptation is currently being integrated into an updated national strategy on climate change and that the country is working with other Mekong River Basin countries to promote gender-sensitive livelihood development in transboundary areas. Neither migration nor displacement are mentioned at all in the NDC.

Although there is limited engagement with intersecting gender and social inequities within wider climate policies, Lao PDR has adopted several instruments focused specifically on promoting gender equality and protecting children and youth that engage with climate and environmental changes. For example, the 2019 Law on Gender Equality has been found to be gender-responsive, with a key mandate to mainstream gender considerations across various government sectors.[126] However, there is limited attention to the needs of ethnic minority groups.[127]

However, the Decree on Environmental Impact Assessment, also adopted in 2019, does require that project assessments of environmental risk consider gender equality and ethnic minorities, although there is no mention of considering impacts for children and youth.[128] The National Agro-Biodiversity Programme and Action Plan II 2015–2025 is also progressive in its mention of how natural resources are managed and accessed differently between women and men and calls for their engagement in its resulting initiatives.[129] In the realm of disaster management, Lao PDR adopted the Law on Disaster Management in 2019, which includes measures on temporary evacuation among other protocols on assistance and recovery.[130] Notably, the law does mention the need for special facilitation of disaster management for children, among other vulnerable groups, although it does not specify how this would be implemented or enforced. The National Plan of Action for Child Protection System Strengthening (2022–2026) builds on this work and aims to enhance the capacities of relevant government bodies to enhance the protection of children, including child protection activities during emergencies such as disaster events.[131]

Policy responses regarding child migrants in Lao PDR vary greatly depending on age. Protections for labour migrants tend to focus on adults, particularly men,[132] while minors are discouraged from migrating at all. Policies protecting women and children mainly involve anti-human trafficking measures.[133] A 2005 memorandum of understanding (MOU) between Thailand and Lao PDR recognized the need for plans to protect women and children and monitor and mitigate trafficking activity.[134] Since then, Lao PDR also passed an anti-trafficking strategy in 2012 and a law on human trafficking in 2015.[135]

2.3 VIET NAM

Viet Nam stretches along the eastern side of the Indochina Peninsula, borders Lao PDR to the west, China to the north, and Cambodia and the Gulf of Thailand to the southwest. The 2019 national census estimated the population at 96.2 million residents, two-thirds of whom lived in rural areas.[136] Viet Nam is not quite as young as its neighbours, but about 24% of the population is under 15 years old.[137]

The majority Kinh ethnic group makes up about 85% of the total population,[138] with the remaining 15% distributed across more than 50 other recognized ethnic minority groups (like Cambodia and Lao PDR, Viet Nam does not use the term "Indigenous"). While Kinh people live all across the country, ethnic minorities are concentrated in rural and mountainous areas, where access to basic services is significantly more limited than in other parts of Viet Nam.[139]

The country's first national disability census, in 2016, found that about 7% of the population has a disability, and another 13% lived in a household with someone with a disability.[140] The survey also found that households with persons with disability tended to be poorer than the national average, which might worsen as the population ages.

Like Lao PDR, Viet Nam is a socialist republic, but it has also welcomed extensive foreign investment and used it to diversify its economy and create new job opportunities in export-oriented industries. Since 2000, Viet Nam's GDP has more than quadrupled in real terms.[141] Extreme poverty has plummeted, from 29.9% in 2002 to just 1% in 2022.[142]

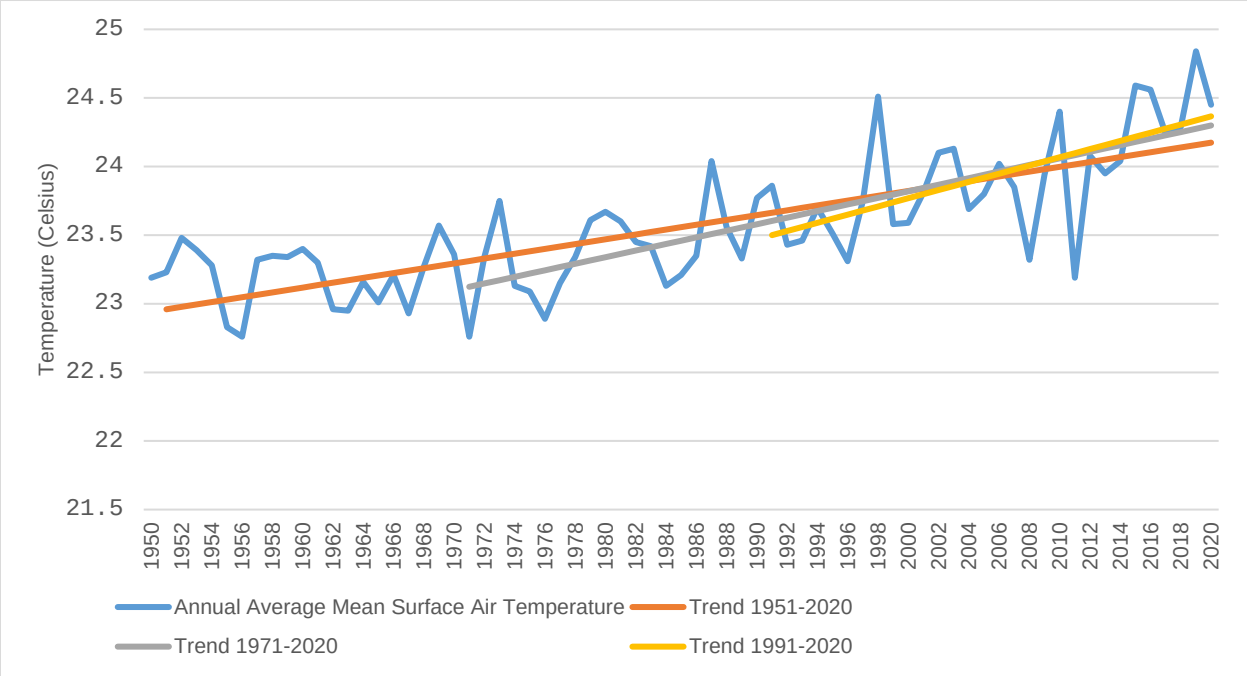
The share of GDP from agriculture, fisheries and forestry has been halved, from 24.5% in 2000 to 12.0% in 2023.[143] The multidimensional poverty rate dropped from 4.9% in 2013–2014 to 1.9% in 2020–2021,[144] and Viet Nam is now classified as having a high level of human development.[145] As of 2022, 61.5% of women and 69.5% of men had at least some secondary education.

In other words, the outlook for Vietnamese who wish to stay in their country has vastly improved, though they may still need to migrate within the country. Indeed, internal migration has soared, particularly towards the country's thriving southeast.[146] The quality of the jobs varies: manufacturing jobs may be formal, well paid, with benefits, but there are also plenty of more precarious service jobs and various opportunities in the informal economy. While Viet Nam's share of informal employment is much lower than Lao PDR's, it is still high: 65% for female workers aged 15 and older, and 70% for male workers.[147] Only 0.7% of employed people over 15 live in extreme poverty, however.[148]

It is because of its improving socio-economic outlook that Viet Nam is rated better than Cambodia and Lao PDR on the ND-GAIN Index,[149] though it also has low scores for projected cereal yields, agricultural capacity, dam capacity and medical staff. But several indicators of poverty, infrastructure inadequacy and general deprivation are better in Viet Nam, as are economic and governance readiness.

The actual climate hazards faced by Viet Nam, however, are enormous, far more daunting than those threatening Cambodia and Lao PDR. The mean temperature has increased by about 0.33°C per decade since 1991, and the number of days exceeding 35°C, by 5.25 per decade.[150] By 2050, depending on the climate scenario, the mean temperature could rise by another 0.7–1.6°C.[151] The number of days above 35°C – about 24, on average, in 1951–2014 – could rise to double or reach as high as 89 days.

Figure 3. Average mean surface air temperature and annual trends with significance per decade, Viet Nam, 1950–2020



Source: World Bank.[152]

Rainfall projections are less dire, but Viet Nam faces two threats that Cambodia and Lao PDR do not have to worry about as much: sea-level rise and intensifying coastal storms (which also bring heavy rain to inland areas, but threaten coastal lowlands and river deltas the most). Viet Nam's coastal and river delta regions are highly vulnerable to sea-level rise, potentially affecting 6–12 million people by the late 21st century without effective adaptation measures. Climate change is projected to increase the population affected by river flooding, ranging from 3–9 million people by the mid-21st century, and agricultural productivity losses are expected for key crops due to saline intrusion and shifts in viable growing areas.[153]

About 70% of Viet Nam's population lives in low-lying deltas and coastal areas, so exposure to these risks is extremely high.[154] Indeed, because of the threats to Viet Nam's extensive low-lying areas in particular, a major World Bank study on climate migration identified the coastal portions of the Viet Nam Mekong Delta, Ho Chi Minh City, and coastal areas of northern Viet Nam near Thanh Hoa and Vinh as likely "hotspots" of climate out-migration by 2050, mainly due to the impacts of sea-level rise.[155]

Even high ground is not necessarily safe, however. The mountainous northern regions are susceptible to landslides and flash floods during heavy rainfall and storms.[156] Droughts, meanwhile, severely affect rural areas, especially in the Central Highlands leading to crop damage, water shortages and declining yields.[157] The impacts of climate and environmental shocks are more severely felt by ethnic minority groups and children, creating significant challenges to their food security, health and education.[158]

Notably, the Vietnamese government has initiated national resettlement and relocation programmes for people exposed significant climate hazards, in addition to emergency measures that are taken routinely to prevent disaster casualties.[159] In 2023, 68,000 people in Viet Nam were internally displaced due to disasters.[160] Relocation programmes are locally implemented, and households often move to nearby localities.[161] The programmes have had mixed results. Success depends on whether communities gain increased access to safe housing and essential services, such as schools and health clinics, as well as the ability to maintain their livelihoods or diversify their income strategies, all of which affect children's well-being.[162] A less positive outcome is so-called "double displacement".[163] For example, many people resettled through schemes in 2000s in the Mekong Delta, Tam Nong district of Dong Thap province and Ngoc Hien district of Ca Mau province have been compelled to migrate again.

Lastly, development-induced displacement and resettlement have been observed in Viet Nam as part of the country's broader infrastructure development initiatives. In relation to hydropower, the construction of large projects has led to the relocation of a significant number of people.[164] It is important to note that these projects serve multiple purposes such as providing irrigation, flood control, and electricity. The government of Viet Nam continues to strive towards compliance with key international standards for hydropower development. However, there have been instances where the distribution of benefits arising from these projects has raised concerns, particularly with respects to equitable outcomes for the most vulnerable people.

POLICY ADVANCES AND GAPS

Viet Nam's first National Strategy on Climate was adopted in 2011 and outlined the country's vision for climate adaptation, which focused on strengthening the responsiveness of communities and natural systems and progressing towards sustainable development objectives. Since then, several laws have been introduced on environmental protection, disaster management and climate change. For example, the 2013 Law on Natural Disaster Prevention and Control outlines principles for disaster prevention and control and recognizes the need for fairness and gender equity within disaster management.[165] The law also specifies the need to protect groups at greater risk of suffering adverse impacts from disasters.

The Law on Environmental Protection in 2020 assesses impacts, risks, vulnerabilities and damages from climate change for adaptation.[166] Viet Nam has also completed a national adaptation plan (NAP), focused on 2021–2030 with a vision to 2050.[167] Notably, the NAP explicitly mentions migration, both as a likely outcome of climate change impacts (referencing the World Bank study), and as a factor that might make some people more vulnerable, such as elders who stay behind when young people migrate. The implementation of the NAP also seeks to contribute towards improving social justice by focusing on groups including children, the elderly, the poor, ethnic minorities and women.

In 2022, Viet Nam approved the National Strategy for Climate Change until 2050, which outlines several key adaptation initiatives for households. The strategy also outlines the government's desire to increase the role and participation of women and youth in climate adaptation and disaster risk management as well as the need to develop sustainable livelihood models in high-risk areas to increase their capacity and fulfil social security and gender equality considerations.[168]

The NDC of Viet Nam, updated in 2022, calls for updated assessments of climate change on different sectors and areas with analysis of specific impacts for vulnerable groups – namely women, the elderly, people with disabilities, children and adolescents, and ethnic minorities.[169] It also mentions migration, and it recognizes the ways in which vulnerability may be compounded in specific areas, such as how ethnic minorities primarily living in mountainous areas face significant risks of heavy rains and flash floods.

Viet Nam was the first country in Asia and the second country in the world to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child, in 1990. Since then, the country has adopted several frameworks and laws to recognize and protect children's rights. Viet Nam approved its National Action Programme for Children in 2021–2030, which aims to create a safe, healthy, and friendly environment for children focused on nutrition, healthcare, education, recreation and participation.[170] However, this programme does not mention climate change. The Children Law of 2016 does stipulate that children have the right to be protected from natural disasters and environmental pollution.[171]

There remain gaps in connecting slower-onset environmental changes with children's rights. The government has recognised several priority tasks for more successful implementation of climate action that safeguards child protections. It calls for implementation support related to assessing risks and loss and damage, raising awareness of the Paris Agreement, determine climate adaptation needs, and understand existing vulnerabilities.[172]

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3. THE VIEW FROM THE VILLAGES: ECONOMIC PRECARITY, ENVIRONMENTAL PRESSURES AND MOBILITY

Section 2 provided an overview of the socio-economic, environmental, migration and policy context in Cambodia, Lao PDR and Viet Nam. This section zooms in on a district in each country, and two villages in each district, to provide an array of perspectives on the complex relationship between climate change, livelihoods and (im)mobility. The village profiles are based on field research, including interviews with people affected by migration and with local key informants (see Table 1 in section 1.4 for the labelling conventions), as well as the researchers' observations. Each sub-section begins with a profile of the district in which the villages are situated, based on official data, academic literature and field research.

3.1 DEBT AND ECONOMIC PRECARITY IN NORTHWESTERN CAMBODIA

PHNOM PROEK DISTRICT, BATTAMBANG PROVINCE

Phnom Proek district is in northwestern Cambodia, bordering Thailand. It was a stronghold of the Khmer Rouge during the civil war, which left lasting impacts on the environment and infrastructure.[173] The 2019 national census estimated the district's population at just under 45,000, almost half of them children.[174]

Detailed, up-to-date economic information about Phnom Proek district could not be obtained, but 2019 census data showed two-thirds of workers in Battambang province were engaged in agriculture, forestry or fishing.[175] Commonly grown crops include rice, maize and cassava – the latter mainly for export to Thailand, with revenues rising and falling sharply with market prices.[176]

Census data also showed notable development gaps; although four-fifths of households in Battambang province had electricity, for example, 63% still cooked with firewood, and just under 15% had safe drinking water piped into their home (another 6% had access to outdoor or shared taps).[177] Wage labour was the exception, not the norm: Almost half of all workers were self-employed, and 28% were unpaid family workers. Men's labour participation rate was much higher than women's – 84% vs. 69%. And while Cambodia's population grew by 1.4% from 2008 to 2019, Battambang's shrank by 0.3%.

The disability rate in Battambang province as a whole is one of the highest in Cambodia; the 2021 national health survey found 38.2% of women and girls over the age of 5, and 34.8% of men and boys, reported having some difficulty in at least one domain of functioning, and 12.6% and 10.3%, respectively, reported at least one severe disability.[178]

Phnom Proek district has 28 primary schools and one secondary school, not enough to meet rising number of students. A 2022 review of recent education review implementation in the district noted concerns from school faculty including limited resources, dilapidated and broken buildings, and a shortage of teachers and specialized staff.[179] If students wish to study beyond grade 9, they must travel to the one upper secondary school in the district, or go to another district. However, the roads in the province are difficult to use during the rainy season, increasing travel times. Only about only half of eligible children are enrolled in lower secondary school, and just 28% in upper secondary school.

Phnom Proek district and Battambang as a whole are experiencing significant climate change impacts, including higher temperatures and worsening floods.[180] In addition, droughts and shifts in seasonal patterns are creating growing challenges for farmers. Extreme events also affect livelihoods, including through cumulative precipitation periods leading to flooding; for example, in 2021, significant flooding affected 40 families, damaging roads and crops, including maize and potatoes.[181] Rice shortage is a critical

issue in the district, particularly from August to September which are the months with the most rain, which is likely to be exacerbated with irregular rainfall.

In this context, and with few stable and well-paid jobs available in the district, many people migrate in search of better employment. Since Phnom Proek borders Thailand, it is common to cross over to work, particularly among younger people.[182]

Household debt is a particularly significant driver of out-migration, which means remittances are often used to repay debts rather than to pay for children's education or make other investments that improve people's lives. On the other hand, migration may also be financed through debt. A 2019 study on debt in Southeast Asia found that 35% of Cambodians returned indebted after international migration, with 57% reporting a lack of savings upon return and 19% reporting their savings had declined. Conditions were better in Viet Nam and Lao PDR, where only 9% of returned migrants reporting they were in debt, with none in Viet Nam and 14% in Lao PDR saying their savings had declined.[183]

Many Cambodian households are heavily indebted; on average, over the past five years, the household debt for those borrowing from microfinance institutions in Cambodia was around US$12,000,[184] over six times the GDP per capita in the country as of 2023.[185] A recent assessment found more than half of borrowers were unaware of the interest rates charged on their loans.[186]

Most poor households take out loans with non-bank institutions and rotate debt by using new loans to settle debts with informal money lenders or other microfinance institutions.[187] These lenders' presence has helped to normalize debt among farmers, but many households get stuck in cycles of high-interest debt. The high cost of farm inputs, the low market prices of produce, and low crop yields and crop losses – due in part to climate change impacts – reduce households' income and limit their ability to meet their own needs and repay debts. Many borrow from informal money lenders to pay back loans from formal institutions, then borrow back from formal institutions to pay back money lenders. Cambodian microfinance institutions often require collateral no matter the size of the loan, which may lead households to be forced to sell their land to clear their debts.[188] A 2023 study found that 6.1% of borrowing households sold land at least once to repay a microfinance loan, most of which was agricultural land, but around 16% of sales included residential property.[189]

Phnom Proek is one of the main districts for irregular border crossings. Many Cambodian migrants use brokers to help them enter Thailand and find jobs there.[190] Common sectors in which migrant workers are employed include construction, agriculture, manufacturing, fishing, domestic labour, entertainment and sex work.[191] Engagements can be long-term or seasonal, as opportunities open up during fruit harvesting seasons, particularly when Thailand faces labour shortages, as in 2021.[192] Internal migration is also common. People from Phnom Proek district typically go to Siem Reap, Cambodia's second-largest city, or other nearby urban areas, where they engage in construction and other contract or informal work.[193] Some go to the capital, Phnom Penh, typically for longer periods.

In our sample, age, gender and economic status all affected migration patterns, including the choice to migrate and the types of jobs taken. Men and boys mainly went to work in construction, often irregularly and sometimes across the border in Thailand. Some girl migrants also took construction jobs, engaged in informal work such as waste picking in urban areas, or took jobs at casinos. Women often find themselves in informal agricultural work across the border or in factories in Phnom Penh.

The frequency of parents visiting home varies; those migrating to Thailand long-term sometimes stay for years at a time. Even though parents migrate to improve their family's financial situation, many children still live in poverty, which affects their access to food, health care and education.

CAMBODIA VILLAGE PROFILES

C1: NAVIGATING FLOODS, DROUGHTS AND DEBTS

Most residents of C1 are low-income farmers who grow maize, potatoes and other vegetables, and microfinance is widely used to help pay for farm inputs and land. Several floods, droughts and storms have caused crop failures, exacerbating economic and nutritional insecurity. Labour migration is thus common, though typically not for seasonal work, according to World Vision operations data, confirmed by the village chief. Instead, people migrate longer-term for industrial jobs in the city or cross into Thailand for construction and plantation work.

A 56-year-old, very poor male farmer described four "very challenging" years that drove him to migrate: "[We had] two years in a row of droughts, then two years in a row of floods. That's why I stopped farming here and went to Thailand. … We owe a lot of money to people."[194]

Floods disrupt not only livelihoods, but also children's education, as roads may be temporarily inaccessible, making it difficult to get to school. During these disruptions, many children living in poverty will try to find local daily wage labour opportunities to support their household. Without support to return to school, they may drop out permanently.

"When there is a flood, teachers find it difficult to teach," explained a 34-year-old woman. "They can't find anywhere to teach the students, since all the chairs and tables are wet."[195] With the roads damaged, she added, the children are also unmotivated to walk to school.

