

POLICY BRIEF

# Cambodia climate change contributes to unsafe migration: addressing the impacts for vulnerable children and youth

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## Summary

This policy brief provides a call to action for development partners in Cambodia and Thailand, the primary destination for Cambodian migrants to address key drivers of distress migration in communities of origin. It advocates for making migration safer, more humane, and more equitable for Cambodian parents and children, while also providing greater support for those who remain behind and those who migrate. By empowering children to actively shape a better future for themselves, this approach aims to create lasting positive change in the lives of all involved.

### The policy challenge

The research finds that the increasing pressures of climate change on livelihoods are leading to distress driven migration. It also finds that vulnerable rural, low-income Cambodian families who rely on natural resources and have the weakest safety nets are by far the most exposed. Accounts from families dependent on subsistence agriculture revealed that they are resorting to migration as a last option to service debts and make ends meet. The element of distress is significant because it amplifies the risks and exacerbates the negative impacts migration can have. Cambodian families migrating in distress are more likely to do so without legal protections, moving in stages that leave them physically separated from each other and their social safety networks. This places children and youth in precarious situations with heightened risks of abuse and exploitation.

### The response needed

The Government of Cambodia has put in place climate policies, especially the Nationally Determined Contributions that are considered child responsive.<sup>1</sup> However, there is need to further recognise and address the link between climate events and severe financial pressures as a trigger for distress migration. The Cambodian government and its development partners will need to take action to extend policy reach into the poorest communities and address the financial stressors that contribute to unsafe migration practices among families dependent on natural resources.

These actions could include enhancing the resilience and reliability of rural infrastructure, supporting rural communities reliant on natural resources to adapt and diversify their livelihoods for greater shock resilience, and providing timely, targeted relief to enable faster livelihood recovery after disasters and protect against the adoption of negative coping mechanisms.

Policy enhancements are needed between Cambodia and Thailand to ensure safer migration for the children of low-income earners, including addressing some of the unintended consequences of existing migration policies. Where migration policies do not fully consider the drivers, dynamics and pathways of distress migration, they inadvertently exacerbate the deprivation of vulnerable children and youth by pushing them into more exploitative work arrangements and further away from essential social services.

This policy brief outlines recommended actions to improve the enabling environment for safe, orderly and dignified migration from Cambodia, ensuring the rights, well-being and opportunities of the most vulnerable migrants, especially children. It draws on insights from field research and interviews conducted with dozens of children, young people, parents and leaders across two vulnerable communities of **Battambang province** in Cambodia, and from in-depth reviews of national and international research.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> UNICEF, Child sensitive NDC dashboard: <https://ndcsforeverychild.unicef.org/post/71faf0c1-f567-4f78-aed3-10d4b64993ab>

<sup>2</sup> The findings set out in this report draw from research conducted across three countries during 2023-2024 through a partnership between World Vision East Asia and Stockholm Environment Institute. For further reading and methods refer to the full findings report: Vigil, S., Steiner, C., Kim, D., Flores, D., & Davis, M. (2024). Climate change, vulnerability and migration: Impacts on children and youth in Southeast Asia: <https://www.wvi.org/eastasia/research-climate-change-vulnerability-migration>

## Context

Cambodia has a young and predominantly rural population, with most employment in informal sectors that are highly vulnerable to economic and climatic shocks.<sup>3</sup> An estimated 30.5% of the population are children under 15 years old, another 17.1% are just 15–24.<sup>4</sup> The country has made significant progress on poverty reduction, shrinking the portion of children living in multidimensional poverty from 40% in 2014 to 20.5% by 2022.<sup>5</sup> However, climate change is causing significant setbacks and hindering development, amplifying disparities and pushing rural families deeper into poverty.<sup>6</sup> Cambodia has one of the highest ratings for children's climate risk.<sup>7</sup>