Several homes in the village have also been severely damaged by storms – especially the poorly built structures where lower-income households live. This can lead people to take on additional debts to repair and rebuild, and ultimately leave to try to earn enough money to repay the debts. The field researchers found households that are relatively wealthier are likelier to be able to choose to stay when facing similar climate shocks and stressors; this may be because having more resources helps them be more resilient and better able to recover swiftly and effectively. Such patterns are also connected to Cambodian socio-cultural norms and practices. While young single girls in financially difficult situations were found to be likely to migrate, the village head said that "traditionally, daughters or unmarried daughters are not allowed to be away from home", but once they are married, "they follow their husbands".[196]

C2: ISOLATION, INSECURITY AND FEW SAFE HAVENS

C2 has a similar socio-economic profile as C1 and faces similar environmental challenges, including floods, droughts and storms. Local farmers grow mainly maize, fruits and vegetables. Floods and droughts have reduced the quality of crops, so they sell for lower prices, and led to crop failures and food and nutritional insecurity in poorer households. As in C1, people rely heavily on microfinance debt for farming and land costs, and borrowing patterns reflect the presence of middlemen in the village. They set the prices for crops, leaving farmers with little room for negotiation.

As a 65-year- old woman farmer said: "When they give you a low price, can you sell the rice to someone else? No. They will all give the same price … if they give a low price, that's the same price they are offering to everyone."[197] As a result, even when weather conditions are favourable, farmers may earn little from their crops. As in C1, however, farmers report worsening environmental problems that they said exacerbate issues with unfair financing, resource access and child development. Increasing heat was also mentioned as a concern for livelihoods and community members' well-being. Storms also impact housing for people of all classes, requiring them to borrow money for repairs.

Also as in C1, floods disrupt children's education. One boy said in an interview that because of floods, "I couldn't go to school, and that caused me to not do well in my exam."[198]

One way in which people cope with climate shocks is to sell land – a response also seen in C1. This means better-off households, which are likelier to own land, have greater flexibility than lower-income and heavily indebted households, who may opt for labour migration.

While most migration in the village is long-term, there has been a shift in migration patterns, likely influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic and associated border closures. Fewer people are crossing the border, and instead they more are moving to urban centres within Cambodia for factory work.

The C2 village head said that married couples often migrate together if a grandparent can care for the children, or else one parent will go alone.[199] These decisions are also gendered, not only in terms of child care but also because patriarchal norms around male labour on larger farms can influence which parent migrates in relatively wealthier households, and what kinds of work they take at their destination.

The choices made also reveal a keen awareness of environmental risks. "If my husband goes Thailand, I stay. If I go, my husband stays. We take turns," one 56-year-old, very poor woman said. "I am afraid that if we both go, my grandchildren will drown in the floodwaters."[200] She has five grandchildren, aged 1 to 10, under her care; the parents work in construction and agriculture in Thailand. During a recent flood, one of the older children fell into the water after crossing an informal path. She said they were lucky that it was not one of the smaller children, as they would have likely drowned.

3.2 STRUGGLING WITH TOO MUCH OR TOO LITTLE WATER AT THE LAO-THAI BORDER

SOUKHUMA DISTRICT, CHAMPASACK PROVINCE

Champasack province is in southwestern Lao PDR and borders both Thailand and Cambodia. It encompasses diverse agricultural landscapes, including the Bolaven Plateau in the northeast, which predominantly supports small-scale rainfed Robusta coffee cultivation. Along the Mekong corridor, there is commercial agriculture, with a significant rubber concession area and an expanding cassava industry.

Soukhuma district is in the floodplain part of the province at the Thai-Lao border, and was home to about 57,600 people as of the 2015 national census (as of 2023, the UN estimates the population at about 66,600, about 15% under the age of 15).[201] The census also found 92% of the district's population was rural, and 22% lacked a road connection. This means many people cannot travel readily to school, paid jobs in the area, or public services. Across Champasack province, less than 5% of households had piped drinking water, and a third cooked with firewood. Almost 26% of children aged 6–16 were not attending school, and only about a quarter of all people over the age of 6 had completed primary school.

Livelihoods in Soukhuma district are mainly agricultural, such as growing rice or cassava and raising livestock and poultry. This makes households very vulnerable to climate change and variability. Although the total annual rainfall in Champasack province has not changed dramatically, precipitation across Lao PDR is becoming more extreme, with more torrential rains and extended wet periods, and more dry spells.[202] Champasack province is also getting hotter, with the mean maximum temperature rising by about 0.41°C per decade since 1990. Heatwaves and droughts sharply reduce yields and can make it impossible to plant crops, or destroy what is already in the ground.[203]

Groundwater in Soukhuma district is being extracted at increasing rates to cope with dry-season water shortages and unreliable rainfall.[204] Farmers in the district recently turned to growing cassava to improve their livelihoods, but mono-cropping poses a threat to long-term soil health, food diversification and community nutrition. It can also leave households vulnerable to market fluctuations and crop losses. Data collected by World Vision in 2021 showed that 20% of households in the district experienced one or more months of hunger, and half lacked dietary diversity.

Another critical concern for household is the high interest rates from microfinance institutions. A survey of 600 people in 2014, including 100 from Soukhuma district found that the annual interest rates paid by respondents using microfinance could be as high as 80%, while annual interest rates for bank customers went up to 18%. This means that people who need to use microfinance institutions, who are generally poorer, accessing credit can be exorbitantly expensive compared with banks.[205]

Houses in Soukhuma district are concentrated along the riverbanks, which flood regularly, damaging the buildings and sometimes causing large crop losses. Fewer than half of the villages are accessible during the rainy season, and a quarter are inaccessible year-round due to poor road conditions. The government has offered land for resettlement, but many local farmers do not wish to move, as the proposed resettlement location may not be suitable for farming. Dam construction along the Mekong River has not displaced residents of Soukhuma district, but large infrastructure projects have affected water levels, caused floods, and changed the transport of sediment, potentially affecting the fertility of the land.[206]

The most common form of migration in Soukhuma district is out-migration across the Lao-Thai border, motivated by the prospect of higher wages. Some children drop out of school and migrate to live with former neighbours and family and seize job opportunities in Thailand. In 2018, it was reported that Soukhuma district had Lao PDR's highest secondary education dropout rate, 24% more than double the national average of 9.2%. These migrants work in irregular situations and lack protections in Thailand.[207]

Along with international migration, some people in Soukhuma district engage in seasonal migration to other districts in Champasack and Attapeu provinces to work on plantations.[208] During the COVID-19 pandemic, some former cross-border migrants reintegrated into their communities because of the closure of the border, and they have since taken up new livelihoods that might be changing household dynamics. All these forms of migration take place within a changing environment, and are at least partially related to natural resource management, access, and participation within the district community.

Soukhuma district also has inadequate education and health infrastructure, which makes it difficult to meet children's needs. More than half of the 63 villages in Soukhuma district (35) have only primary schools up to the third grade, and five have no primary school.

All the migrants interviewed Soukhuma district had crossed the border into Thailand. Women from poor backgrounds often migrated to engage in domestic work, while others sold fruit in Thailand. Women who were somewhat better-off also migrated to work in construction, often irregularly, and men also work in that sector.

LAO PDR VILLAGE PROFILES

L1: AN ETHNIC MINORITY FACES SEVERE FLOODS

The residents of L1 are part of the Suay ethnic minority and mostly poor. They grow rice, cassava and maize and engage in subsistence fishing. Given that low-income households predominate, there is less visible wealth inequality than in the Cambodian villages. People borrow money from the village association, but informally. The loans are used to cover farming costs, migration costs, and the purchase of vehicles.

The village is in a low-lying area next to a river, so it is highly exposed to floods. When flooding occurs, crops are damaged or destroyed, there are shortages of food and animal feed, safe drinking water may not be available, and people get sick. In 2019, floods were so severe that all the rice was damaged, the floodwaters took five or six days to recede, and all the villagers were temporarily displaced.

An 18-year-old, very poor girl described the situation after a large flood: "There was not enough fish to eat. We drank rainwater. We could not help others; we had to help ourselves first. Other families got sick; luckily our family did not. We stopped school for almost two months, because the school was also flooded, the building damaged, school materials destroyed."[209]

Local residents rely on boats for transportation, so during heavy rains, when the river becomes unsafe to navigate, the village is isolated. This is a particular problem for students wishing to pursue secondary education, as the nearest school is across the river. One 71-year-old grandfather explained how the floods can disrupt their education: "The children go to school by boat in the morning and return by boat in the evening, but when the water levels are high, it is dangerous to go by boat."[210]

Floods also have serious impacts on housing, as sometimes floodwaters have reportedly reached as high as the roofs of houses. The recurrence of severe floods has led several households to express their desire for resettlement. Some farmers oppose resettlement, however, as they are concerned that they will be moved to land that is not be suitable for growing rice, and this would affect their livelihoods. However, others said that living in a flood-prone area is too difficult, with food shortages, high rates of water-borne diseases and other impacts on their quality of life. Some households who have faced significant housing and livelihood losses have already begun to move to higher ground.

Very poor people who cannot find good jobs locally are most affected by the adverse conditions, and they are also likelier to live in low-elevation areas at high risk of flooding. Poverty and environmental impacts thus compound to influence out-migration. Many people head to Bangkok and other areas of Thailand after relatives who are already there tell them about job opportunities.

Box 2. Life spotlight: Growing 'just enough' to eat in a flood-prone Lao village

Noy is 35 years old and lives in a still-unfinished wooden house with her husband, five children – aged 3 months to 16 years at the time of the interview – and elderly parents.[211] They are part of the Suay ethnic minority and are subsistence farmers. They own their home and grow "just enough food to eat", which she deems to make them "middle-class" by village standards.

She is illiterate, having only briefly attended primary school. Her eldest daughter completed the fifth grade, "but then she had to leave to help take care of her brother and sister". This is common in the village: "Most [children] finish fifth grade and then leave school to help their parents with farming or to work in Thailand". The girl has extensive duties: "She helps with housework, cooking, and farm work because I take care of the youngest one. She and her father are main [farm] workers." The other three children are still in school.

The family has an old tractor and two buffalo, and they supplement their diet by fishing. They usually grow just enough rice for themselves, but when they have had "a little extra", "we sold it and used the money we earned to pay back the loan we took out to buy fertilizer and farming equipment".

The village is "very crowded", she says, and because a road is being built in front of her house, she cannot even grow a vegetable garden, but the family has not received any compensation.

Floods are common here, and not always bad, Noy says – sometimes they improve the rice harvest. But heavy rains and associated floods can also be devastating.

During one recent incident, "many villagers were scared because of the strong wind combined with the rain, so they had to move to higher places, like the rice fields. Some people were stuck somewhere, and it was difficult to call for a boat. Everyone was scared."

Afterward, children could not go to school, there was no drinking water, and supplies could not be delivered to the village. Rice crops were also ruined. "There was a lot of damage that year." Many people got sick, including with malaria.

Many people have migrated to Thailand for work, and Noy has seen their lives improved as a result. Her husband migrated once, too, but he found it "exhausting" and returned home. She has no desire to migrate, but she would like to move to a less flood-prone location, but the family cannot yet afford it.

As for her village, Noy says: "We aspire to have a bridge. If we get a bridge and improved roads, life will be better. We also need food, as there are days when we don't have enough."

L2: STRUGGLING WITH DROUGHTS AND DREAMING OF A BETTER LIFE

The residents of L2 are also farmers, growing crops such as cassava and vegetables and fishing. Women mainly tend to their household gardens, plant cassava and farm, while men harvest the cassava and fish.

Floods are not frequent here, and when they occur, they mainly affect rice production, with no reported impacts on child health, development or education. There are primary and secondary schools nearby, so, unlike in L1, children do not have to travel across a river for their education.

The largest climate-related challenge here is droughts, which make it difficult to grow a variety of crops, lead to crop failures, and impact fish availability. A 50-year-old woman farmer said: "There have been droughts since 2017 that made things difficult, for us, and we could not plant rice nor catch fish."[212] Vegetables do not grow well in the village because of hot and dry climate, which has gotten worse due to climate change and deforestation. Storms and strong winds also often damage homes, as they are poorly built.

Interviewees described very little borrowing – which, when it occurs, is through formal channels. A 13-year-old girl reported that remittances from migrants are "used for buying food and to settle financial obligations with the bank."[213] It is possible that other households rely on different formal and informal lending, given dependence on agriculture and the impacts of prolonged droughts.

Most of migration from this village is long-term, with destinations primarily in Thailand, where people find jobs in sectors such as hospitality and construction. According to the village chief, there is also seasonal migration to Thailand. The households where people have not migrated tend to be relatively wealthier farmers. Although no landless people were interviewed, the limited availability of land was described as a reason for migration. Migrants were also driven by a desire for upward social mobility, such as to save up to buy land or vehicles, whereas in L1, migration was motivated by basic needs.

3.3 PEOPLE LIVING UPSTREAM IN THE WESTERN MOUNTAINS OF VIET NAM

THUONG XUAN DISTRICT, THANH HOA PROVINCE

Thuong Xuan is a mountainous district in Thanh Hoa province, in north central Viet Nam, that borders Lao PDR. Much of the district has no significant roads and is very remote. The 2019 national census found just over 89,100 residents, less than 7% of them living in urban areas.[214] As of 2010, 80% of the district's land area was covered by natural forest, though in the past two decades, Thuong Xuan has lost over a fifth of its tree cover, particularly near its most populated areas.[215]

Although across Viet Nam, and even within Thanh Hoa province, the Kinh ethnic group predominates,[216] in Thuong Xuan much of the population belongs to minority groups, such as ethnic Thai and Muong. The district is one of the poorest in the country, with about a quarter of households living in poverty as of 2019. The district has also played a prominent role in highlighting the concerns of ethnic minorities,[217] leading to some efforts to reduce poverty, deliver basic services and improve living conditions.[218]

Thanh Hoa province as a whole is a land of stark contrasts: While the north and west are mountainous, the terrain shifts to hilly midland plains fed by the Ma and Chu rivers, which come together as the Ma before reaching Thanh Hoa city, the provincial capital, and the Gulf of Tonkin.[219] The province's coastal zone is very flat and low-lying. Thanh Hoa has seen some development in its industrial and service sectors, primarily concentrated in the city. However, agriculture, forestry, and aquaculture continue to play a significant role in both the economy and cultural life of the province. According to the 2019 census, over 85% of the province's population remains rural.[220]

Thanh Hoa's geographic and socio-economic profile led a World Bank study to identify it as one of a handful of "hotspots" of out-migration in the Lower Mekong Region as climate change impacts intensify by 2050, highlighting sea-level rise as the main driver.[221] Indeed, the province faces compounding climatic and non-climatic risks with implications for human security and resource sustainability.[222]

Thanh Hoa has a tropical monsoonal climate, and its coastline is frequently struck by tropical storms and typhoons that bring heavy rain and often floods and destructive winds that cause catastrophic damage. Between 2000 and 2023, international data show, Thanh Hoa experienced 29 disasters, all hydrological (such as riverine and flash floods) or meteorological (mainly typhoons).[223]

High levels of coastal erosion, worsening since the 1990s, also affect infrastructure and livelihoods near the mouth of the Ma River and in surrounding coastal areas.[224] Moreover, saltwater intrusion threatens coastal agriculture and inland rice paddy cultivation, and high concentrations of salinity hinders the development of mangrove forests, a key resource in reducing the impact of typhoons and floods on local livelihoods.

More research is needed to ensure that policy-makers have the knowledge they need to proactively support affected communities and facilitate safe migration for those who choose to move.

Thuong Xuan district is not directly affected by sea-level rise, but the shifting conditions to the east could reduce the options for migrating within the province, and potentially bring new residents who need to move to higher ground. Moreover, the heavy rains and flood risks brought by typhoons do affect the west of the province, as do earthquakes, though they tend to be less severe. The province lies on three deep tectonic faults, Son La-Bim Son, Song Ma and Sop Cop, which contribute to landslides and mudslides.[225]

In Thanh Hoa's mountainous region, flash floods and landslides are a major concern; most drainage systems in the province were constructed in the 1980s and lack sufficient capacity to protect against severe flooding.[226] In Thuong Xuan district, there are no shelters designated specifically for people displaced by floods displacement, but families are evacuated to buildings on higher ground, with the local government's assistance – as occurred after a major flood in 2017.[227]

Thuong Xuan district is also the site of the Cua Dat project, Viet Nam's largest hydropower and irrigation project, on the Chu River, which since 2010 has contributed to flood management and provided irrigation for more than 86,000 hectares of agricultural land.[228] However, past typhoons have affected the stability of the reservoir, and households originally displaced by the project have resettled in a semi-flooded area.[229] Very vulnerable households lack access to key infrastructure and services. After calls for a stronger resettlement response, the district is building a centralized resettlement area including houses, schools, water, electricity, roads and other key infrastructure.

The combination of heavy rains and mismanagement of water levels in reservoirs has led to severe floods and loss of livelihoods,[230] and this has created an additional reason to migrate for people who were already struggling economically. Viet Nam has high rates of internal mobility overall, particularly from rural to urban areas (and, increasingly, between urban areas),[231] and Thuong Xuan district is just about 70 kilometres (km) from Thanh Hoa city and about 200 km from Hanoi.

Migration in Thuong Xuan district is almost entirely internal – that is, within Viet Nam. People migrate seasonally or even for several years to work in the major cities. In our sample, common destinations included Hanoi and other nearby cities, such as the port of Hai Phong, where people across socio-economic backgrounds sought construction, industrial and service jobs. Migrants also go towards the South to Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam's largest urban hub and a major destination for migrants across the country, which is consistent with national internal migration patterns.[232]

With limited arable land and increasingly difficult climatic conditions, many households cannot earn enough to support themselves by farming, especially as the prices paid for their crops are low. With few viable livelihood opportunities in their community and plenty of labour demand in the cities, younger people often migrate for work and leaving children behind to be cared for by their grandparents. Those who do not have household members migrating face additional economic difficulties.

Industrial production also attracts middle-aged men, particularly to areas such as Quan Hoa, where machinery factories offer employment. The textile and garment industry is another significant employer for migrants from this district, reflecting a broader trend in Viet Nam's economic shift towards industrialization. Evidence was also found of older women moving to Hanoi to work as domestic workers, a choice possibly influenced by a lack of opportunities for them within the district.

VIET NAM VILLAGE PROFILES

V1: FLOODS AND ISOLATION EXACERBATED BY DAM DISCHARGES

About 30% of the households in V1 are part of the Thai ethnic minority, and the rest are mainly Kinh. They have agricultural livelihoods, growing rice, acacia and vegetables and tending to buffalo. The village lies next to a river, and when water levels are high due to heavy rains and/or dam discharges, it is not safe to cross, so no one can get out.

"When the dams discharge water, we are quarantined," a 38-year-old woman said, noting that children are not allowed to go to school. "This applies to the whole village."[233] A 40-year-old man explained: "It's an isolated village. Children can miss school for very long periods. If you have relatives on the other side of the river, you will not miss school in the rainy season, but if you do not, you will have to miss school. The education of the children of this village is mostly inferior to that of other children in the area."[234]

Since the dam was built, the availability of irrigation has shielded local farmers from the impacts of droughts, interviewees said, but flood risks have worsened. "Due to the rains and floods, we have lost acres of land,"[235] said a relatively well-off, 76-year-old woman in a non-migrant household. Decreased farm outputs and the loss of arable land have led a cycle of borrowing and debts in the village.

Amid such adverse conditions, a growing number of people in the village have become longer-term internal migrants. When families migrate together, the parents may get factory jobs, while the children are engaged in service sectors. Those who stay behind – and those who return home – find that agriculture cannot sustain them, but there are few alternatives that do not require leaving the village.

"When I came back here to work, I wanted to stay close to home, but because of the land conditions, there is no work, so I had to go to work far away,"[236] said a 53-year-old woman from a poor background. A 51-year-old man expressed a similar sentiment: "In general, there was no way to make a living at that time. I find it good to eat rice at home, but here it is very hard, and there are crop failures. We worked very hard, but we were still lacking."[237] One reason, he said, was worsening soil quality due to floods.

V2: FROM TRADITIONAL LIVELIHOODS TO FACTORY FLOORS

The people in V2 are better-off overall than those in V1, and they have greater access to off-farm job opportunities, such as factory work. In a fairly rural region with large ethnic minority populations, V2 also stands out for being about 95% Kinh and heavily urbanized.

With little arable land available, but viable options within commuting distance, it has become common to travel daily to nearby companies and factories, or else to migrate. "The land is very limited here," [238] explained a village leader, adding that young people are finding it harder to secure land for farming. As a 33-year-old woman explained. "People go to work as builders, people go to companies. In general, they are all hired workers." [239]

Although people in V2 are far less dependent on natural resources for their livelihoods than those in V1, households are still affected by environmental changes such as heavy rains, floods, storms and, to a lesser degree, droughts. Poor households are particularly susceptible to food and housing insecurity due to climatic events. Floods, which are associated with dam discharges, also disrupt the power supply and hinder children's ability to go to school.

The villagers interviewed for this study described a loss of soil fertility, crop failures and the loss of other traditional livelihoods, including fishing, due to floods and the mismanagement of water resources. As a 48-year-old woman, who use to be a fisher, explained: "In general, floods affected local people who live near the river a lot."[240] In these instances, children may also drop out of school to migrate with their parents or help with farm labour.

The patterns of migration and commuting in V2 are much more diverse than in the other villages profiled for this report, due to a great extent to the broader range of employment opportunities, including in expanded industrial zones, and the high local unemployment rate.

A 59-year-old man from a poor background remarked: "The reason for going to work far away is fairly common for the whole country. This village has no work available, so I have to go to work far away. Until I am 60 years old [the official retirement age], I will still have to go to the lake and work part-time to earn a livelihood."[241]

Women or mothers in the village tend to engage in daily wage labour or remain behind while men or fathers work farther away in cities, in line with the prevailing gender norms. However, in northern Viet Nam, it is has also been common for years for women to migrate for wage labour while men remain behind and care for the children. This shows the shifting family and mobility structures of Vietnamese society.[242] Overall, the availability of job opportunities nearby appeared to play a role in households' somewhat better perception of socio-economic conditions compared with other villages.

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4. PARENTAL MIGRATION AND THE CHILDREN WHO STAY BEHIND

The village profiles in Section 3 provide context for understanding living conditions, livelihoods, environmental pressures and drivers of migration in each location, as well as the options available to those who leave and the conditions faced by those who stay or return.

This section delves deeper into personal narratives of parental migration, from the perspectives of migrant parents, children who remain at home, and their caregivers. Millions of children in Southeast Asia are growing up with just one parent, or in the care of grandparents or other relatives. This section examines the effects on children, including developmental, educational, health and emotional impacts.

As parents migrate in search of employment, millions of children grow up with just one parent or under the care of relatives back home. Although parents largely migrate to try to improve their family's economic situation, their departure inevitably transforms the lives and caregiving routines of those who stay behind.[243] As indicated by the V2 village profile in Section 2, the feminization of labour migration, driven by global shifts in production and societal changes, is also markedly reshaping family dynamics and child care practices in the mothers' communities of origin. UN data for mid-2020 show that 50% of all international migrants from Viet Nam, 54% from Cambodia and 56% from Lao PDR were women.[244]

This section begins with perspectives from parents on what drove them to migrate, followed by descriptions of their migration journeys and the conditions they encountered at their destination. Then it delves into the impacts on the children who stay behind, showing how multiple factors affect outcomes, including the gender and age of the migrants and children, socio-cultural norms, the capacities of the caregivers who remain, working conditions at destination, and the duration of the migrants' absence.

4.1 WHY DO PARENTS MIGRATE?

As noted in Box 1 in the introduction, this study defines human mobility in line with De Haas (2021): "people's capability (freedom) to choose where to live – including the option to stay".[245] This is the ideal: a choice based on each person or family's aspirations, not forced or made in distress. In reality, however, as the village profiles in Section 3 show, many migrants have left because their livelihoods were no longer viable and, except for residents of V2, there were few job opportunities nearby.

A GENDERED SENSE OF FAMILIAL DUTY

The migrants interviewed for this study generally reported making their own choice to leave, not through a family discussion. However, their decisions were clearly influenced by familial expectations and responsibilities. They were part of larger household strategies for sustainable livelihoods, with individuals not often citing personal/social motivations, but rather economic/environmental reasons for migrating, due to limited opportunities at origin. Parents often emphasized providing for their children and giving them better opportunities for the future when explaining their motivations for migration.

Decisions about migration between young adult parents were further shaped by gender norms that construct "responsibilities" for young men to migrate to provide food and financial security for the family, while young women often (but not always) stayed behind to fulfil household care and labour responsibilities. This sense of familial duty is entrenched in customs and expectations stemming from class and socio-cultural identity.

That said, the (un)availability of livelihood options greatly influenced which parent migrated, or whether both did. For example, the women interviewed in V1 and V2 in Viet Nam, where there are higher rates of off-farm work and internal migration, were likelier to stay at home to care for children and aging in-laws and work on their farms. Even if they took paid jobs, they were nearby, and they could still fulfil their traditional roles. Men, meanwhile, were expected to make money and find "rice" to support the family, so they were far likelier than women to migrate.

In the villages in Cambodia and Lao PDR, meanwhile, it was not uncommon for mothers to migrate because of limited nearby opportunities**.** Asked whether it should be women or men who migrate, a 12-year-old girl from Lao PDR whose parents both migrated replied: "Women, because women are more diligent."[246] Her mother sends remittances, and her grandmother manages them, highlighting the key role women play in financial management for children's well-being.

As noted earlier, across Southeast Asia, labour migration by women has grown sharply in recent decades, as development has created more job opportunities for them.[247] Several studies have indicated that women migrants send back larger shares of their income as remittances and maintain closer attachments to their family.[248] Many mothers and fathers interviewed for this study spoke about the emotional toll of separation. Mothers also frequently mentioned sending remittances for their children's development and well-being, but gender differences in remittances were not explored in the field research.

Given how difficult it is for mothers to leave small children behind, the fact that they still migrated shows how much economic hardship they faced; some felt they had no real choice.

INVESTING IN THE CHILDREN'S FUTURE

Parents often view migration not just as a way to earn more money in the near term, but as a long-term investment in their children's future. As the father of a Vietnamese man who migrated (alone) to work in Hanoi explained: "In general, migration is surely better than work at home. If my son worked at home, he could only be a farm labourer. … However, when he works in Hanoi, he has regular money. He can send back for his children's food, education."[249]

Similarly, a 56-year-old, very poor father of six in Cambodia said he hoped by migrating, he could enable his children to get an education: "Because we are short of knowledge; we are illiterate. … That's why I am trying hard to encourage my children to go to school, so that they will not become like their parents. I want them to gain knowledge so that they can do more things. Even if they work in the factory, it's better than their parents."[250]

Several interviewees mentioned that parents had left their children behind to protect them and ensure that they continued their education. A 65-year-old grandmother in Cambodia whose three adult children all work in Phnom Penh said her daughter had left her children behind to ensure that they were well cared for. The mother works in a factory, and the father in construction. She sends about US$100 per month for food, living expenses and school, and to help pay down a 5 million riel (about US$1,218) microfinance debt. Asked whether the parents had considered taking the children to Phnom Penh, the grandmother replied: "No, never. They want their children to stay with me, and they want their children to go to school. That's why they're working so hard. … I'll never let them skip school … even though I have never been to school at all."[251]

DEBT AND FINANCIAL RESPONSIBILITIES

In general, parents have added financial pressures to provide for their family's basic needs such as food, clothing, shelter, health and education. This responsibility drives them to seek work in locations where they can earn higher wages than they can find locally.

Indebtedness is also a socially and culturally constructed driver of migration, particularly for youth. In Southeast Asia, debt is often considered a household rather than individual obligation, although it may be used by parents on behalf of younger generations to improve the future socio-economic status of the family.[252] There are also gendered implications, as women farmers often manage the finances of the farm and the household.[253] In fact, women have long been targeted by microfinance schemes that purport to empower them, but often overburden them with debt and increase their vulnerability.[254] This contributes to distress migration.

For example, a 34-year-old mother in Cambodia, whose son is now 7 years old, said she decided to go to Thailand in 2017 with her husband to work in a chicken factory, "because I owed a lot of money to microfinance and banks". She had borrowed money for the family farm, but due to a drought and then heavy rains, they had bad outcomes, "so I decided to migrate".[255]

A 65-year-old Cambodian woman described being stuck in a cycle of debt: "[I wanted] nothing besides help with some funds for rice farming, so that I don't owe a lot of money to people, but every year, [I earn] only enough to pay them back, nothing left."[256]

It is important to note that although debt was most commonly mentioned as a key driver of migration in Cambodia, it is not only a problem in that country.

LACK OF LAND AND SHRINKING OPTIONS FOR AGRARIAN LIVELIHOODS

Land ownership is often correlated with socio-economic status in the villages we studied and significantly influences migration patterns. In Cambodia, individuals and families who did not own land were likelier to migrate. In Lao PDR and Viet Nam, those who did not own land often engaged in wage labour or relied on remittances as their primary sources of income.

A 31-year-old, very poor man in Cambodia who has not yet migrated said: "I want to buy land… so we can farm like the other families, because people in this village are farmers, and we are uneducated, so we don't know how to do business."[257]

Economically insecure households that do have land often need to sell it to be able to pay off debts, and even to help cover the costs of migration. A 32-year-old woman in Cambodia explained: "People migrate because they don't have land for farming. They used to own land, but they were in debt, so they sold their land to repay the debt. … Sometimes they borrowed money for farming, but they couldn't harvest their crops, so they lost them and didn't have money to repay the debt." She blamed the crop losses on floods and droughts.[258]

As discussed in the Viet Nam village profiles, dam construction has also affected traditional livelihoods. A 39-year-old father who migrated for factory work with his wife said they used to fish, but due to the dam, there are no fish in the river now.[259]

Mechanization in the farming sector is further diminishing job opportunities at home. When asked why her parents migrated, a 13-year-old girl from Cambodia explained: "In Phnom Penh there are many jobs; here we don't have much work. People don't hire us to work for them, even if they have maize. Now they use harvest machines, they don't use manual labour anymore, nor for potatoes."[260] A 38-year-old, very poor man echoed her description: "Everything is now being done by the machines."[261]

A 13-year-old girl in Viet Nam described a similar pattern, but in less negative terms: "In my opinion, now society is more developed, so it is no longer as rudimentary as before. Now there are machines … so most people go to work for companies, because they provide a more stable income than farming."[262]

4.2 JOURNEYS AND DESTINATIONS

As noted in the introduction, most migration, including in the context of climate change, occurs within countries.[263] People may prefer to stay close to home, and cross-border migration can be difficult and costly. However, in Southeast Asia, there is a long history of international migration as well, particularly in border areas, and migration in the context of climate change is following established corridors.

FROM CAMBODIA AND LAO PDR TO THAILAND

Thailand is the wealthiest and most developed country in the Greater Mekong Subregion, with more than triple the GDP per capita of its neighbours Cambodia and Lao PDR.[264] Viet Nam, which has more than quadrupled its economy in the past 25 years, is quickly catching up, but Thailand is still well ahead.[265] Thailand thus remains a top destination and regional hub for labour migration.[266]

As of 2018, UN agencies have estimated, there were about 4.9 million non-Thai citizens living in Thailand, including about 3.9 million migrant workers from Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Viet Nam. Migrants were estimated to make up about 10% of Thailand's workforce.[267] Migrants most commonly work in construction, agriculture, manufacturing, domestic work, fishing, seafood processing and the service sector. In some sectors, such as construction and fishing, they make up the vast majority of the workforce, though many are not registered with the government.

A key draw for migrating to Thailand is that wages are much higher than in Cambodia, Lao PDR or, for that matter, Viet Nam. Based on labour force and household surveys, the International Labour Organization (ILO) has estimated that workers earned an average of US$2.615 per hour in Thailand in 2022, compared with $1.127 in Lao PDR, $1.716 in Viet Nam and $1.249 (in 2021) in Cambodia.[268] These are national averages, much higher than what lower-skilled and informal labourers are likely to be able to earn. Still, even after adjusting for the higher cost of living in Thailand, and the costs of migration itself, it is clear that migrants can earn much more there than in their own countries.

However, the laws and regulations governing labour migration – and the recruitment systems used – can make regular migration expensive and bureaucratically cumbersome. Since the early 2000s, Thailand has had memoranda of understanding (MOUs) on migration with Cambodia and Lao PDR, and since 2017, the process laid out in these MOUs has been the only lawful way to enter Thailand for relatively long-term, low-wage work. Work permits are tied to a specific employer; they are valid for up to two years and can be extended for up to two additional years.[269] After this, migrants must wait another three years before they can return to work in Thailand. Migrants under the MOU process are generally entitled to health care coverage and, depending on the sector and type of job, also social security and workers' compensation. However, only about 60% of eligible migrants are enrolled in those programmes.[270]

For short-term work, such as seasonal farm labour, migrants can obtain temporary non-citizen cards known as "pink cards";[271] Cambodians in border areas are also eligible for 90-day border passes, usable only in Thailand's border areas. While these permits are meant to provide a safe, regular channel for workers to enter Thailand, they come with even more restrictions than the MOU system. Not only are workers tied to a specific employer, even if they are engaged in seasonal, short-term work, but they must stay in a specific province. The logistics and costs involved also hinder access for the poorest migrants.

For parents, another key issue with both the MOU and short-term pass systems is that labour migrants are not allowed to bring their dependents with them.[272] This means that even if they are fortunate enough to be able to manage the process of migrating legally, they cannot do so without leaving their children behind. All others have no option for migrating except for irregular channels. These are well established as well, given the region's history of cross-border migration, geographic proximity and porous border.[273] Still, these journeys can be dangerous, and – as discussed further in Section 5 – irregular migrants are highly vulnerable at their destination as well. In other words, there is no good option for migrant parents. All they can do is weigh the risks and try to make the best choice possible for the family.

Migrants interviewed in **Phnom Proek district in Cambodia** had crossed the border through irregular channels to work mainly in agriculture (e.g., longan and mangosteen plantations) and construction. Despite the challenges, they all said it was better to migrate to Thailand for higher wages.

A 56-year-old man described crossing the border several years ago with the help of a broker, who in turn was aided by a Thai police officer.[274] To stay safe despite being undocumented, "I had to pay the [police officer] 500 baht (US$14) per month." When migrant workers heard that police were coming to check their place of employment, he added, "we all ran into the forest." Eventually his employer obtained a short-term permit for him.

Notably, the migrants the households interviewed could not travel back and forth due to the risks associated with irregular migration. Longer-term migration was thus the norm. This matches other studies' findings[275] and means that families were separated for longer than if they had been able to find viable opportunities closer to home, or could have migrated through regular channels.

Several interviewees described exploitative conditions in Thailand that made it difficult to achieve a better life through migration. For example, a 16-year-old girl described how her parents migrated to work in construction after having to sell their farmland to repay debt. Their long-term poverty was exacerbated by the loss of crops from flooding and storms, which had also damaged their house. They hoped to save up their earnings to buy land and open a store, but employers in Thailand regularly withheld their wages. "We can't complain, since we're Cambodian," she said.[276]

In poor households, some parents who had migrated together, leaving their children behind, said it was a strategic choice. As a 34-year-old woman put it: "We went together to make more money faster." In the good times in Thailand, they could each earn about 10,000 baht per month (US$271), but after living

expenses, they only had about 10,000 baht left. When she returned home after two years, her son, who had been a baby when they left, didn't recognize her. "It was hard for me to accept that, because I missed him so much, and when I came to see him, he didn't know me… because when I left he was too small."[277]

In **Soukhuma district, Lao PDR**, the households interviewed spoke only about cross-border migration to Thailand, not internal migration. Women from poor backgrounds often went to serve as domestic workers, and some became fruit sellers; both men and women, often from relatively better-off households, migrated for construction work as well, which was more lucrative. While the main reason cited was to earn more money, several households also spoke about the impacts of droughts, floods and other environmental shocks. Many engaged in unsafe and irregular migration that left them vulnerable to exploitation, forced labour and potential violence.

A 35-year-old mother of three who migrated to Bangkok to work in construction said she could earn about 100,000 kip per day (US$4.60) farming cassava, but she was promised 250 baht per day (US$6.80) on a construction site in Bangkok.[278] Her mother had a brain tumour, and she wanted to earn money to help her. However, although she had regular migrant status, she found herself in a very difficult situation. She travelled with two cousins, but they got separated upon arrival, and she did not see them again. She was confined to the premises – an aspect of forced labour – and witnessed people stabbing each other: "I was scared and had to run to my room." She could not see her mother again before she died, and did not even earn what she had expected. "They didn't pay me on time, and even when they did, it was only a partial amount, [and] they provided limited funds for our basic needs."

Migrant workers are often unable (or afraid) to access support even in cases of regular migration because their work permit is tied to a specific employer.[279] The construction worker's experiences with forced labour and wage theft in Thailand directly affected her household's economic security in Lao PDR, as her earnings fell far short of what she had been promised: 1,000–3,000 baht per month, instead of the 8,000 baht (US$217) she had expected.

Another Laotian mother of three who migrated to Bangkok with her husband 14 years earlier to work in construction, but irregularly, said she used to earn 110 baht per day (US$3), and she had to worry about evading the police. She was away for eight months and could only send back 1,000–2,000 baht (US$27–54) per month to help her family buy food and pay for school. Her parents have since given her land, which enabled her to stay in her village, "I don't want to leave," she said. "I want to work at home."[280]

Not all the Laotian migrants have had negative experiences, however. A 58-year-old woman in Lao PDR said her adult children migrated through regular channels to Thailand. They work as servers and were well cared for when they got sick. "Their manager accompanied them to the hospital. They have better health than if they had stayed in the village. They do not have to carry heavy stuff, and they are enjoying staying there. They have freedom and days off."[281]

Similarly, a 19-year-old woman who migrated at age 17, also through regular channels, to work in construction said her employer in Thailand was fair, and she had health coverage. "Luckily the Thai labour association paid for that every month. They also supported the MOU and work permit."[282] Although she missed her family, she said, she felt good about being able to send back about 2,000 baht per month to meet basic needs, repay debt, and help pay for books and school supplies for her siblings.

RURAL-TO-URBAN MIGRATION IN VIET NAM AND CAMBODIA

While cross-border migration predominated in the villages studied in Cambodia and Lao PDR, in Viet Nam, most people who migrated stayed in the country. Although Thuong Xuan district, like the two other study sites, is also on a border, Viet Nam actually has better economic opportunities than Lao PDR. Thus, and with a growing industrial sector in the country and in the district, migration remains internal.

As described in Section 3, people from diverse socio-economic backgrounds are drawn to cities such as Hai Phong, Hanoi and Quan Hoa, for construction, service jobs, and in industry – from machinery production to the textile and garment industry. Women tend to work closer to home, so they can still care for their children, while many men migrate farther for factory and construction jobs. Some older women moved to Hanoi to be domestic workers.

The availability of daily work within commuting distance also makes contract and factory work more attractive compared with farming, which is more seasonal and susceptible to environmental shocks such as floods. In the village labelled as V2, the lack of arable land was also cited as a significant reason for migration. In general, working in factories and construction is more lucrative than agriculture.

A 39-year-old father working with his wife in a shoe factory in Xuan Phu said migration allows him to make money to send back for the food of the children in a context where local job opportunities are lacking: "There is nothing for me to do here, so I left those jobs to pursue wage labour. … As difficult as migration is, there is nothing left to do here."[283]

Although internal migration was the norm within our studied villages in Viet Nam, two women who were interviewed had previously migrated to Saudi Arabia to be domestic workers. A widowed mother of three young children, for example, had little other option than to find lucrative work to support her family following difficult farming conditions and her husband's passing, combined with flooding and family illnesses,[284] while another mother left internationally because of debt and family sickness.[285]

In Phnom Proek district in Cambodia, meanwhile, while many migrants went to Thailand for higher wages, internal migration was also common, particularly to work in factories (garment sector for women), and iagricultural labour and construction. Some parents moved to Phnom Penh and other cities, such as Sihanoukville, Kratie and Kampong Speu.

The conditions that internal migrants face on their migration journey and at their destination are often less precarious than if they migrated irregularly across borders. However, internal migrants still face challenges accessing social protection, health care, education and other benefits and services. Viet Nam's social protection infrastructure, for instance, is based on household registration and residency, and this hinders access to key public services for non-residents.[286] That is a significant issue given that rural migrants often take dangerous and unsafe jobs in the cities. A 42-year-old woman from village V2, for example, said another local resident had died from a workplace accident as a migrant in the south.[287]

Rural-urban migrants in Cambodia also mentioned exploitative work conditions that have informed their subsequent decisions about migration. A 30-year-old mother who decided to migrate to Thailand explained said she made that choice "because when we went to Phnom Penh, we got scammed and didn't get any money."[288] Difficult working conditions within their own countries also deter parents from taking their children with them.

4.3 IMPACTS ON CHILDREN REMAINING BEHIND

Most migration research has focused on those who move, but there is growing interest in understanding the experiences of those who remain, voluntarily or not.[289] One of the least-explored questions to date has been how children are affected by their parents' migration, particularly in the context of climate change.

As briefly discussed in the introduction, studies have found that families can benefit from economic remittances sent home by migrants, having one or both parents go away to work can have many negative impacts on children, particularly on their emotional and physical health.[290] There is little doubt that remittances play a crucial role in supporting families and children remaining behind, but scholars have raised questions about just how much migration contributes to development[291] or to climate resilience.[292] This is because the poorest and most vulnerable households often use remittances to cover basic needs, so they have little – if anything – left over to invest in improving their longer-term prospects.

If parents can travel safely and without being exploited, and have access to decent work at their destination, the remittances they send and the savings they accrue can potentially make a big difference for adaptation. Most of the people interviewed for this study were not so fortunate, migrating in distress instead. Relatively few reported being able to use extra income from migration to invest in their own climate resilience or to make substantial improvements in their children's lives.[293]

Children interviewed for this study did say that migration had made their household economically better off. However, this did not necessarily translate into improved education, health or well-being for them. Most households, particularly the poorest, already faced significant deficits before migrating, including debt, food insecurity, limited land, low-quality housing and precarious livelihoods. Climate change added to these pressures, and the modest economic benefits of migration only helped so much.