With GDP per capita still below USD2000, income disparities across Southeast Asia continue to be a pull factor for regional migration from Cambodia.<sup>8</sup> The number of Cambodian migrants increased from just 2,800 individuals in 1999 to over 55,000 at its peak in 2019.<sup>9</sup> Internal migration is also prevalent, representing close to a quarter of young women and a third of young men aged 20–24.<sup>10</sup> Persistent struggles have led many people to migrate, for a range of industrial, agricultural and service sector jobs including domestic in the city or for in Thailand.<sup>11</sup> Experiences of climate change and migration are highly gendered in Cambodia. Thailand, the most developed country in the Greater Mekong Subregion, attracts four times more Cambodian labour migrants than any other destination, offering average wages twice as high as those in Cambodia.<sup>12</sup>

Weak rural infrastructure is a particularly significant push factor for migration out of Cambodia., limited access to safe drinking water, inadequate sanitation and outdated agricultural technology hinder production and reduce income opportunities, leaving most farmers stuck at subsistence levels or dependent on low and unstable commodity prices.<sup>13</sup> The rural families interviewed rely on maize, potatoes and other vegetable production. However, they have experienced repeated recent climate events including droughts, storms and floods, that have severely impacted their production.<sup>14</sup> This coupled with transport and market disruptions, and lack of alternative support, contributed to many taking on unsustainable debt and turning to microfinance to pay for basic farm inputs.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>3</sup> UN estimates the rural share of the population as 75.8% in 2020. UN DESA. (2018). "World Urbanization Prospects 2018." New York: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. <http://esa.un.org/unpd/wup/>.

<sup>4</sup> United Nations Population Fund Cambodia (UNFPA). (2022). Cambodia Population Pyramid: UNFPA World Population Dashboard. <https://www.unfpa.org/data/world-population-dashboard>

<sup>5</sup> UNICEF. (2023). Children in Multidimensional Poverty in Cambodia. <https://www.unicef.org/cambodia/children-multidimensional-poverty>

<sup>6</sup> World Bank. (2022). Cambodia Country Climate and Development Report. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/09/20/cambodia-climate-change-and-development-report>

<sup>7</sup> UNICEF. (2021). The Climate Crisis Is a Child Rights Crisis: Introducing the Children's Climate Risk Index. <https://www.unicef.org/reports/climate-crisis-child-rights-crisis>

<sup>8</sup> World Bank. (2021). Cambodia Overview. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/cambodia/overview>

<sup>9</sup> International Organization for Migration (IOM). (2020). Migration Data Portal: Cambodia Migration Trends. [https://migrationdataportal.org/data?i=stock\\_abs\\_&t=2020&cm49=116](https://migrationdataportal.org/data?i=stock_abs_&t=2020&cm49=116)

<sup>10</sup> International Labour Organization (ILO). (2019). Rural Migration in Cambodia: Patterns and Drivers. [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---ilo-hanoi/documents/publication/wcms\\_733000.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---ilo-hanoi/documents/publication/wcms_733000.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> ILO. 2023. Triangle in ASEAN quarterly briefing note: <https://www.ilo.org/media/100546/download>

<sup>12</sup> UNICEF. Country Migration Profiles: Cambodia: <https://esa.un.org/migmgprofiles/indicators/files/Cambodia.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Asian Development Bank. (2021). Cambodia Rural Infrastructure Development. <https://www.adb.org/projects/44421-013/main>; Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). (2020). Cambodia Agricultural Overview. <http://www.fao.org/cambodia/en/>

<sup>14</sup> United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2023). Cambodia's Climate Resilience and Agricultural Shocks. <https://www.undp.org/cambodia/publications>

<sup>15</sup> Microfinance Opportunities. (2021). Cambodia: Financial Stress and Microfinance in Agriculture. <https://microfinanceopportunities.org/cambodia>

## Findings

### **Climate shocks and stress are contributing to the financial stress driving distress migration among vulnerable rural Cambodian families**