Children were also affected by the increased burdens on their caregivers – the remaining parent, grandparents or other relatives. Caregiving responsibilities took up time that these adults would otherwise have been able to spend farming or on other income-producing activities, and they also might have had to do more work on the farm or pay a labourer to make up for the adult who left. Children often had to take on more responsibilities themselves, at home and on the farm. In such contexts, neglect is a significant concern, as caregivers sometimes struggle to meet children's basic needs.[294]

REMITTANCES

Migrant parents in the households interviewed almost always sent remittances, averaging US$113 per month in the two villages in Lao PDR, US$122 in Viet Nam, and US$86 in Cambodia. Consistent with the findings of previous studies in the region, the most common use for the money was to cover basic needs, such as food, utilities and health care. However, families made different choices depending on their immediate needs and the financial pressures they faced.

In Cambodia, along with meeting basic needs, remittances typically were used to pay off debts. Indeed, as noted in Section 3, debt was a key reason why many people migrated. In village C2, debt repayment was actually the most common use of remittances. To the extent that they had money left over, both poorer and better-off households made investments in education, but they tended to be very small.

For example, a Cambodian couple who left their daughter in her grandmother's care and migrated to work in construction send about 50,000 riel (US$12) about twice a month. "Sometimes when we don't have rice left, they will send 100,000 riel [US$25], but this is only to buy food, water, and pay school needs," the 12-year-old girl said. Her grandmother jumped in to say that the remittances did not come regularly.[295]

A 47-year-old Cambodian mother who had migrated to Thailand with her husband recalled how the exploitative work conditions made it impossible to send remittances: "It was just enough for us to eat, and we didn't have money left. I started to think with my husband: 'If we keep doing this, we won't have any profit left.' I had been working for one year, and I didn't have any money left when I returned home."[296]

Even if most remittances were spent on basic needs and debt repayment, education was still a priority, both for migrant parents and for caregivers at home. As a 65-year-old Cambodian woman said: "I spend a lot of money on my grandchildren. It's more than just for food. We want them to go to school, so that's why we eat whatever we can find." She added that she spent twice as much on the two children's schooling as on food; it took up a large share of the remittances sent by the parents, who had migrated and worked hard so that the children could be educated.[297]

In the villages in Lao PDR, meeting basic needs and paying off debts were also the main uses of remittances, followed by support for children's education. However, it was only really the better-off families that could pay for education, while poorer households used remittances just to survive.

For example, a 13-year-old girl said she used remittances "to purchase food and settle financial obligations with the bank."[298] Her grandfather had borrowed 10 million kip (US$450) for cassava farming but couldn't repay it, so the money sent by her parents went towards settling the debt. The girl had also dropped out of school after her parents left, so she could help her grandfather with cassava farming.

In some households where debt was not the main driver of migration, and families were better off to begin with, remittances did improve conditions. A 60-year-old grandmother who was caring for a 6-year-old girl while the parents worked in Thailand said: "Life is better because they send me money, around 8,000 baht [US$216] each month, for buying food and medicines, house and school supplies."[299] In contrast, a 21-year-old Laotian woman who was poor and had migrated to Thailand lamented: "I thought that my family would be better off, but the result was the same."[300]

In Viet Nam, there were significant differences between the isolated village V1 and the better-connected V2. The use of remittances in V1 was similar to that in the villages in Cambodia and Lao PDR. However, in V2, where large numbers of people had found jobs in nearby factories, there were more varied spending patterns. Along with meeting basic needs, some families used remittances to purchase new items for their home and improve their living situation.

A 14-year-old girl whose parents migrated to work said her household's situation is better because of her mother's efforts: "She works far away. It is sad to be away from my mother, my loving mother, but the finances of the family are better." When her mother was working at home, she earned 5–6 million dong (US$196–235) per month, but now she earns as much as 9 million [US$353] if she works overtime, and she sends back around 3 million (US$117) per month for food and schooling.[301]

A 15-year-old boy said his family had better housing because of the extra income his father sent from working in Hanoi in the construction sector.[302] A father said he and his wife sent about 4–5 million (US$157–196), a third of their income from working in a shoe factory, to cover food and milk for the young child remaining behind with his grandparents.[303]

The Vietnamese families' ability to use remittances for education costs can hinge be constrained by other expenses, however. For example, a 41-year-old poor man said that a month's tuition was about 250,000 dong (US$10), a fraction of the 1.5–2 million dong (US$59–79) he sent in remittances. However, a storm in 2017 caused his house to collapse, and he was still paying off the 35 million dong (US$1,377) bank loan and 100 million dong (US$3,935) loans from family and friends. This meant that the money left over was not enough to cover basic needs: "There were times when we didn't have money for breakfast."[304]

Overall, while some households in the three countries used remittances for longer-term investments such as buying land or investing in housing, this was far less common than meeting immediate needs. Only a handful of respondents mentioned using remittances for longer-term resilience. This indicates that, even if remittances help families to cope, they often do not enable them to make real improvements in their lives.

Beyond basic survival needs, household spending priorities varied depending on who was managing the money. In the migrant households in the study sample, women who stayed behind – including mothers and grandmothers – often took on household financial management and budgeting. However, some men directed how their remittances were spent, and fathers who stayed behind managed what mothers sent.

For example, a 63-year-old returned migrant said that when she worked as a domestic worker in Hanoi, sending back about 6 million dong (US$227) per month, her husband mostly used the money for their farm: "He bought pesticides, things to spray the fields, manure and nitrogen for farming."[305]

The men interviewed for this study were likelier than women to mention using remittances to cope with or prepare for environmental shocks. A 69-year-old Laotian man who had migrated to work in construction in Thailand said his remittances had been used to help compensate for reduced farm outputs due to floods and droughts in his village.[306]

Asked whether he had ever sent extra money to help his family cope with environmental shocks, a 51-year-old Vietnamese man who migrated to work at a paper machine factory in Quan Hoa replied: "Yes, it is necessary to respond. Rain and wind spoil things, so money must be sent in advance."[307]

While economic remittances are of paramount importance to migrant households, it is also important to mention the role of so-called social remittances, defined by Levitt (1998) as "the ideas, behaviours, identities, and social capital which flow between communities as a result of migration".[308] Through connections and networks, migrants can gain knowledge, technical and interpersonal skills, and a new perspective on the world, which can benefit them as well as their community of origin. Migrants can also increase their adaptive capacity by learning about climate-resilient agricultural strategies, for example.

Asked how internal migration affected him, a 34-year-old Vietnamese man said: "I learned many new things. I gained experience at work, learned many things, and I also learned how external social realities develop."[309] Given that many migration opportunities are short-term, contract-based work, he explained, a broader skillset can give people more flexibility to stay home or seek higher-paid work in the cities.

A 42-year-old man in Viet Nam who had not migrated echoed that perspective. His carpentry skills, he said, enabled him to support his children during their formative years and ensure that they remained in school.[310] Improving opportunities for sharing and learning new skills across communities can thus help improve resilience to future climate impacts and improve child development.

CARE ARRANGEMENTS AND CHALLENGES

Although the phenomenon of parents migrating without their children is not new, the number of mothers doing so in Southeast Asia has grown notably in recent years.[311] When fathers migrate, mothers typically continue to serve as the children's primary caregivers, even if they must also assume the responsibilities previously handled by the men. This can take a significant toll on the women – physically, economically and emotionally – and be felt by the children as well. However, a mother's departure tends to have a greater impact on care and family structure and affect the children more.

Studies indicate that daughters' lives may be changed the most when mothers migrate, as they may have to take on significant caregiving and household duties themselves, often at the expense of their own education (sons, in turn, may inherit their parents' responsibilities).[312] Daughters who stay behind may leave school early, engage in early marriage, or face unplanned pregnancies. Grandparents, who often care for children when both parents migrate, also frequently step up to support fathers when mothers migrate. Their pre-existing role in the family can facilitate adjustments to caregiving arrangements.[313]

In the households interviewed for this study, it was more common for both parents to migrate in Cambodia and Lao PDR, while only one parent tended to migrate in Viet Nam (as noted earlier, especially for residents of village V2, there were more viable income-earning options for women that did not require migration). In all three countries, when both parents migrated, grandparents – especially grandmothers – became the primary caregivers for the children who stayed behind.

In many parts of Southeast Asia, the tradition of grandmothers looking after their grandchildren is rooted in the history of complex, multi-generational households that predominantly engage in small-scale farming.[314] However, this can be challenging, particularly when the grandparents are not in good health. As noted earlier, in Cambodia, disability rates among middle-aged and older adults are very high, and Battambang province, where villages C1 and C2 are situated, has particularly high disability rates, linked to its history as a Khmer Rouge stronghold and remaining undetected active landmines.[315]

In Cambodia, as parents increasingly migrate for work, there has been a rise in "skip generation" households without young adults. Previous studies have shown that grandmothers play a central role in children's health and nutrition, but in prioritizing children's food needs, they may forgo their own.[316]

Older grandmothers caring for the children of migrants may only be able to meet household needs if they receive sufficient remittances.[317] Parents who leave their children with their own parents are often keenly aware of the effort required. A Laotian mother who migrated to Thailand said her move "placed a burden" on her parents, and she constantly missed and worried about her family while she was away. "However, the financial constraints compelled me to make the difficult decision to leave."[318]

While siblings (particularly older ones) can take on caregiving duties, the children interviewed for this study mainly mentioned their grandmother as their primary caregiver. However, care arrangements are not always straightforward, and even if they are, parents may feel anxious. A Cambodian mother, now 47, who migrated to Thailand with her younger daughter said she left her eldest daughter with her older sister, as her husband, who did not want to migrate, did not have suitable living arrangements.[319] Similarly, a 42-year-old Laotian mother who had gone to Thailand with her husband, leaving the children with her parents, decided to return. "I was worried about the children, especially if they fell sick," she said.[320]

Several grandparents in Viet Nam spoke about the challenges of caring for small children. As a 49-year-old widow explained: "I work as a collector of waste products and bottles, but I cannot work regularly because I am busy taking my granddaughter to school." Her labour only earns her about 700,000 dong (US$35) per month, but she is poor and forgoing income. Yet the girl's school is 3 km away, and during the windy and rainy season, it is difficult for her to return home alone.[321]

Some grandparents may be unable to do everything that parents would do for their children. For example, a 62-year-old grandmother caring for three children (ages 10, 3 and 1) noted: "Parents who do not migrate take their children to school and pick them up. My grandchildren must ride bicycles to school by themselves. They do their homework without their father at home."[322]

GENDERED RESPONSIBILITIES AT HOME AND ON THE FARM

In all three countries, the children of migrant parents often shouldered significant household and agricultural responsibilities, losing leisure time, compromising their education and becoming more vulnerable to getting stuck in poverty. Particularly in poorer families, education can easily come second to survival needs, and in all three countries, changing responsibilities in the absence of migrant parents also affected boys' and girls' ability to play and enjoy their childhood.

In the Cambodian villages, girls whose parents migrated promptly transitioned to caregiving roles, highlighting stark gender disparities. A 12-year-old girl whose parents migrated to Thailand described her days: "I have to wake up early to cook rice and then cook rice again when I come back from school." Sometimes her older brother stepped in and did some of the rice-cooking.[323] Another 12-year-old Cambodian girl had even more duties: "I help to wash dishes, I cook rice … I help to cut grass, help to pick maize. … I go to farm during the afternoon and go to school in the morning."[324]

These first-hand accounts echo findings from gender studies highlighting that crises often exacerbate traditional gender roles, forcing girls into care roles while boys undertake riskier tasks. Boys interviewed in Cambodia described physically demanding duties. For example, a 13-year-old boy said: "I helped my grandmother cut the grass, clear grass in the sugarcane and chop wood."[325] He spoke casually about slipping and cutting his hand with an axe once, and about spraying weed killer without a mask. Such tasks, normally performed by fathers, may be passed on to boys in their absence, even if they lack the necessary skills and knowledge.

The situation in Lao PDR mirrored those challenges, but also highlighted unique cultural expectations.[326] A 14-year-old girl whose mother migrated to Thailand, but left her behind to attend school, articulated the conflict between her aspirations and her familial duties: "My grandparents wanted my mother to stay with me. However, she said that we were short on funds and would starve." Despite her mother's wishes, she added, "I'm not studying, I'd love to study if we had money, but no one is staying and cooking for my grandparents."[327]

A 13-year-old girl explained that her grandfather had not allowed her to study since her parents migrated, because she needs to "help him with cassava farming". She also cooked and fished, and "I carry water for my grandfather to take a shower."[328] These accounts underline the severe resource constraints that often dictate life choices in these communities. Children's engagement in household and agricultural work is not merely a choice, but often a necessity to fill the gaps left by their parents.

On family farms, parents' migration also imposes burdens on the remaining adults, who have to balance their caregiving duties with the need to do extra farm labour. As a Lao grandmother taking care of her grandchildren explained, "We lack labour in the family, and we don't have labour to support on the field and garden."[329]

In villages in Viet Nam, the household labour gap created by parental migration was often filled by children, with both boys and girls contributing to chores such as cleaning, cooking and shopping. A 13-year-old girl described her daily routine: "I help my grandparents. I come home from school and if she hasn't cooked rice or food, I will go to the kitchen to cook. Or if I have a morning off, I will sweep the yard. Before he comes back, I'll sweep the yard, sweep the house, clean up."[330]

Boys also engage in housework and farm labour as needed. A 15-year-old boy said when his mother is away, he helps by "cleaning the house, buffalo herding, cleaning the yard, getting to work."[331] However, the gender of the child often dictates what happens after they leave school, members of the Women's Union in one of the villages said. Girls typically continue to contribute domestically and engage in agricultural activities, while boys tend to seek employment in industrial jobs. This dynamic illustrates the impact of gender norms on economic activities and social roles in these communities.

Box 3. Life spotlight: At 12, battling hunger and striving for a better future

Thida is 12 years old and lives in village C2.[332] She is in sixth grade and has two brothers, who are in ninth and fourth grade. Their parents, who owned no farmland and used to work as wage labourers, have been living in Thailand for more than half of D.'s life, working in construction.

Their grandmother used to stay with them, but she left to work, and the children now live alone in their small house. When D. contracted dengue fever recently, however, her grandmother took care of her.

An older neighbour also checks in on them periodically, and if they do not have enough food – a common occurrence – she brings them some. D. cooks, does housework and grows some chilies to sell. Thanks to a scholarship she received in the village, she has been able to keep attending school and buy clothes. Still, in the morning, before school, she also works to earn money for the household.

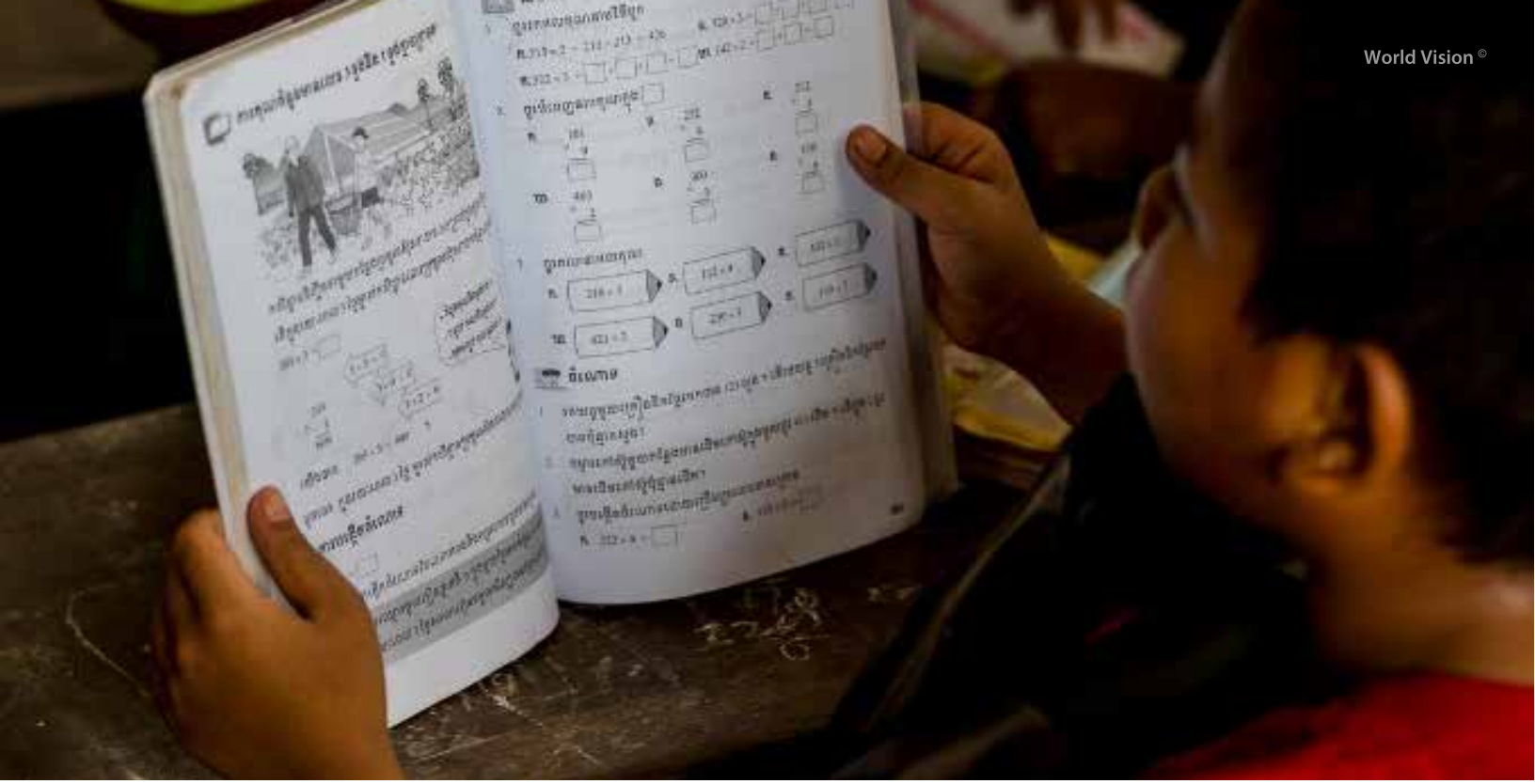
"I go to pick [mung] beans for other people," she explains. She goes with her younger brother and friends, and typically earns about 7,000 riel (US$1.70) per shift. The day before her interview, however, her school was flooded, so she picked beans all day and earned 12,500 riel.

Her parents migrated because they had no work – due in part to floods and droughts – and were in debt to a microfinance provider, because they had borrowed money to buy food. Now they only come home for the holidays, about 10 days each time around Khmer New Year and Pchum Ben Day.

"I don't want them to go, but what can we do, when we don't have money?" she says. She worries that their work is arduous, and they might get sick or injured. She often cries by herself at night.

Her parents have said that they migrated to earn money for the children. Her mother encourages her to pursue her education. "She says that I have to study hard and get good grades, so I can have a good job." D. wants to become a physician, but she also wants more economic opportunities in her village, so she can earn more money and her parents can return home.

"I want them to have land… to farm," she says. And for herself? "I want a good future."



EDUCATIONAL DISPARITIES

As the discussions of remittances and children's household and farm duties make clear, there is a significant gap between the promise of migration as a way to give children a brighter future, and the common reality of conflicting demands on children's time, economic struggles and disrupted schooling. All the children interviewed for this study had parents who had migrated for a year or two at a time, not permanently. In Viet Nam, where the migration of one parent was more common than the migration of both, the impacts on children's education tended to be more positive, especially when it was the mother who migrated. This concurs with other studies that have found mothers tend to send more remittances for education, health and family well-being, while fathers are likelier to allocate their earnings to investments and savings.[333]

However, the migration of mothers has also been found to lead to worse educational outcomes for some children in Cambodia, particularly when the mothers go abroad and the children are older.[334] In the households interviewed for this study, children's education was adversely affected if the family's economic situation was not improved by migration.

However, parents remain key motivators, despite challenges. A 16-year-old Cambodian girl whose parents migrated to Thailand to work in construction after having to sell their land to repay debt said she studied hard, "because they're always calling and motivating me, pushing me to study harder. They also told me: 'You don't have to worry about us; we'll keep working hard as long as you want to study.' They want me to graduate and be successful. They told me to become a doctor or a teacher."[335]

As discussed in Section 3, natural hazards such as floods can make it difficult to even get to school in some of these communities. This is also linked to a lack of high-quality schools, which can make it necessary to travel long distances, particularly for secondary school. This issue of transportation was highlighted by

village leadership in Lao PDR, who noted that the hour-long walk to school significantly affected school attendance and completion rates.[336] Exposure to environmental hazards then compounds existing structural issues, further limiting access to education for lower-income families.