- Families interviewed felt the frequency of floods, storms and droughts in their villages was increasing. Each time climate induced extreme weather events hit, the livelihoods of those reliant on natural resources were devastated, pushing the poorest families further into debt.
- Among the communities interviewed, distress migration was common, particularly as a result of climate-disrupted livelihoods leading to debt and food insecurity. Some were struggling to feed their family due to low crop yields, crop failures, and/or a lack of stable work.
- Families talked about receiving little government support during climate-induced disasters, having no savings buffer, meaning they couldn't meet basic needs, and resorting to debt.
- The negative impacts of climate change on livelihoods leading to financial distress were most notable among villages and families reliant on natural resources for food and income.
- Each participant had unique circumstances but all shared the same reason for migration - to earn more than they could at home.
- Migration was viewed as a last resort because of the risks involved. Many of those interviewed (adults and children alike) said they did not wish to migrate, particularly if it meant risky border crossings and long-term separation from their families. Most said they would happily stay if they could 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 taking on unsustainable debt.

### **Debt and weak infrastructure surrounding vulnerable villages exacerbate their exposure to and the impact of extreme weather on financial stress**

- Many interviewees noted that due to physical isolation and weak rural infrastructure, during extreme weather events – which are becoming more frequent and severe due to climate change - they often lost access to markets and inputs. When crops were wiped out by floods or drought, their children went hungry.
- Many households faced crushing debts, often linked to climate-induced disasters such as floods, droughts or storms.
- Debt is exceptionally high among Cambodian households at USD12,000 on average, six times the annual GDP per capita. Many of those interviewed identified debt and the inability to pay debt as the key driver for their decision to migrate.<sup>16</sup>

### **Children and young people were active participants in the decision to migrate, reflecting their needs and aspirations for a better future and better socio-economic conditions**

- The child migrants interviewed said they had made the decision to migrate, many focused on helping their household cover basic needs or pay off debts.
- Children are aware of many of the risks of migration. They 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. Sometimes one sibling worked so that others could stay home and attend school.

### **Migrating in distress put children, youth and their families into situations where they were vulnerable to abuse and exploitation and reduced access to support**

- Migrants interviewed had crossed the border through irregular channels and worked mainly in agriculture and in construction, opting for longer stays due to the risks associated with moving.
- Those who had engaged in irregular migration were the most vulnerable to exploitation, forced labour and potential violence. However, those who migrated through regular channels still reported being abused and

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<sup>16</sup> M-Cril. 2023. "An Impact Assessment of Microfinance in Cambodia." M-Cril Limited and Cambodia Microfinance Association. <https://cma-network.org/km/information-center/cma-publication/>.

feeling they could not complain without jeopardizing work permits. Internal migration carried some risks, like wage theft and difficulty accessing services.

- Migration disrupted and inhibited children's formal education. Children who migrated often did not participate in education or healthcare, and many did not return to school once home. In Thailand, while schools allow non-residents, parents fear revealing their status to authorities.
- Instead, migrated children of low-income earners typically work to help make the migration financially worthwhile. Children's work conditions at the destination were particularly hazardous, precarious and exploitative.
- Lack of legal channels in Thailand for bringing children along with unskilled (low-income earning) migrants as well as for lawful employment of migrant children mean they take up work in poorly regulated sectors with lax labour law enforcement. Like migrant parents, child migrants often said they had been exploited, forced to work long hours, and sometimes cheated out of their wages.

#### **Migration did not always pay off, it often failed to provide the expected economic returns and left families overall no better off**

- Whether they stayed in their country or crossed the border, many migrants found the financial benefits fell short of their expectations. 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.
- A 2019 study found that 35% of Cambodians returned from international migration indebted after international migration, with 57% reporting a lack of savings upon return and 19% reporting their savings had declined.<sup>17</sup>

#### **Migration reshapes and disrupts family relationships and social safety nets, impacting the children who remain behind**

- Because low-wage migrant workers have no legal way to take their dependents to another country, and irregular migration is risky and stressful, unskilled Cambodian migrants often leave their children behind, especially the youngest.
- After departure, the stress and burden on the children left behind increased. Grandparents often take up childcare and struggle to meet children's basic needs, including at times not having enough to eat. Meeting needs is made harder by the exceptionally high rates of disability (reaching 57% among those aged 60 and older) and deprivation among elderly.<sup>18</sup>
- Children who remained took up more work, sometimes physically dangerous, and at times left school to maintain subsistence livelihoods, food production, and domestic chores. Children's mental and physical health were affected, some fearing debt collectors would hurt them.