In almost all households interviewed in Lao PDR, the education of children who stayed behind was said to have suffered due to a combination of greater household responsibilities and the inability of their illiterate grandparents to support them with their studies. Given the already challenging situation, however, it is unclear how great a role parental migration plays in these children's educational outcomes.

A mother who went to work in Thailand, then returned home, said her migration did not directly affect her children's education, but her daughter had dropped out of school in sixth grade and was helping with farm work. Her son had finished eighth grade, but no longer wanted to continue his schooling: "The youngest child doesn't want to study. I don't know why, but I don't have any problem with it. I would have been happy if he studied, but ultimately, he did not. … I want them to help farm and garden to help build our family business."[337]

In Viet Nam, the situation was slightly different, particularly in village V2, where people were better-off. The potential for negative impacts on education appeared to be mitigated by better access to schools, the quality of education available, support systems within the community, and the fact that mothers often remained in the village. However, children in the isolated V1 village experienced similar challenges as those in Cambodia and Lao PDR. The illiteracy of grandparents was also noted as a barrier to children's education. As a grandmother explained, neither she nor her late husband could help their granddaughter with schoolwork. "She studies by herself."[338]

A mother of two in village V2 who had not migrated, but worked at a nearby garment factory, and whose husband was a carpenter, said children's education suffers when they are not adequately supervised. This had influenced her to stay home, rather than migrate, so she could watch her two children, who were in seventh and tenth grade: "What I noticed about my son [the eldest] is that he is very naughty. I have to keep an eye on my son, monitor his school attendance. Without being at home, I cannot manage my children. Some families in the village work far away from home, leaving their children at home. They study until seventh or eighth grade, then drop out and refuse to study anymore."[339] She noted that she and her husband had been able to stay in the village because there were no sick or elderly people within her household. They also lived on higher ground, so they were less exposed to floods than other villagers.

PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL HEALTH

Many studies focused on children who stay behind when one or both parents migrate have found an increased risk of mental health problems, including depression and anxiety, compared with children of non-migrants.[340] As several examples above have already shown, children interviewed for this study often expressed longing for their parents, sadness and loneliness. The field research also highlighted other adverse impacts on emotional and physical health.

In Cambodia, some children were also anxious about debt collectors. For example, a 16-year-old girl had stayed behind while her parents migrated to Phnom Penh, Laem, and Thailand because of microfinance debts taken out to invest in farming after devastating floods and droughts. She said: "I'm afraid that people will have bad intentions for me, because we owe others money and haven't repaid them. … I'm afraid that they will harm my body."[341]

A 32-year-old man who had not migrated said it is better for children if parents can stay and work in Cambodia. Otherwise, "nobody takes care of them when they're sick or something like that."[342] A 30-year-old mother who had migrated to Phnom Penh and Thailand before, and had lost contact with her migrant husband, spoke about how during her migration, she had been unable to care for her two children when they were sick with fever, diarrhoea and dengue. "It was hard for them to live without their parents," she said.[343]

Similar issues were raised in the villages in Lao PDR, with interviewees highlighting the psychological impact of parental absence. Children were concerned about both their parents' and their own well-being. An 18-year-old son of very poor migrants said: "I worry about how they live, how they survive. They are alone. Sometimes they call and they cry. They do not have smartphones, though, so they cannot video-call."[344]

A 13-year-old girl whose parents migrated when she was an infant, and have since divorced, described her fractured childhood: "I have never seen their faces since I was born. I don't know where they live in Thailand. I feel sad because I want my parents to take me on a trip as my friends. Life would be much better if my parents had stayed. I would be able to go to school and not have to go out to work to earn money."[345] Instead, she lived with her 16-year-old sister and brother-in-law, dropped out of school after the third grade, and went foraging in the nearby forest to earn money.

Interviewees in Viet Nam, particularly in village V1, also spoke about the isolation felt by children remaining behind and the effects on their mental and physical well-being. As the village chief said: "Family members who remain behind suffer, because they are isolated from the outside world."

A 51-year-old grandfather, himself a returned migrant, described his grandson's plight: "Sadly, all the time he asked about his dad – where he went, where he worked, how long until he would come back."[346] As several examples above have already shown, many migrant parents experience anxiety themselves. As a 39-year-old returned migrant and father said: "When my sick children are not close to me, my mind does not work smoothly. I always have to think about my family."[347]

NUTRITIONAL CONCERNS

Another common problem for children remaining behind, particularly in very poor households, is nutritional insecurity.[348] Nutrition is already a challenge in the villages covered in this study, given the high poverty rates and the growing impacts of climate change, which are affecting crop yields and, in some cases, increasing the physical isolation of communities. As a 48-year-old returned migrant in Cambodia said when asked about her aspirations: "I don't want anything. Just enough food to eat, not like before, when we were poor, just like others."[349]

Although remittances from migrant parents can help the remaining caregivers with the cost of food, they are not always reliable or sufficient, and – as noted earlier – caregiving responsibilities may also interfere with income-producing activities. As a 56-year-old, poor woman in Cambodia who was caring for her grandchildren put it: "I depend on the money that [my adult children] send me, and some money from my farming. Sometimes, I have nothing at all. Sometimes, we have no rice for several days."[350]

A 13-year-old daughter of migrants in Viet Nam spoke about the impacts of a flood that had occurred a few weeks before her interview: "When the rain is heavy, it affects food. The food was wet. My grandmothers tried to cook rice, and we just ate rice balls [without anything else]. At that time, because of the flood, we could not reach the shop."[351]

Endnotes

[243] Hoang et al., 2015, "Transnational Migration, Changing Care Arrangements and Left-behind Children's Responses in South-East Asia."

See also: Boehm, D.A. et al. 2010. "Children, Youth, and the Everyday Ruptures of Migration." In *Everyday Ruptures: Children, Youth, and Migration in Global Perspective*, 1–19. Vanderbilt University Press.

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[245] De Haas, 2021, "A Theory of Migration: The Aspirations-Capabilities Framework."

[246] Interview code L12WWM2.

[247] ILO. 2015. "Facts and Figures: Women Migrant Workers in ASEAN." International Labor Organization. https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@asia/@ro-bangkok/@sro-bangkok/documents/publication/wcms_432817.pdf.

[248] See, e.g.: Hoang, L.A. and B.S.A. Yeoh, eds. 2015. *Transnational Labour Migration, Remittances and the Changing Family in Asia*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK. doi:10.1057/9781137506863.

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[249] Interview code V57MPM7.

[250] Interview code C56MVPR1.

[251] Interview code C65WPM1.

[252] IOM, 2019, "Debt and the Migration Experience: Insights from South-East Asia."

[253] Tatlonghari, G.T. and T.R. Paris. 2013. "Gendered Adaptations to Climate Change: A Case Study from the Philippines." In *Research, Action and Policy: Addressing the Gendered Impacts of Climate Change*, 237–50. Springer.

[254] Banerjee, S.B. and L. Jackson. 2017. "Microfinance and the Business of Poverty Reduction: Critical Perspectives from Rural Bangladesh." *Human Relations* 70 (1): 63–91.

[255] Interview code C34WWR4.

[256] Interview code C65WWM5.

[257] Interview code C31WVPI3.

[258] Interview code C32WWI2.

[259] Interview code V39MWR7.

[260] Interview code C13WVPR4.

[261] Interview code C38WVPR2.

[262] Interview code V13MWR8.

[263] Clement et al., 2021, "Groundswell Part 2: Acting on Internal Climate Migration."

[264] See World Bank data for GDP per capita (current US$): https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=BN-KH-ID-LA-MY-MM-PH-SG-TH-VN.

[265] See World Bank data for GDP (constant 2015 US$): https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD?locations=BN-KH-ID-LA-MY-MM-PH-SG-TH-VN.

[266] IOM, 2022, "Asia-Pacific Migration Data Report 2021."

[267] UN. 2019. "Thailand Migration Report 2019." Bangkok: United Nations Thematic Working Group on Migration in Thailand. https://thailand.un.org/en/50831-thailand-migration-report-2019, https://thailand.un.org/en/50831-thailand-migration-report-2019.

Note that this estimate includes people who migrated through irregular channels. The number of migrants who are formally registered with the Thai government is much lower. See also the International Organization on Migration (IOM) overview for Thailand: https://thailand.iom.int/migration-context.

As of 2020, UN estimates based on census data and other sources put the number of foreigners in Thailand at 3.6 million, including about 691,800 Cambodians, 941,300 Laotians, 7,300 Vietnamese, and 1.8 million people from Myanmar. See: UN DESA, 2020, "International Migrant Stock 2020." Data taken from spreadsheet acquired online.

[268] See ILOSTAT data: https://rshiny.ilo.org/dataexplorer1/?lang=en&id=EAR_4HRL_SEX_CUR_NB_A. No 2022 data were available for Cambodia as of this writing.

[269] Exceptions to the time limits on work permits can be made by the Council of Ministers, as occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. For a detailed discussion of these issues, see: Vigil and Kim, 2023, "International Labour Migration in a Changing Climate: Insights from Malaysia and Thailand."

See also the Thailand policy brief published with that report: https://thailand.iom.int/resources/policy-brief-climate-change.

[270] IOM. 2022. "Thailand Social Protection Diagnostic Review: Social Protection for Migrant Workers and Their Families in Thailand." PUB2021/207/R. Bangkok: International Organization for Migration. https://publications.iom.int/books/thailand-social-protection-diagnostic-review-social-protection-migrant-workers-and-their.

[271] For a detailed explanation, see: IOM. 2023. "Thailand." In *Compendium of Good Practices in Enabling Access to Legal Identity for Undocumented Migrants*, 56–69. Geneva: International Organization of Migration. https://publications.iom.int/books/compendium-good-practices-enabling-access-legal-identity-undocumented-migrants.

[272] See Thailand policy brief: https://thailand.iom.int/resources/policy-brief-climate-change.

[273] UN, 2019, "Thailand Migration Report 2019."

[274] Interview code C56MVPR1.

[275] Smith, A. 2023. "Migration and Family Separation: Needs, Challenges and Access to Services for Children Remaining behind Battambang, Cambodia." Case Study. Regional Situation Analysis on Children Affected by Migration in ASEAN Member States. Bangkok: United Nations Children's Fund. https://www.unicef.org/eap/reports/case-studies.

[276] Interview code C16WPM6.

[277] Interview code C34WWR4.

[278] Interview code L35WPR2.

[279] Similar situations are documented in: Vigil and Kim, 2023, "International Labour Migration in a Changing Climate: Insights from Malaysia and Thailand."

[280] Interview code L42WWI1.

[281] Interview code L58WPM2.

[282] Interview code L19WVPR3.

[283] Interview code V39MWR7.

[284] Interview code V53WPM2.

[285] Interview code V38WWM6.

[286] Pham, Q.M., D. Briesen, and T.T.T. Nguyen. 2023. *The Labour Market in Vietnam*. Hanoi: Thanh Nien Publishing House. https://ussh.vnu.edu.vn/uploads/ussh/news/2023_09/bao-cao-quoc-gia-so-6-eng_1.pdf.

[287] Interview code V48WWM8.

[288] Interview code C30WPM3.

[289] See, e.g.: Zickgraf, 2018, "Immobility"; Schewel, 2020, "Understanding Immobility: Moving beyond the Mobility Bias in Migration Studies."

[290] Griffiths, S.M., D. Dong, and R.Y. Chung. 2018. "Forgotten Needs of Children Left behind by Migration." *The Lancet* 392 (10164): 2518–19.

[291] Haas, H. de. 2010. "Migration and Development: A Theoretical Perspective." *The International Migration Review* 44 (1): 227–64; De Haas, H. 2012. "The Migration and Development Pendulum: A Critical View on Research and Policy." *International Migration* 50 (3): 8–25.

[292] Bettini, G. and G. Gioli. 2016. "Waltz with Development: Insights on the Developmentalization of Climate-Induced Migration." *Migration and Development* 5 (2): 171–89. doi:10.1080/21632324.2015.1096143; Black, R. et al. 2011. "Climate Change: Migration as Adaptation." *Nature* 478 (7370): 447–49. doi:10.1038/478477a.

[293] We found only one case of improved climate readiness from remittances where money was used migration to plant trees to protect the house from storms (C63WVPM4).

[294] Smith, 2023, "Migration and Family Separation: Needs, Challenges and Access to Services for Children Remaining behind Battambang, Cambodia."

[295] Interview code C12WVPM4.

[296] Interview code C47WVPR3.

[297] Interview code C65WPM1.

[298] Interview code L13WVPM3.

[299] Interview code L60WWM3.

[300] Interview code L21WPR1.

[301] Interview code V14WPM10.

[302] Interview code V15MWM1.

[303] Interview code V39MWR7.

[304] Interview code V40MPR6.

[305] Interview code V63WPR4.

[306] Interview code L69MWR1.

[307] Interview code V51MPR6.

[308] Levitt, P. 1998. "Social Remittances: Migration Driven Local-Level Forms of Cultural Diffusion." *International Migration Review* 32 (4): 926–48.

[309] Interview code V34MWR5.

[310] Interview code V42MWI4

[311] Huijsmans, R. 2013. "'Doing Gendered Age': Older Mothers and Migrant Daughters Negotiating Care Work in Rural Lao PDR and Thailand." *Third World Quarterly* 34 (10): 1896–1910. doi:10.1080/01436597.2013.851952.

[312] See, e.g.: Lam, T. 2019. "Young Women and Girls Left behind. Causes and Consequences." In *Supporting Brighter Futures. Young Women and Girls and Labour Migration in South-East Asia and the Pacific*, 11–28. International Organization of Migration.

Lam, T. and B.S.A. Yeoh. 2019. "Parental Migration and Disruptions in Everyday Life: Reactions of Left-behind Children in Southeast Asia." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 45 (16): 3085–3104. doi:10.1080/1369183X.2018.1547022.

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[313] Hoang et al., 2015, "Transnational Migration, Changing Care Arrangements and Left-behind Children's Responses in South-East Asia."

[314] Huijsmans, 2013, "'Doing Gendered Age': Older Mothers and Migrant Daughters Negotiating Care Work in Rural Lao PDR and Thailand."

[315] NIS, MoH, and ICF, 2023, "Cambodia Demographic and Health Survey 2021–22."

While nationwide, 21% of people over the age of 5 have difficulties in at least one functional domain, in Battambang it is 38.2% of women and 34.2% of men. Nationwide, 4% of people over the age of 5 have a lot of difficulty or cannot function at all in at least one domain, while in Battambang, it is 12.6% of women and 10.4% of men. The national survey data do not provide a detailed breakdown by age group at the province level, but nationwide, disability is far more prevalent in people over the age of 50, with 5.9% of those aged 50–59 and 22.6% of those 60 and older reporting a severe disability.

[316] Schneiders, M.L. et al. 2021. "Grandparent Caregiving in Cambodian Skip-generation Households: Roles and Impact on Child Nutrition." *Maternal & Child Nutrition* 17: e13169.

[317] Zimmer, Z. and M. Van Natta. 2015. "Migration and Left-behind Households in Rural Areas in Cambodia: Structure and Socio-Economic Conditions." Phnom Penh, Cambodia: UNFPA and National Institute of Statistics. https://cambodia.unfpa.org/en/publications/migration-and-left-behind-households-rural-areas-cambodia.

[318] Interview code L35WPR2.

[319] Interview code C47WVPR3.

[320] Interview code L42WWI1.

[321] Interview code V49WPM1.

[322] Interview code V62WPM6.

[323] Interview code C12WPM3.

[324] Interview code C12WPM1.

[325] Interview code C13MWM2.

[326] A limitation in our sample is that all the children interviewed in Lao PDR were girls.

[327] Interview code L14WPW1.

[328] Interview code L13WVPM3.

[329] Interview code L50WPM1.

[330] Interview code V13WPM7.

[331] Interview code V15MWM4.

[332] Interview code C12WPM3. Thida is a pseudonym; all names have been changed to respect interviewees' privacy.

[333] Chow et al., 2023, "From Left-Behind Children to Youth Labor Migrants: The Impact of Household Networks, Gendered Migration, and Relay Migration in Southeast Asia."

Ullah, A.A. and D. Chattoraj. 2024. "Unraveling Gender Dynamics in Migration and Remittances: An Empirical Analysis of Asian Women's 'Exposure to Migration.'" *Genealogy* 8 (1): 4. doi:10.3390/genealogy8010004.

See also Hoang and Yeoh, 2015, *Transnational Labour Migration, Remittances and the Changing Family in Asia*; Kunz and Maisenbacher, 2021, "Gender and Remittances."

[334] Marchetta and Sim, 2021, "The Effect of Parental Migration on the Schooling of Children Left behind in Rural Cambodia."

[335] Interview code C16WPM6.

[336] Interview code LML1.

[337] Interview code L42WWI1.

[338] Interview code V49WPM1.

[339] Interview code V42MWI4.

[340] See, e.g.: Wickramage et al., 2015, "Risk of Mental Health and Nutritional Problems for Left-behind Children of International Labor Migrants."

Griffiths, Dong, and Chung, 2018, "Forgotten Needs of Children Left behind by Migration."

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[341] Interview code C16WPM5.

[342] Interview code C32MWI3.

[343] Interview code C30WPM3.

[344] Interview code L18WVPR1.

[345] Interview code L13WVPM1.

[346] Interview code V51MPR6.

[347] Interview code V39MWR7.

[348] Griffiths, Dong, and Chung, 2018, "Forgotten Needs of Children Left behind by Migration."

[349] Interview code C48WPR5.

[350] Interview code C56WPM4.

[351] Interview code V13WPM7.

5. CHILD MIGRATION IN THE CONTEXT OF ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE

For parents, migrating without their children poses many challenges, but taking them along can be difficult and, particularly when the journey involves crossing a border without authorization, outright dangerous. Yet every year in Southeast Asia, countless families make that choice, and many children also migrate on their own. As noted in the introduction, based on census data, there were 1.27 million international child migrants in the ASEAN region as of 2020, about 40% of them in Thailand.[352] However, with as much as half of migration into Thailand believed to be irregular, even more so from bordering countries, the number of migrant children in Thailand living without domestic legal status has been estimated at 1 million to 2.5 million.

The needs and vulnerabilities of child migrants are routinely discussed in research, policy debates and humanitarian campaigns, but their actual perspectives are rarely considered. Instead, they are typically seen as simply as victims, with no agency of their own.[353] This section aims to address that gap.

A key objective of the analysis presented here is to move beyond the idea that migration is inherently an adult activity,[354] while children should be at home, attending school. From that perspective, when children migrate, they are out of place. Yet from the children's perspective, migration may make good sense, if it offers a path to greater economic security and especially when the alternative is family separation.

Moreover, the dangers that many child migrants face are due, to a great extent, to hostile systems and a lack of child-centric services.[355] Some have thus argued for a shift in perspective: from condemning child migration, to fostering a safe and supportive environment for it when it occurs.[356]

This section begins by examining the drivers of child migration, including poverty, environmental shocks and familial obligations. It then examines young migrants' journeys and the conditions that they encounter at their destination. It also considers the impacts on their education, health and well-being, aiming to understand what kinds of support would be most beneficial. The analysis focuses mainly on cross-border migration, but many of the themes that arise are also relevant to internal migration.

5.1 WHY DO CHILDREN MIGRATE?

Children interviewed for this study said they made the decision to migrate, and they did so for a variety of reasons, such as to pay off household debts, cover their siblings' school fees, cover medical expenses, and generally help improve their family's situation. Each story was different, but it was clear that in all six villages, the drivers of child migration were inextricably linked to the broader social, economic and environmental context. Prior research has found that some journeys are mainly driven by family needs, while others are more individually motivated.[357]

Independent child migration from rural to urban areas is a significant phenomenon in Southeast Asia, with children going on to work in factories, construction, plantations, on fishing platforms, as domestic servants and in the sex industry, among others, and sometimes living on the streets.[358] Many children also migrate internationally for similar jobs. The precarious situations in which these children find themselves have raised serious concerns among policy-makers and child advocates and in the international community.

As with adults, poverty is a key driver of child migration, as parents take their children along when they migrate for work, and some older children go off alone in search of economic opportunities.[359] Climate change impacts such as worsening droughts, floods and storms, which can ruin crops and cause major damage to homes, further strain household resources.[360] Studies have shown that early life exposure to environmental impacts may affect the likelihood that someone will migrate by early adulthood.[361] As discussed in Section 3, in the villages examined in this study, debt is also a major issue.

In Cambodia, several children said they had migrated due to poverty and environmental shocks. Several children in Cambodia mentioned not having land to farm – because their family owned none, or had been forced to sell it – as a motivation to migrate. This further highlights how inequities in land ownership, exacerbated by predatory debt, constrain children's options.

In Lao PDR, environmental stressors compounding household poverty were also cited often as reasons for children to migrate. As an 18-year-old from L1 village said: "Over the last four years, there have been big floods here. No one can live in this village." The floods compound vulnerabilities, she added, leading to food insecurity: "Some years we have 20–30 sacks of rice, some years almost nothing due to floods … we need to borrow rice from others." She migrated to Thailand, she said, but "if income from farming were good, people would not migrate."[362]

In Viet Nam, economic concerns were the main drivers of children's migration. A 27-year-old man described dropping out of school and migrating to Hanoi years earlier: " My parents told me to go to school, but I found that my family situation was not good, not enough … for food and school. In general, at the time, the economy was not good, so I had to quit school and go to work. … I love my parents. … … If you don't make money, you can't get rich, you have to go."[363]

Social norms and family expectations can lead children from poorer families to feel obliged to contribute to the household's income, to be a "good child".[364] This may mean anything from helping out on the farm, to engaging in paid labour outside of school hours, dropping out of school to work, or migrating to work in the city or abroad, with a parent or on their own. Because there are very limited avenues for children to migrate internationally, alone or with their families, they often go by irregular channels.[365]

For example, a 13-year-old girl from Cambodia with three younger siblings who now lives with her grandparents said she migrated to Phnom Penh when she was 10, with her mother and siblings. They all went together, and she worked. She explained that they had migrated "because my family is poor and is short of many things, and there was flooding as well. My grandpa and grandma are also sick, so my mom decided to take me to work so that we can have money to support the family."[366]

A migrant boy from Cambodia said he was motivated by the lack of livelihoods in origin and his desire to support the educational aspirations of his younger siblings.[367] Another boy, who had migrated internally to work in construction and sent remittances, said: "My grandmother took the money to buy rice and gave to my sisters to go to school. … She also kept some money for medical treatment."[368] In addition to health worries, debts taken out for housing repairs after storms, floods and termite infestations have also contributed to children migrating to work.[369]

Boys were particularly likely to express a desire to help provide for their families and repay debts. As a mother in Viet Nam explained, her son dropped out of school in ninth grade after his family took on debt to care for his grandfather's hospital and medical bills. When the boy saw the mounting medical bills – 100 million dong (US$3,948) – he decided to go away to work for three years. He went to Binh Duong to work in a restaurant and sent 2–3 million dong (US$79–118) each month. He has told her that he is often fatigued, but he refuses to come back. "Going far away is difficult, so difficult," the mother said. "He is still too young to have to endure such pressures. … I want my child's future to be better and less difficult. … I pray that my son will not encounter thieves, robbers, snatchers or many social evils."[370]

5.2 JOURNEYS AND DESTINATIONS

Most of the children and young adults interviewed for this study who had migrated had travelled with one or both of their parents, though there were several instances of unaccompanied minors. In general, they followed pathways that were commonly used by members of their community, with some exceptions.

Child migration in the context of Southeast Asia is complex and fraught with vulnerabilities. For children as for adults, internal migration is generally easier and less risky than cross-border migration, though young migrants are still highly susceptible to exploitation and abuse on their journey and at their destination. Informal employment predominates across the region, and migrants in general are particularly likely to be informally employed. Children are legally allowed to work at age 14 in Cambodia and Lao PDR, and at age 15 in Thailand and Viet Nam, with some exceptions.[371] This limits where younger children can work, steering them into poorly regulated sectors with lax labour law enforcement.

Many children and youth who migrate internally are employed informally in construction or on plantations, working long hours, performing arduous and dangerous tasks and, in a changing climate, increasingly exposed to extreme heat. They do not enjoy labour protections and can be subject to many risks, also including violence, exploitation and substance abuse.[372]

While internal migration was common in the villages studied in Viet Nam and Cambodia, in Lao PDR, international migration to Thailand predominated, and it was also common in Cambodia. Because most parents who migrate internationally through regular channels cannot bring their children along, and minimum working ages constrain children's own employment options, the overwhelming majority of child migration is believed to occur through irregular channels, with all the associated risks. Actual statistics are impossible to come by, however.[373] There are no records of these children's border crossings, and when they arrive at their destination, they often need to hide from the authorities. All this makes child migrants essentially invisible in government statistics and deprives them of legal protections.

It is thus difficult to know how many child migrants live or work in Thailand. The best available estimates are based on census data, which show that out of an estimated 4.9 million migrants, 3.9 million are migrant workers from neighbouring countries and 508,000 are migrant children.[374]

Migrant children's lack of legal status often keeps them from accessing basic services to which they are entitled. Because the minimum age for labour migration is 18, and work permit holders may not bring dependents, most child migrants in Thailand have irregular status (unless their parents obtained regular status and registered them as dependents). However, regardless of their parents' status, migrant children can obtain a non-Thai identity card and use it until they are 18 and can apply for regular status. Migrant children also have a right to free basic education in public schools, regardless of their status.

In practice, however, migrant families often have difficulties in accessing education and other benefits for their children, if they are even aware of the possibility.[375] An estimated 200,000 migrant children in Thailand, possibly more, are not in school. Without adequate efforts to ensure that migrants know about and can access education and other services, they simply go without. Short-term migrants may not even try to enrol their children in school, in part because classes are conducted in Thai.[376]

LONG HOURS, ABUSE AND LACK OF SUPPORT

Migrant workers in sectors such as agriculture and construction typically work long hours, and if adults bring their children to work with them, the children do not fare much better. A boy from Cambodia who went to Thailand with his sister and parents when he was only 11 said that his mother worked on a pig farm, and he helped her. "My mother woke up before the sun had risen, and I went to help her at sunrise."[377] Although he was only planning to help her over summer break, he only returned to Cambodia after classes had started, and this affected his performance in school that year.

A woman from Lao PDR who migrated to Thailand through irregular channels, alone, when she was 18 and worked as a maid described exploitative conditions: "I worked a lot, so I didn't have time to eat. … I worked there for two years without a break. I ate in the bathroom every day because they didn't let me take a break for lunch." Sometimes the police conducted document checks, she noted, and "I had to give them money, as I didn't have a work permit." Her migration also meant that her younger brother had to drop out of school to care of their sick mother. She was paid around 8,000–9,000 baht (US$216–245) a month and sent back around 7,500 baht (US$204), "but sometimes the employer didn't pay."

Internal migration can also be difficult, with high costs. A young man from Viet Nam said he had migrated to Hanoi as a child, where he did "heavy work" to help his family. However, his earnings barely covered his food and lodgings. "I earned 6 million [dong] a month [about US$236], 7–8 million (US$275–315) if I worked overtime." The workers stood all day, and it was hard to sleep at night.[378]

A 17-year-old boy from Cambodia who had migrated to Phnom Penh with his sibling said he faced many challenges: "I didn't get paid, I didn't have money to buy food, and in some workplaces, it is hard to find a place to sleep, no toilet." He had no one to turn to for help: "It was just me and my sibling, the two of us."[379]

A 16-year-old girl from Cambodia said she had migrated alone to work in a casino in Preah Sihanouk. Asked whether she was afraid, she replied: "Yes, sometimes I felt scared, but I didn't have any choice." She paid about US$100 for a room and earned around US$300 per month working 12–18 hours per day. After covering her expenses, she was able send around US$100 per month to her family.[380] The girl also noted that her employment at the casino had been illegal, and that returning there would be difficult.

Although most migrants interviewed in Viet Nam had stayed in the country, a 17-year-old boy from a very poor and landless household described being misled by traffickers who took him to Cambodia: "I went to

the South to work with my friends. … My parents didn't know what it was like to go south to work." When he reached his destination, he realized he had been tricked and was in Cambodia. His parents had to borrow 100 million dong (about US$3,928) to get him back home.[381]

Overall, however, human trafficking was not widely mentioned in interviews, though it may be a matter of perspective, as many people migrating irregularly used brokers and smugglers to cross the border. A former Khmer Rouge soldier and his family described how the mother and 15-year-old daughter migrated from Cambodia into Thailand to work in construction, while the father and sons stayed behind tending to the farm.[382] The mother said they paid 5,000 baht (US$136) to a broker, but only earned 250 baht (US$7) per day in Thailand. They crossed at night, had to crawl under culverts, and feared being shot by the Thai border police; about 40 Cambodians went through together, all from villages in Phnom Proek. Then they walked for three nights to a place where they were picked up and taken to Bangkok.

Entering Thailand through regular channels can also present challenges, however. Thailand has introduced several policies aimed at ensuring the fair and ethical recruitment of migrant workers, with employers expected to pay the required fees, but such measures have been slow to implement and weakly enforced.[383] The complicated registration and renewal process, all in a foreign language, can be difficult for migrants to navigate, so they, too, often hire brokers. Using a broker can sharply increase the cost of migration,[384] and even the baseline costs can be steep for the poorest migrants. For example, an 18-year-old boy from Lao PDR from a very poor background said he migrated as part of a group. "We needed to borrow from an informal lender to provide money to process the 12,000 baht [US$327] needed to pay immigration broker to migrate. This includes passport processing, work permit and transportation."[385]

BOX 4. LIFE SPOTLIGHT: A CHILD MIGRANT WORKING TO SUPPORT HIS FAMILY

Sophorn was about 12 when he first went to Phnom Penh with his father to find work in 2019.[386] "We were so poor, we didn't have enough money to buy food and repay our debt," he says. He had already quit school. "If I continued to study, my father would have a hard time. He was alone earning for the family."

They had lost their home in a nearby village to a severe storm and flood, and been unhoused for some

time before moving into his uncle's vacant house in village C1. His father borrowed money from a microfinance provider to buy a single rai of land – one-sixteenth of a hectare – and they grew potatoes.

The harvest earned them just 200,000 riel (US$49), but needed about US$200 per month just for loan payments. Jobs in the village only paid about 10,000 riel per day, so they went to the capital and worked as painters. Twice in a row, they were cheated on their payments and returned home in frustration. After the second time, his father decided to stay in the village, but Sophorn tried again.

He could not pay the full fare to Phnom Penh, however, so the driver dropped him off along the way. "I was walking for two days," he says. At night, he slept outside. Finally, a man driving by took pity on him, gave him a place to sleep for three days, and helped him find work in a cushion factory.

"They started to force me to work overtime, but they didn't pay me extra, just for my workday," he says. "Sometimes I worked until 11 or midnight. Then I could eat my dinner and in the morning, I needed to be down at work by 6:30am." After a few months, he could not withstand the long hours anymore. He did whatever he could – some construction work in the city, about six months picking fruit near the Thai border. Because of his young age, a factory refused to hire him.

Every month, he sent money home, which his parents used to pay the microfinance debt, buy food – sometimes all they can afford is rice – and help cover his grandfather's medical expenses.

Sophorn is back in the village when he is interviewed, but just for a break around the holidays. Malnutrition has made him sick; he mostly eats eggs and brohok, a fermented fish paste. But he will be on the road again soon. His father wants to get him documents so he can go work abroad.

"I do not want to go back, but because of my family's poor condition, I need to go back to work," he says. "Migration is better than staying here. I could only stay if I had land to farm, but without land, I can't stay, because the work is unreliable. We only get work for one or two days, and then the work is gone."

Asked about his hopes for his family, he says: "I want my family to be happy and grow. I don't want them to be miserable anymore." He also wants his siblings to be able to finish school. As he gets older, he hopes to be able to earn more money.

How will he make it all happen? "Just keep on trying."

5.3 IMPACTS OF CHILD MIGRATION ON DEVELOPMENT AND WELL-BEING

Given the legal and logistical complications of child migration, with or without parents, the families interviewed for this study that included migrant children had generally faced very difficult situations to begin with. It was common for children to have already been working outside of school hours, and some, like Sophorn, profiled in Box 4, had already dropped out prior to migrating. Still, migration often imposed further deprivations and stressors that affected children's physical and emotional health.

Disruptions of schooling were particularly common. Cross-border migration was often, but not always, associated with dropping out of school, while internal migration more commonly resulted in missed weeks or months, with children more easily returning to school afterward. Some child migrants only migrated during school breaks, though they often stayed for at least some time beyond the break.

A woman from Cambodia who migrates annually to Thailand to work on plantations said she and her daughter cross the border whenever there is work available: "She always misses school. She might go to school for two or three months, then we need to go to Thailand, and another two or three months later, we need to go to Thailand again. If it is the season to pick longan, then we need to go."[387]

Although under Thai law, migrant children are entitled to attend school regardless of their legal status,[388] none of the households interviewed for this study said that their children had attended school there. Children who migrated internally did not attend school at their destination, either.

A 15-year-old Cambodian girl who started migrating with her parents when she was 10, to work as a waste picker in Phnom Penh, said she would go away during school breaks, and her grandmother would tell her to return when school resumed. "Sometimes I came back … sometimes I skipped school for two or three months." She and other workers also got sick. "Sometimes, we just needed to take some pills, then it would be better and we could keep on working, but sometimes we also needed to get intravenous infusions. Putting on IVs cost a lot of money … [and] the clinic was quite far as well." [389]

The challenges faced by child migrants are exacerbated by the absence of relatives and other support networks. A girl from Lao PDR who migrated in preadolescence described her loneliness and isolation after migrating with her older sister: "In Thailand, I only had two or three friends, and I felt very homesick. I missed my parents very much." She also missed school for two years before returning home. "Now, I am back in school. I do not want to go back to Thailand. We now have enough food with support from my sister who migrated. My brothers have not yet sent back money home."[390]

While the emotional tolls of migration may be less visible than physical scars, it is important that migrant children have access to support for emotional well-being as a core component of health services in destination. Children in particular have a need for socio-emotional support during their development, which may be hindered because of the social and cultural separation imposed by migration.

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5.4 CHILD MIGRANTS' OWN ASPIRATIONS

While families' economic distress was clearly a key driver of child migration, it is important to recognize children's own perspectives on these decisions, including their own hopes and aspirations. As a 16-year-old girl from Cambodia said, "I want to have my own business in the city, because farming isn't profitable, I don't know what to do here anyway."[391]

Many others said that migration enabled their families to make ends meet, and they were happy to be able to contribute towards the basic needs of the family. However, the aim of many migrating children, particularly those facing long-term poverty, was to support family aspirations to have land and be able to farm – that is, to achieve better socio-economic conditions.

At the same time, children recognized that migration was not the best pathway out of poverty – even if it was their only option at a given time. They were aware of the precarity of the journeys and the exploitative conditions that were common at their destination. As a result, if they were able to stay home, many chose to be with their family, even if they could earn more by migrating. Asked why she did not want to migrate to work in construction like many others in her community, a 12-year-old Cambodian girl replied: "Because it's hard. I want to keep studying."[392]

One migrant's sacrifices may also enable others in the family to aspire to a more ambitious migration journey. A 16-year-old girl in Viet Nam whose mother migrated to Hanoi to be a domestic worker was still enrolled in school when she was interviewed. Asked whether she wished to migrate, she said: "In the future, I would want to study abroad in South Korea, since this is an expanding market. You can go to know more and learn more."[393]

These accounts underscore that while the aspirations of children and youth in these regions signify their potential to transform their lives, the realization of these aspirations is contingent on adequate support mechanisms. Without targeted support, these children remain vulnerable to the cyclical forces of poverty, exploitation, and environmental instability. This emphasizes the critical need for interventions that not only recognize but actively support their capacity to aspire for a better future.

Box 5. Life Spotlight: Dreaming big after a year of child labour in Thailand

Mai was about 10 when she migrated with her sister – just three years older – to work in Thailand in 2022.[394] "The reason is to help my sister and my parents make money," she says. "I decided to go because I saw that my family was poor, and I wanted to help them."

The girls did domestic work and washed dishes at a restaurant. Mai says she earned about 2,000 baht (US$54) per month and sent home 1,000–1,500 baht (US$27–41), subsisting on what remained.

She missed her parents and her friends, and she felt bad about not being able to help out on the family farm. After a year, the girls went back to Lao PDR, just in time for the start of a new school term. Migration had given her a new perspective.

"The thing that changed my life was learning new things, seeing a bigger society, meeting many people," she says. "I wanted to return home and attend school because I believed that if I went to school like my friends, I would gain more knowledge, obtain a good job, and earn more money."

Her family still struggles, growing rice and gardening in a place where climate change and deforestation are exacerbating dry conditions. They also fish a little, and barely meet their basic needs.

Mai says she was "very happy" when she returned home, and now she studies diligently, so she can attend university. "I want to become a doctor to take care of patients and help treat my parents and relatives," she says.

She hopes her village can get better access roads and be peaceful, but she does not want to migrate again. "I don't want to move anywhere," she says. "I want to stay in my village and help my family."

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[385] Interview code L18WVPR2.

[386] Interview code C17MVPR1. Sophorn is a pseudonym; all names have been changed to respect interviewees' privacy.

[387] Interview code C38WVPR2.

[388] UNICEF, 2023, "Children Affected by Migration in ASEAN Member States: Thailand."

[389] Interview code C13WVPR4.

[390] Interview code L13WWR2.

[391] Interview code C16WWR6.

[392] Interview code C12WVPM4.

[393] Interview code V16WWM6.

[394] Interview code L12WPR1. Mai is a pseudonym; all names have been changed to respect interviewees' privacy.

6. TOWARDS A BRIGHTER FUTURE: AN AGENDA FOR ACTION

As the climate crisis worsens, children and youth in Southeast Asia face mounting threats to their health, education, livelihoods and economic prospects. Climate change impacts, compounded in some cases by infrastructure development such as dam construction, are deepening poverty and inequality and making people ever more vulnerable to distress migration and, through it, to exploitation and abuse.

Yet, as much as Southeast Asian countries have recognized the urgent need to build resilience to climate change, policy-makers are only beginning to address the links between climate change and human (im)mobility. Of the four countries examined in this study – Cambodia, Lao PDR and Viet Nam, where migrants come from, and Thailand, the top destination in the region – only Viet Nam mentions migration at all in its updated nationally determined contribution (NDC) under the Paris Agreement.[395]

Similarly, while Viet Nam's national adaptation plan (NAP) explicitly notes the connections between climate change and migration,[396] Thailand's does not[397] (Cambodia and Lao PDR do not yet have NAPs). This is an important gap to fill – even Viet Nam could do more to identify adaptation measures that address migration-related challenges. However, all four countries can also significantly improve the lives of migrants and their communities of origin through a wide range of measures focused on climate resilience, disaster risk reduction (DRR) and economic and human development. The point is that recognizing how these issues are interconnected could help policy-makers prioritize the needs of the most vulnerable people, and mobilize domestic and international resources to support them.

As the stewards of public infrastructure, services and programmes, national governments have the most crucial role to play in addressing the economic distress and adversity described in this report. Yet they cannot do it alone. Even Thailand, the most advanced of the four economies, still has significant levels of poverty, inequality and informal employment,[398] and all four countries require international climate finance to meet their adaptation needs – and are entitled to it under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Paris Agreement.[399]

Sustained support from bilateral and multilateral development partners is thus essential as well, and so is the support of international organizations, including UN agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which provide vital expertise and on-the-ground assistance to governments, civil society groups, communities, families and individuals. Researchers have an important role to play in filling knowledge gaps and providing robust evidence to inform policy-making and investments in infrastructure and programmes.

With all this in mind, this section presents a **call to action** to address key drivers of distress migration in communities of origin; make migration safer, more humane and more just for parents and children alike; provide more support for those who stay behind; and empower children and youth to shape a better future for themselves, whether they choose to migrate or stay home.

We frame our recommendations around five objectives:

1. Enhance community resilience through robust infrastructure and disaster preparedness;
2. Provide flexible and fair support for sustainable livelihoods;
3. Make migration safer and more just for both parents and children;
4. Care for caregivers – and the children who stay with them;
5. Empower children and youth to be able to build a better future for themselves.

We highlight specific support needs, make recommendations to **national governments, donors, development partners and international organizations**, and identify **future research needs**. We draw on insights from the field research, a wide range of academic research and policy-oriented reports reviewed for this study, and knowledge, perspectives and ideas shared by experts and stakeholders as part of the key informant interviews (see list in Annex).

The needs identified in the villages profiled are enormous and multi-faceted. Rather than try to cover every single issue, we prioritize the needs of people whose voices often go unheard, and who are marginalized due to their poverty, gender, age, ethnicity or other factors. Lastly, honouring the courage, ambition and determination of the children interviewed, we aim to remove key obstacles in their way.

6.1 ENHANCE COMMUNITY RESILIENCE THROUGH ROBUST INFRASTRUCTURE AND DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

A recurring theme in interviews for this report was the lack of basic infrastructure in the villages, which the research teams also observed first-hand: rough, barely passable roads that become unusable after heavy rains; bridgeless river crossings; bare-bones school buildings that are frequently damaged or inaccessible; a lack of safe drinking water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) infrastructure.

These deficiencies are not unique. Across Southeast Asia, particularly in the poorer countries in the region, there are large infrastructure and public service gaps, with rural areas typically lagging well behind urban areas. In Cambodia, for example, 58% of urban residents had access to safely managed drinking water service as of 2022, but only 20% of rural residents. In Lao PDR, the corresponding shares were 27% and 12%; in Viet Nam, they were 76% vs. 46%.[400] All three countries have made real strides in expanding access to basic services, but limited fiscal capacity, the rugged landscape of the region and, in some cases, major setbacks caused by climate-related disasters have hindered progress.

As a result, millions of people still live in conditions that are unsafe, unhealthy and harmful to child development. Physical isolation due to the lack of reliable roads or bridges severely limits livelihood options for people in most of the villages studied, forcing them to choose between abject poverty at home or migration to an urban area or to Thailand. More frequent and severe storms and floods are also disrupting children's education for up to weeks at a time in flood-prone areas in Lao PDR and Viet Nam. In some cases, the schools have plans in place to cope with such events, but they may not suffice amid worsening climate change impacts.[401] Outbreaks of water- and mosquito-borne diseases are also common, and many interviewees spoke about experiencing food insecurity after floods damaged or destroyed crops.

Governments have made some efforts to help people resettle to higher ground – though interviewees said the options offered are not always viable if they wish to keep farming. Measures are also in place to reduce disaster risks. For example, in Viet Nam, local authorities in mountainous areas have informed residents of landslide risks throughout the rainy season to try to avoid deaths and injuries.[402]

Communities need significantly more support than they currently receive, however – and they deserve to be more actively involved in planning and decision-making that affects their own resilience. Many donors, NGOs, UN agencies and research institutes have embraced the concept of "locally led adaptation" as a way forward – that is, replacing top-down approaches with models that give local actors the power and resources to set and address their adaptation priorities.[403] A key principle of locally led adaptation is to address structural inequalities faced by women, youth, children, people with disabilities, displaced persons, Indigenous Peoples and marginalized ethnic groups.

Interviewees spoke about the need for better schools and other community infrastructure and more robust housing for themselves.[404] In all six villages, people highlighted the importance of better transportation infrastructure, such as safe roads and bridges – especially in flood-prone areas in Lao PDR and Cambodia and in village V1 in Viet Nam. Along with WASH infrastructure and better health care facilities, better coordination between local health volunteers, health officials and community members is essential for effectively managing health risks.[405]

Lastly, it is crucial to ensure that infrastructure development does not increase risks to local communities or exacerbate their poverty. Building roads is clearly important, but people whose land is taken for such projects, or rendered unusable for agriculture, deserve compensation. Hydropower and irrigation dams are enormously valuable resources, but dam releases must be carefully managed to avoid flooding villages.

Related to this, it matters who funds infrastructure development. In the absence of sufficient concessional finance from multilateral development banks (MDBs), climate funds, bilateral partners and philanthropy, the only roads that are built in some remote areas of Lao PDR, for example, may be to support logging. This is why it is urgent to close the adaptation finance gap,[406] globally and especially for Least Developed Countries (LDCs) such as Cambodia and Lao PDR.

RECOMMENDATIONS

National governments should:

1. Prioritize the construction of robust, climate-resilient transportation infrastructure, including roads and bridges usable year-round by motorized vehicles, cyclists and pedestrians, to support safe and continuous access to education and other basic services, as well as connectivity to markets and job opportunities within commuting distance.
2. Upgrade schools and health care facilities to ensure they meet safety standards, are not vulnerable to flooding or storm damage, and can serve as hubs for community members to access basic necessities, including clean drinking water and hand-washing facilities, during emergencies. Also improve waste management systems to mitigate water pollution risks during floods.[407]
3. Allocate funding to local authorities to be used for investments prioritized by community members, as well as support for participatory processes to empower community members, including women, children and youth, and other marginalized people, to discuss their needs, share ideas and contribute to setting priorities.
4. Provide targeted subsidies and support for proactive housing upgrades to enhance resilience to severe weather impacts and to "build back better" after extreme events.
5. Conduct rigorous social and environmental risk assessments for all infrastructure development projects and rigorously enforce social and environmental safeguards, including through open

dialogue and consultations with project-affected communities and through transparent, accountable and easily accessible grievance mechanisms.

6. Strengthen social protection systems to enable them to be quickly expanded both vertically (providing more support) and horizontally (reaching more people) in the wake of disasters.
7. Establish and strengthen village-level disaster risk mapping and reduction efforts, taking into account the differentiated needs of women/girls, small children, elders and people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, precariously housed people and other vulnerable populations, who should have a voice in the discussions. Integrate local weather data and climate risk assessments to increase community awareness and preparedness, including setting up automatic weather stations and creating information sharing networks for live updates.[408]

Donors and development partners, international humanitarian NGOs and UN agencies should:

1. Scale up grants and other highly concessional finance for investments in infrastructure and in social protection programmes that prioritize the needs of the poorest, most marginalized and most vulnerable communities, to support governments with the actions recommended above.
2. Provide financial and on-the-ground support for participatory processes to identify and prioritize local resilience-building needs, as well as to develop and scale up community-based disaster response plans with designated roles for different community members, such as such as involving youth to support small children and the elderly during emergencies.[409]
3. Support educational ministries to develop databases for tracking school climate risks, coordinating with communities to implement disaster preparedness plans and ensure continuous access to education.[410]
4. Supplement governments' social protection programmes by facilitating access to food, cash, medicine, water filters and/or bottled water, and other urgent needs during and after disasters.[411]
5. Work with communities, especially the most marginalized people, such as women, children and ethnic minorities, to build their skills and empower them to engage in adaptation and DRR planning, as well as monitoring the impacts of development projects and seeking redress as appropriate.

Future research needs include:

1. Conduct comprehensive research on the impacts of climate change and extreme weather events on the health, well-being and education of children in highly impoverished and isolated areas.
2. Assess the effectiveness of existing physical and social infrastructure in mitigating climate change impacts and disaster risks, and identify gaps. Cover transportation, housing, and school infrastructure in flood, drought and typhoon-prone areas.
3. Develop research projects that actively involve local communities, especially children and youth, in planning and decision-making process, drawing on international examples of locally led adaptation to identify suitable approaches in specific local contexts in Southeast Asia.[412]

6.2 PROVIDE FLEXIBLE AND FAIR SUPPORT FOR SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS

Adults and children alike said in interviews that they did not wish to leave their communities of origin – particularly not if it meant migrating unsafely across borders and being separated from their families for long periods. Almost everyone said explicitly that they would much prefer to stay, if they could just have decent work (and/or a viable farm) and not have to worry about going hungry, being unable to cover health costs or other basic needs, or being buried in thousands of dollars of debt.

It is possible that, even if these conditions were met, many people, particularly in the most remote villages, would still choose to move, drawn by better economic opportunities or just a different life. But that would be true mobility as conceptualized by De Haas (2021): being able to choose to stay or go,[413] not having to "choose" between poverty and despair, or a risky trip abroad, possibly to be exploited.

For some people, just having a piece of land to cultivate would be an upgrade; indeed, some returned immigrants said they were able to stay precisely because they got land. Others, in contrast, described having to sell off land to repay debts, especially after extreme events, and having to migrate as a result. It is thus important to address disparities in access to land and help farmers to keep the land they have.

Climate change impacts, especially worsening extreme rainfall, floods and droughts, are making agriculture less and less viable, however. Productivity is down, and crop losses and failures are increasingly common. This means that farmers urgently need guidance and support to be able to adapt. Many, particularly in Lao PDR, need to diversify their crops. Seeds for improved crop varieties, new techniques,[414] access to irrigation and other inputs, and better equipment might all help. (However, for farm labourers, often the poorest people in the villages, mechanization has reduced work opportunities.) Raising ducks or other animals can also be beneficial for livelihood diversification.[415]

Closely related to this is the urgent need to free these communities from usurious, exploitative microfinance providers. The crippling burden of debt, especially when coupled with high interest rates and unfair loan terms, can financially devastate households and stifle community development. This issue was most pronounced in Cambodia, but communities in all three countries were at risk of financial precarity and indebtedness. Some people, including children, even described being afraid to be physically hurt by debt collectors.[416]

In addition, in places where prices for crops are set by middlemen, as was the case in villages in Cambodia and Lao PDR, households are vulnerable to exploitation, since there are no alternative buyers for their crops. Enhanced market access and regulation can help address this problem.

Addressing livelihood instability also requires tackling broader issues of natural resource management, pollution, soil degradation, and biodiversity loss. Policies and market practices have driven a culture of mono-cropping and dependence on a few key crops, exacerbating risk exposure and compromising long-term soil health. Reducing risks on local communities necessitates both traditional livelihoods approaches alongside more transformative policies that centre socio-environmental justice for long-term resilience.

RECOMMENDATIONS

National governments should:

1. Enhance agricultural extension services, so officers can train farmers on climate-resilient and sustainable agricultural strategies, including crop diversification and conservation agriculture,

provide access to climate information and teach farmers how to use it, and help them mitigate disaster risks.
2. Sponsor small-scale crop insurance schemes or other forms of social protection for farmers who lose their crops or experience significant income losses due to extreme weather events and slow onset climate change impacts.
3. Support identification of market opportunities and facilitate meetings between farmers and district-level stakeholders to promote the demand of local products and reduce the power of middlemen, thereby mitigating price exploitation.
4. Increase access to formal loans with low interest rates to improve financial inclusion, with safeguards for climate risk. Mandate flexible repayment structures, including the ability to refinance after experiencing climate shocks.
5. Promote the development of alternative livelihood options within villages and non-agrarian employment opportunities within commuting distance, taking into account the differentiated needs of men and women and aiming to provide pathways to upward socio-economic mobility.
6. Protect and compensate households for environmental protection roles (e.g., forestry) that can support locally led conservation and Indigenous environmental stewardship.

Donors and development partners, international humanitarian NGOs and UN agencies should:

1. Support government efforts to increase the resilience of farming communities, including through complementary programmes that enhance farmers' knowledge and technical capacities and/or provide access to additional resources.
2. Support livelihood diversification through training programmes and resources for establishing small enterprises, animal husbandry and other options. These efforts should be grounded in a clear understanding of local gender dynamics, including the loss of traditionally masculine livelihoods, but also the need to empower women economically. Engaging men through peer support networks – "men's clubs" – may help reduce the risk of gender-based violence.[417]
3. Engage with farming cooperatives to disseminate climate-resilient and sustainable practices and promote local products through regular interactions between local farmers and wider community markets. This should include targeted interventions to support women and girl farmers.
4. Provide greater financial literacy education, including on relationships between debt and climate impacts, to support improved financial knowledge and decision-making within communities.[418]
5. Support community regulation of predatory lenders, including through citizen involvement in protection boards designed to help communicate unfair practices to authorities for improved regulation.

Future research needs include:

1. Conduct in-depth studies on the relationship between household debt and climate vulnerability, exploring how financial stress affects adaptive capacity and resilience. Investigate the effectiveness of current microfinance mechanisms and (in)formal loan practices, identifying ways to integrate climate risk considerations into financial products and services.
2. Assess the outcomes of various livelihood diversification initiatives, particularly those involving climate-resilient crops and alternative income sources such as animal husbandry. Identify best practices and barriers to successful implementation, providing evidence-based recommendations for scaling up these strategies in different contexts.

3. Analyse the impact of market access and regulatory frameworks on farmers' income stability and resilience to climate impacts. Study the effectiveness of interventions aimed at reducing the power of middlemen and promoting direct market access, focusing on how these changes influence local economies and community well-being.

6.3 PROTECT BOTH PARENTS AND CHILDREN WHO MIGRATE

As the stories in this report show, the migration journeys of parents and children alike are often difficult and even dangerous. Many interviewees reported being exploited, abused and defrauded, and the types of work available to them were often strenuous, with long hours – whether they were harvesting longan, building high-rises in Bangkok, working in factories or doing domestic labour.

Irregular migration across borders is especially challenging, even dangerous, and regular international labour migration channels do not allow low-wage workers to bring their families. As a result, parents who went to work abroad often chose to leave their children behind, or took just the older ones. Some children also described migrating alone, usually to try to help their family out of debt and/or economic crises. They were particularly vulnerable on their journeys and at their destination.

Moreover, whether they travelled alone or with their parents, child migrants did not report attending school at their destination. Instead, they worked alongside adults, even if they were not yet of legal working age. Not only did this put them at considerable risk, but it increased the likelihood that they would remain in poverty, unable to pursue higher-skill, better-paid and safer employment opportunities. Work conditions also limited the amount of time that parents could spend caring for their children. [419]

For adults and children alike, migrating under precarious conditions greatly limited their ability to make gains in economic security, resilience, or capacity to adapt to climate change. The frequency with which returned migrants spoke about wage theft, excessively long hours, lack of safety protections and other illegal practices was striking, though consistent with other studies in the region.[420] While migrants hoped for better outcomes, and were clearly upset to have been abused and exploited, they also spoke of these things as commonplace – just what life is like when one is poor and powerless. Child labour was also seen as normal, though of course it is illegal (though widespread) in all these countries.[421]

Notably, the stories of abuse and exploitation involved both regular and irregular migration channels. Those who had crossed the border without authorization had to hide from the police or any government officials – and/or bribe those who had aided them. They thus felt they had no recourse, even though Thailand's labour laws would also apply to them. Migrants with work permits, on the other hand, knew those permits were tied to their employer, so if they complained, they risked losing their both their jobs and their legal status. As a result, they also often accepted clearly illegal situations, such as confinement.

In Thailand as well as Cambodia, Lao PDR and Viet Nam, there are labour laws that should, in theory, protect workers and also entitle them to basic benefits such as health care coverage and social security. However, it is employers who are expected to enrol them, and often that does not happen, particularly among small and medium-sized enterprises and subcontractors, and there is little accountability.[422] The manner in which disputes are to be resolved also tends to favour employers. For children, meanwhile, informal and precarious employment in sectors with lax enforcement is the default. Protecting them starts by recognizing that they exist, in large numbers, and creating safe mechanisms for them to get help.

RECOMMENDATIONS

National governments should:

1. Make regular migration channels more accessible, flexible and just, by making the process for obtaining both short- and long-term labour migration permits easier to navigate for people who are very poor, have low literacy levels and/or do not speak the destination country's language. Even if permits are linked to specific employers upon entry, it should be easy to transfer them to another employer, including in another district or province, to protect workers from exploitation.
2. Enable parents migrating under bilateral MOU schemes to bring dependent children with them, and facilitate the post-facto registration of children who are already in the country with their parents.[423] More broadly, improve considerations for dependents in bilateral MOUs to enhance access to established services for migrant children and mitigate the potential for statelessness and irregularity.
3. In Thailand, building on the "Education for All" policy in place since 2005, systematically address barriers that keep migrant children out of school, including through improved language access and recognition of skills and knowledge acquired in the country of origin.[424] In countries of origin, make it easier to recognize both formal and informal education received by children while abroad.
4. Improve sectoral regulations in industries like agriculture, construction and domestic work through migrant-sensitive policies that provide safe ways to report abuse and exploitation, such as through an NGO or other intermediary, and do not require revealing one's legal status. This is particularly important for addressing potential sexual exploitation, particularly affecting migrant women and girls.
5. Develop incentives for companies to support accessible child care services for migrants that reduce burdens on parents and exposure to hazard for migrant children.
6. Extend trafficking support services to individuals who demonstrate high trafficking risk, rather than limiting services to past survivors. This includes improving emotional and social learning support for migrant children, to help them cope with stresses and traumas.

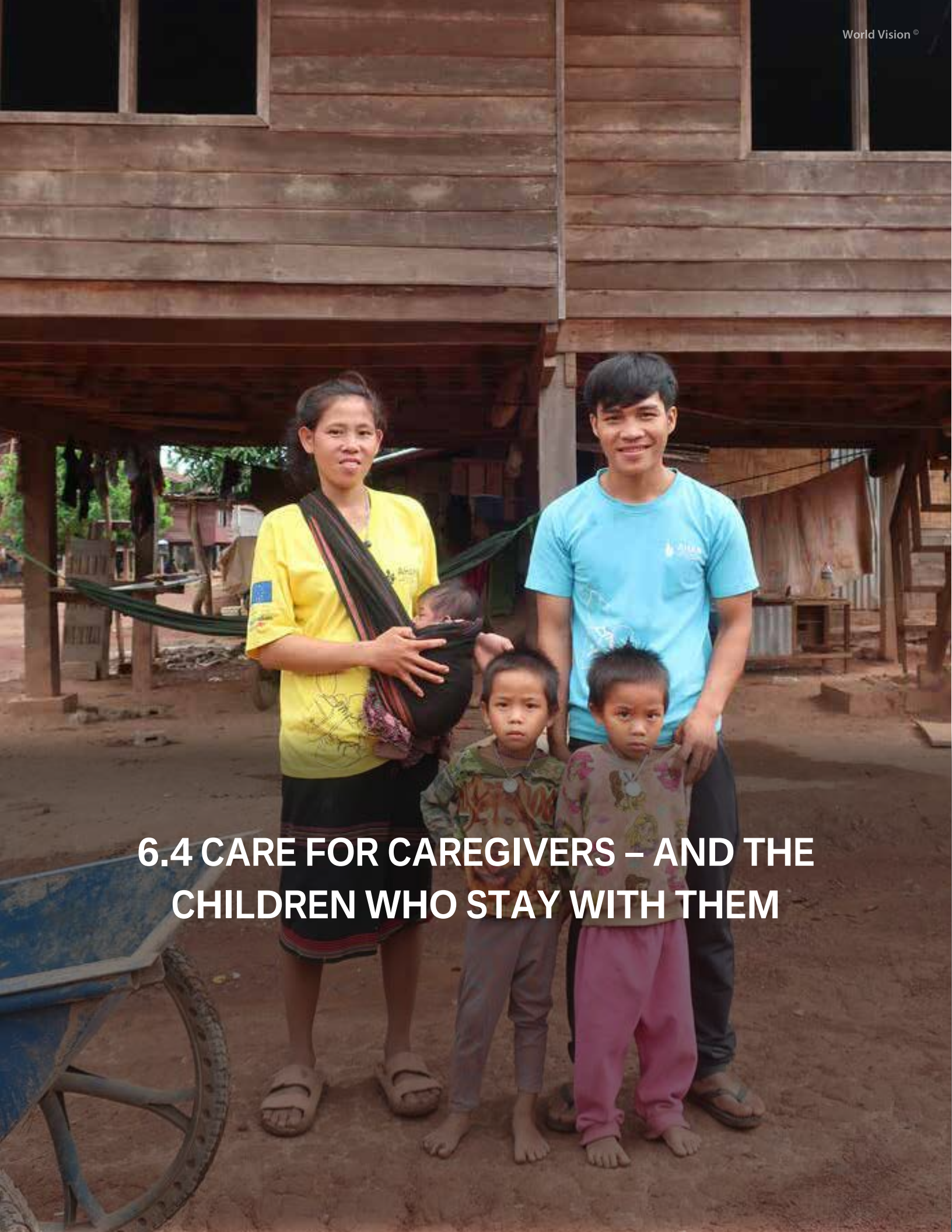
Donors and development partners, international humanitarian NGOs and UN agencies should:

1. In communities of origin, sponsor gender-responsive and child-friendly programming and materials to help both adults and children to recognize and avoid potential trafficking and exploitative schemes. This should include mapping areas of high risk and promoting support services and health care access for survivors of trafficking.
2. Facilitate safe migration by collaborating with governments and the private sector to ensure that migrants can access regular migration channels, know their rights and receive support during transit, including through checkpoints and safe spaces for women and children.
3. Recognizing that some migrants will still follow irregular channels, support mobile units that provide assistance along known routes, including legal, health and psycho-social services for women and children. These units should be ready to handle cases of gender-based violence and trafficking, ensuring an immediate and effective response.

4. Collaborate with governments to provide training for border officials and workplace inspectors about the needs and vulnerabilities of migrants, in particular women and children, and consider partnering to provide a safe, non-government contact point for migrants to report violations.
5. Collaborate with local governments and businesses to improve labour standards and provide information and programming that helps migrants understand their rights and the services available to them and to their children. A priority should be to promote peer support networks and learning and dispel perceptions that migrants must accept injustice.[425]
6. Continue to build national and local coalitions that advocate for migrant protections and access to justice and remedy. These coalitions should account for emerging climate challenges to migrants' safe work, nutrition, and housing and represent diverse migrant interests.
7. Reduce the impacts of migration on child development, health and well-being through programming targeting returned migrant children that provides psychological and social support and "catch-up" learning to enable a successful reintegration post-migration.

Future research needs include:

1. Assess the effectiveness of existing regular migration pathways, and identify barriers to their use and potential improvements to enhance the safety and security of migrants, especially children.
2. Conduct in-depth studies on the educational, psychological and physical impacts of irregular migration on children. Examine how the lack of legal protections and access to services at destination affects their development and long-term prospects.
3. Assess the extent to which current labour policies in destination countries integrate environmental and social protections for migrants. Identify gaps and recommend ways to better coordinate across environment, social and human rights impact to achieve comprehensive harm reduction.



6.4 CARE FOR CAREGIVERS – AND THE CHILDREN WHO STAY WITH THEM

The grandparents and single parents caring for children of labour migrants spoke about them with love and devotion. They were clearly committed to keeping them safe, ensuring they ate well and stayed healthy; many were also determined to ensure that the children did well in school and completed their education, even if the caregivers themselves were illiterate.

Yet they struggled, for multiple reasons. Children missed their absent parents. Grandparents, often in poor health and stretched thin by the need to balance child care with their livelihoods, could not always provide the attention and support the children needed, such as with school work.[426] If the parents did not send regular, substantial remittances, they might not be able to cover all their expenses, even buy enough food. It is because of such struggles that so many studies have found children's emotional and physical health often suffers when their parents migrate.

To improve children's well-being, it is thus essential to support caregivers, so they can better meet the children's needs without neglecting their own. This, in turn, requires understanding how migration in the context of climate change, including the feminization of migration, is changing traditional customs and family roles, and funding culturally appropriate interventions in affected communities.[427]

Grandmothers play a particularly crucial role in migrant households, serving as the main caregiver when both parents (or just mothers) migrate, and typically managing household finances.[428] At the same time, in migrant households, it is often "all hands on deck", with children taking on significant duties, usually in line with gender norms. Older sisters may care for their younger siblings, cook and clean; boys may work on the farm, chop wood and perform other heavier labour. This means children have to grow up quickly, forgoing play and other aspects of childhood, and often sacrificing their education as well.

RECOMMENDATIONS

National governments should:

1. Expand social protection programmes to provide additional support to single-parent and elder-headed households, recognizing the special challenges they face. Additional support services may also be valuable, such as child care and after-school programmes.
2. Tailor child well-being and food security programmes to meet the needs of older caregivers and young mothers, to ensure that programmes are both gender- and age-inclusive and provide appropriate support for households affected by migration.
3. Engage with grandparents as key actors for improving the adaptive capacity of families in their communities of origin, developing programmes that enable them to enhance their own knowledge and skills to recognize and address climate risks and build resilience in their household.
4. Ensure education programming is sensitive to the constraints on children posed by parental migration. Develop strategies that address the unique educational needs and challenges faced by these children.
5. Encourage the development of community sports and recreation activities that facilitate access to leisure for low-income children. Integrate these activities with existing community organizations and outreach for improved participation.[429]

6. Develop inter-generational community programming that aims to record, preserve and promote socio-cultural heritage to mitigate potential socio-cultural losses from migration that affect community psychological health and identity, particularly in ethnic minority and Indigenous communities.

Donors and development partners, international humanitarian NGOs and UN agencies should:

1. Promote "intergenerational dialogues" aimed at reducing the risks to children from changing caregiving roles, divisions of household care and labour responsibilities, and promote family unity.[430] This process can also enhance understanding of children's and caregivers' needs.
2. Support programmes such as the Grandmother Inclusive Approach, which provide practical assistance to caregivers.[431] These programmes aim to reduce the stress of shifting childcareresponsibilities by offering resources and support in areas such as nutrition and health care, acknowledging the crucial role grandmothers play in maintaining child well-being and ensuring they have the means to care for their families effectively.
3. Identify and support households where parents have migrated and where children may lack supervision or access to educational support, and provide educational programming and care for them, while recognizing and addressing barriers related to poverty and marginalization (so, for example, children may need stipends to make up for not working to earn money).
4. Support emotional and social learning programmes for children affected by migration to help children identify and manage emotional stresses and develop coping mechanisms.
5. Help migrant parents and children stay connected to reduce the emotional toll of separation – for instance, by providing them with low-cost smartphones that enable them to have video calls.

Future research needs include:

1. Conduct comprehensive studies on the long-term psychological impacts of parental migration on children, focusing on how different caregiving arrangements affect emotional and mental health outcomes. This research should include diverse family structures and various socio-economic backgrounds to understand the broader implications of migration on child development.
2. Investigate the specific needs and challenges of caregivers, particularly grandmothers, in supporting children left behind by migrating parents. This research should assess the adequacy of current social support systems and identify best practices for enhancing the capacity of older caregivers to provide stable and nurturing environments for children.
3. Explore the prevalence and impacts of child labour in marginalized communities because of distress migration by parents and propose targeted interventions to mitigate risks and support children's education and development.

6.5 EMPOWER CHILDREN AND YOUTH TO BE ABLE TO BUILD A BETTER FUTURE FOR THEMSELVES

The children and young adults interviewed for this report faced enormous challenges, but were also enterprising, eager to help their families achieve economic security and, in several cases, attend university and become successful professionals. Their decisions to migrate – or to stay home – were shaped to a great extent by the situation and desires of their parents, but they clearly exhibited agency, and many had navigated through very difficult situations on their own.

The first four recommendations focused on addressing the conditions that drive distress migration in rural Southeast Asia and trap millions of children in poverty, compromising their health and well-being and making them deeply vulnerable to climate change impacts. Those actions are urgent and essential, but young people deserve more. They also deserve a chance to participate in decisions that will shape their future.

Around the world, youth are increasingly leading the way on climate justice, through advocacy from the grassroots to the global level, including a formal role in the UN climate regime;[432] engagement in climate change adaptation planning and project implementation; and innovation and entrepreneurship. Young people have also engaged in discussions about migration in the context of climate change.[433]

Yet very few children and youth get such opportunities, particularly in the poorest communities. Enabling them to participate in discussions about climate change, resilience-building and mobility will require deliberate efforts tailored to each context and to the differentiated needs of children and youth within each community. Such efforts will not succeed unless basic needs are also met, but there is no reason to wait for one to start with the other. Engagement can start at the local level and gradually build up.

Broad standards on children's rights still need to be applied regionally and to specific national contexts to start transforming local realities.[434] Child and youth climate engagement also remains fairly limited in national policy spaces in Southeast Asia.[435] On a positive note, continuous engagement of youth may be more possible in regional spaces, particularly on transboundary issues.[436] However, such processes must be made inclusive of diverse identities, including Indigenous groups, to be just.

Adults also need to do much more to empower migrant children and youth to participate in debates and policy-making at the intersection of children's rights, migration and climate change.[437] As the stories in this report show, poverty, debt and labour migration can be all-consuming, leaving little time or space for people to do anything else but work and survive.[438] Yet without young people's voices, policy debates will be woefully incomplete, leading to solutions that may not reflect the priorities of those affected. It is adults' responsibility to create spaces for their meaningful participation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

National governments should:

1. Integrate climate change into school curricula starting in early grades and continuing through secondary school, so children understand from an early age what is happening around them, what it means to adapt to climate change, and what measures might be appropriate in their context. This can include creating climate clubs in primary, secondary and vocational schools.[439]
2. Deliberately create spaces for children and youth to engage in policy-making and planning processes at all levels with regard to children's rights, migration and climate change, and work with NGOs and other partners to build young people's capacities to engage in these processes.

3. Support increased collaboration and dialogue among children and youth working groups on the Paris Agreement, the Global Compact on Migration, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other relevant global- and regional-level policy spaces.

Donors and development partners, international humanitarian NGOs and UN agencies should:

1. Improve the integration of children and youth considerations across non-child focused agencies and organizations, particularly within those advancing migration and environmental justice and rights. This includes seeking out and incorporating the voices of young migrants, especially those who, due to their irregular status, may find it difficult to participate.
2. Provide scholarships, fellowships and other funding opportunities to facilitate child and youth engagement in both migration and climate change forums, including capacity-building to enable young people to participate more meaningfully.
3. Legitimize diverse forms of knowledge-sharing around climate change and a healthy environment that enable both children and youth to provide insights informing environmental policy development. For example, allowing children to submit drawings, videos, songs and other forms of creative expression that facilitate their participation.[440]
4. Develop small grant programming that incentivizes children and youth to identify solutions to local climate issues and provide funding for idea implementation in a way that encourages community engagement.
5. Enable the leadership of child and youth environmental defenders by providing protection for them and facilitating their safe participation.[441]

Future research needs:

1. Engage in participatory action research with children and youth in areas with significant climate vulnerabilities and/or high out-migration rates, to support the identification of issues, strategies and indicators for progress.

Children and youth are inheriting a world that is filled with injustice and needless suffering, and that is likely to become even more inhospitable as climate change impacts worsen in the coming years. Migration could help them and their families to become more resilient, rise out of poverty and improve their living conditions, but only if they can migrate safely – not in distress – and avoid exploitation and abuse at their destination. Those who stay behind also need much stronger support and opportunities to thrive without having to leave their loved ones and communities.

These young people deserve a better future. It is up to adults – particularly those with resources and power – to start building that future, and to empower them to actively participate in shaping it.

ENDNOTES

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A 2023 study found that a growing number of NDCs mentioned migration, but two-thirds did not, and only 11% included concrete provisions on migration (which the Viet Nam NDC does not). See: Mombauer, D., A.-C. Link, and K. van der Geest. 2023. "Addressing Climate-Related Human Mobility through NDCs and NAPs: State of Play, Good Practices, and the Ways Forward." *Frontiers in Climate* 5 (March). doi:10.3389/fclim.2023.1125936.

[396] Socialist Republic of Viet Nam, 2022, "National Adaptation Plan for the Period 2021-2030 with a Vision to 2050."

[397] Kingdom of Thailand. 2023. "Thailand's National Adaptation Plan." Bangkok: Department of Climate Change and Environment, Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment. https://unfccc.int/documents/638001.

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The share of informal employment as of 2018 was 65%. See ILOSTAT data for informal employment rate by sex (%): https://rshiny.ilo.org/dataexplorer19/?lang=en&id=EMP_NIFL_SEX_NB_A.

[399] See https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement.

[400] See UN Water data for Cambodia: https://www.sdg6data.org/en/country-or-area/Cambodia, Lao PDR: https://www.sdg6data.org/en/country-or-area/Lao%20People's%20Democratic%20Republic and Viet Nam: https://www.sdg6data.org/en/country-or-area/Viet%20Nam.

[401] Interview Code KII2.

[402] Interview Code V57MPM7.

[403] For an overview of the principles of locally led adaptation and a library of related resources, see: https://www.wri.org/initiatives/locally-led-adaptation/principles-locally-led-adaptation.

[404] Interview Code V53WPM4.

[405] Interview Code KII12.

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[407] Interview Code KII1.

[408] Interview Code KII1.

[409] Interview Code KII9.

[410] Interview Code KII3.

[411] Interview Code KII1 and KII10.

[412] Interview Code KII5.

[413] De Haas, 2021, "A Theory of Migration: The Aspirations-Capabilities Framework."

[414] See, for example, this collection of briefs on climate-smart land use practices, tailored to ASEAN countries: https://asean-crn.org/climate-smart-land-use-practice-insight-brief-series/.

[415] Interview Code L35WPR2.

[416] Interview Code KII6.

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[418] Interview Code KII5.

[419] See also: UNICEF. 2023. "Children Affected by Migration in Southeast Asia: The Role of Business." Policy brief. Bangkok: United Nations Children's Fund. https://www.unicef.org/eap/reports/children-migration-business-policy-brief.

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[422] Interview Code KII4. See also UNICEF, 2023.

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[424] Interview Code KII3.

[425] Interview Code KII8.

[426] See also: Mendoza, A.N., C.A. Fruhauf, and D. MacPhee. 2020. "Grandparent Caregivers' Resilience: Stress, Support, and Coping Predict Life Satisfaction." *The International Journal of Aging and Human Development* 91 (1): 3–20. doi:10.1177/0091415019843459.

[427] Interview Code KII5.

[428] UNICEF, 2023, "Children Affected by Migration in ASEAN Member States: Cambodia."

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[432] See https://youngoclimate.org.

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[434] Interview Code KII7.

[435] Interview Code KII5.

[436] Interview Code KII12.

[437] Interview Code KII7.

[438] Interview Code KII9.

[439] Interview Code KII10.

[440] Interview Code KII9.

[441] Interview Code KII12.

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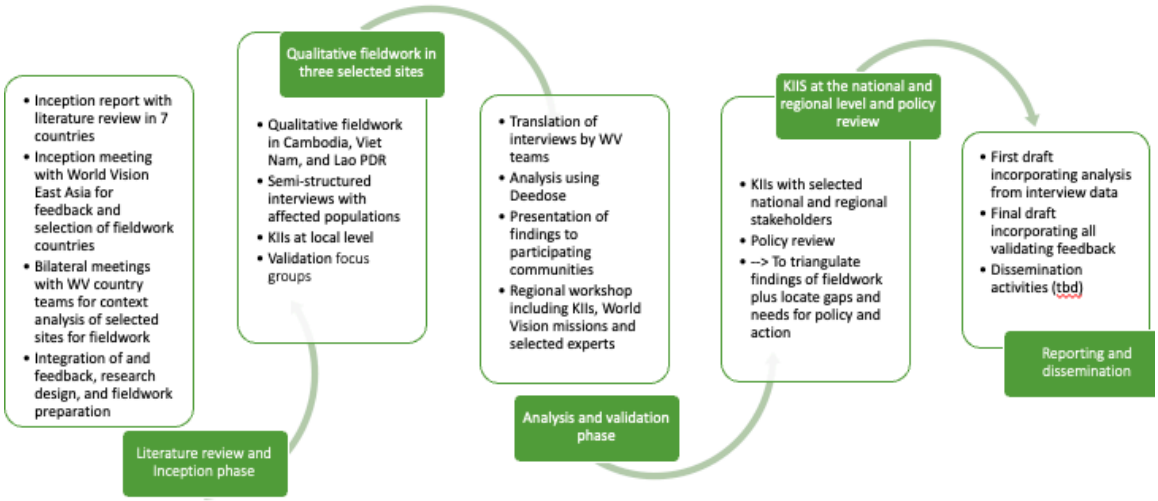
ANNEX: RESEARCH DESIGN

This section provides more details on the design and implementation of this study. The figure below provides an overview of the key steps, which are then described briefly.



STEP 1: LITERATURE REVIEW AND INCEPTION PHASE:

First, the research team conducted a literature review including profiles for each of the seven countries in East Asia where World Vision is present. This allowed us to redefine research questions and suggest possibilities for fieldwork in function of gaps and of World Vision's priorities. The inception report was shared with World Vision and an inception meeting held for comments and inputs. Cambodia, Lao PDR and Viet Nam were selected for focused case study fieldwork because they exemplify many of the risks and gaps relevant to the research questions under study. These choices are also made for accessibility and to be in line with the countries where climate and migration are a strategic priority for World Vision. Following this country selection process, bilateral meetings between SEI and World Vision took place with each selected country team to undertake a context analysis of each site and define the sampling strategy for the study. This was followed by a revision of the inception report to include inputs from World Vision as well as the development of the research design and interview tools for fieldwork.

STEP 2: QUALITATIVE FIELDWORK IN THREE SELECTED COUNTRY SITES:

Within the three chosen countries, this research focused on case study locations (two villages in each country) for detailed and comparative analysis. These case studies enabled us to delve deeper into the intricate interplay between environmental and climate events and human mobility, with a particular emphasis on their effects on children and youth. A total of **92 interviews were conducted** with affected populations, averaging around 15 interviews per village (see Table A1). In addition, a total of **13 key informant interviews (KIIs)** at the local level were conducted with selected local officials to provide contextual information for data analysis (see Table A2). Selected KIIs included village heads, leaders of women's unions, leaders of children's unions/schools, and leaders of farmer associations and other

relevant community organizations. On the final day of field research, the research team conducted validation meetings with children and caregivers who had not been interviewed previously to triangulate and confirm initial findings.

Table A1. Distribution of interviewees across gender and socio-economic groups

Country	Very poor		Poor		Relatively wealthy		Total
	Male	**Female**	**Male**	**Female**	**Male**	**Female**	
Cambodia	2	8	0	8	6	6	**30**
Lao PDR	2	6	3	10	2	8	**31**
Viet Nam	0	0	7	9	9	6	**31**
Total	**4**	**14**	**10**	**27**	**17**	**20**	**92**

Note: The sample categories follow socio-economic categorisation provided by official village chief records and self-identification. In cases of conflicting description, the official records were used. However, it should be noted that these socio-economic categories are relative to other households in the village. Those categorized as "relatively wealthy" would still be considered to be experiencing poverty by national standards.

Table A2. Distribution among mobility categories

		Cambodia	Lao PDR	Viet Nam	Total
From migrant households with children who stayed behind	Children (12-17)	7	5	7	19
	Adults (parents, guardians, and grandparents) remaining behind	8	4	10	22
From returned migrant households	Returned children (12-17)	5	3	2	10
	Returned adults (parents and guardians)	5	7	7	19
Adults from non-migrant households		5	12	5	22
Total number of interviewees		30	31	31	92

STEP 3: DATA ANALYSIS AND VALIDATION:

All interviews were recorded, transcribed and translated by World Vision research teams. Subsequent data analysis included systematically coding the collected data across age, gender, and socio-economic groupings to answer research questions. The research team used Dedoose, a data analysis software program to store and analyse transcripts. This software enabled contextualization of data complexity, ensured consistency and analytical transparency, and facilitated collaboration across the research team. Findings from data analysis were then presented back to each of the World Vision research teams to confirm and validate identified relationships and trends from analysis.

STEP 4: GLOBAL, REGIONAL AND NATIONAL KIIS:

The final step of the research was to interview experts and stakeholders at the national, regional, and global level working on child rights, climate change, and/or migration. The aim of these interviews was to assess current protections and risks, implementation gaps, existing best practices, and opportunities for targeted policy influence. The research team conducted 12 KIIs which included policy-makers, government actors, civil society or non-governmental organization representatives, and child and youth climate advisors/activists. Their inputs are mainly reflected in the recommendations in Section 6, but also informed the narrative of the entire report. Table A3 summarizes the region and affiliations of these interviewees.

Table A3. Key informant interviews and affiliations

Number	Geographic Area	Key Informant	Gender	Date Interviewed
1	East Asia	World Vision	F	6 June 2024
2	Lao PDR	World Vision	F	7 June 2024
3	Thailand	World Vision	M	7 June 2024
4	Global	Child Rights and Business Specialist	F	10 June 2024
5	Asia and the Pacific	UNEP	F	13 June 2024
6	Cambodia	World Vision	F, M	14 June 2024
7	Global	Terre des Hommes	M	14 June 2024
8	East Asia	World Vision	F	20 June 2024
9	Asia and the Pacific	Child Climate Advisor/Activist	M	21 June 2024
10	Viet Nam	World Vision	F	24 June 2024
11	Global	USAID	M	24 June 2024
12	Asia and the Pacific	Youth Climate Advisor/Activist	F	25 June 2024

SAMPLING STRATEGY

This research adopted **a purposive sampling** strategy to obtain a sample representative of intersecting social differences to answer the research questions, even if it is *not statistically* representative of the greater population. This strategy was developed through the initial literature review and bilateral meetings with World Vision researchers in selected sites, who have wide experience with the districts and populations where we conducted research. Given that the focus of this research is on the impacts of (im)mobility on children and youth, we selected the most important axes of differences as age, gender, socio-economic status and (im)mobility profile. The interviewees fit into five main categories, as outlined in the sample distribution below, and aimed for a balanced sample. **Only one person was interviewed in each household**, though in practice, some conversations involved multiple family members.

MIGRANT HOUSEHOLDS

The interviewee is part of a household where at least one person – who is not the interviewee – was a migrant, either currently away or having migrated within the past five years. This includes interviews with:

- **Children remaining behind:** Children (12–17) who are currently separated or have been separated from one or both parents because of migration. Interviews sought to understand reasons for their separation and the impacts of their parents' migration on their well-being and development.
- **Adults remaining behind**: Caregivers and guardians responsible for children in the absence of the child's parents because of migration. Interviews sought to understand reasons for migration, (im)mobility decision-making dynamics, remittance flows, and resulting impacts on the household from the perspective of adults remaining behind.

RETURNED MIGRANTS

The interviewee personally migrated within the last five years and at least three months had passed since their return at the time of the interview. This includes interviews with:

- **Returned children** (12–17): Children who have migrated. These interviews sought to understand the motivations for their migration, their conditions at destination, reasons for return, their future plans, and how this movement impacted on their education, health, and overall well-being as well as how it may have impacted family members remaining behind.
- **Returned adults**: Parents or guardians who migrated without their children. These interviews sought to understand the motivations for their migration, their conditions at destination, reasons for return, their future plans for their children, and how this movement impacted child education, health, and overall well-being as well as other family members remaining behind (particularly caregivers).

NON-MIGRANT HOUSEHOLDS

The interviewee is part of a household where no one in the household has migrated within the past 5 years. This includes interviews with adults, and sought to understand reasons for staying in place in spite of climate and environmental risks.

SAMPLE DISTRIBUTION

All the people interviewed were adults, but the sampling strategy differentiated between youth, as defined in ASEAN (ages 18–35) and all other adults (35 and above). To the extent possible, the sample included a variety of household types/structures (single adult, dual adult and multiple adult households).