#### **Gender norms profoundly shaped migration patterns as well as the characteristics, distribution and risk profile of work for both those who left and those who stayed behind**

- 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 also migrated together, particularly in the poorest families, and several women migrated on their own, reflecting the growing feminization of migration in Southeast Asia.
- Often girls took on substantial household and caregiving responsibilities and boys might take on physically dangerous farm and household tasks. Reflecting established gender roles, boys were particularly likely to feel a duty to help provide for the family and repay debts.

<sup>17</sup> IOM. (2019). "Debt and the Migration Experience: Insights from South-East Asia." Bangkok: International Organization for Migration. <https://publications.iom.int/books/debt-and-migration-experience-insights-south-east-asia>.

<sup>18</sup> National Institute of Statistics. (2023). Persons with disabilities in Cambodia: Findings from the Cambodian demographic and health survey, 2014 & 2021-22.

**Childhood experiences of migration in Cambodia**

One 16-year-old girl from C1 expressed that she wished her family would remain together to farm in the community, but that her parents decided to work in construction in Phnom Penh, Laem, and Thailand because of microfinance debts taken out to invest in farming. Recurring floods, along with heat and drought in the dry season, had ruined their family's corn and rice harvests and made it impossible to pay back mounting interest from the loans. When asked about how she feels without her parents living at home, she expressed: "I'm afraid...I'm afraid that people will have bad intentions on me, because we owe others money and haven't repaid them...I'm afraid that they will harm my body." These loans are taken out under her mother's name, who she hasn't seen in years because her mother safe cannot return without the debt collectors coming. Despite being the youngest of her siblings, she has taken on the role of managing remittances for the household. She finds that the amount has diminished over time because her parents have started working in agricultural wage labor. Now, she has a more limited budget and must choose between allocating the money for food, school, or transportation.

## Implications

Cambodia has implemented a range of policies aimed at addressing climate change, with a focus on vulnerable and marginalized groups such as children, women, ethnic minorities, and migrant youth.<sup>19</sup> The Cambodian government's climate adaptation strategies prioritize inclusive approaches, and aim to ensure the impacts of climate change on these groups are mitigated, especially in rural areas where economic development and livelihoods are at risk.<sup>20</sup> The government's **National Climate Change Strategic Plan** highlights gender-responsive actions, recognizing that women and children are disproportionately affected by climate change.<sup>21</sup> The plan includes specific programs to boost rural economic development while ensuring that migrant youth, often vulnerable to exploitation in the workforce, are protected through targeted policies and workplace safety initiatives.<sup>22</sup>

However, these plans have not explicitly addressed links between climate change and migration in its policies and planning, or the implications for children, and these policies do not adequately recognise and plan for the impacts of climate change on distress migration. The implication is that the most vulnerable families are left to bear the brunt of distress migration risks. Without further addressing the conditions that drive distress migration, as well as the conditions that make it so risky, millions more children may experience exploitation and be further trapped in poverty, compromising their health, well-being and future prospects.

As the impacts of climate change intensify, with the right policy response, migration could be harnessed as a valuable alternative livelihood option to help families build assets, 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 need stronger support and opportunities to thrive in their home communities and to avoid harm.

Making migration safer requires policy work not only in Cambodia but in destination countries, especially the most popular destination, Thailand. Currently, migration policies that ignore the realities of families in distress, even those that aim to make migration and services more accessible, are having unintended negative impacts by channelling children and youth into riskier employment situations and inhibiting their participation in school and services.

<sup>19</sup> United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2021). Climate Change Adaptation in Cambodia: Vulnerabilities and Strategic Response. <https://www.undp.org/cambodia/publications>

<sup>20</sup> International Labour Organization (ILO). (2022). Rural Youth Employment and Migrant Protection in Cambodia. [https://www.ilo.org/asia/projects/WCMS\\_852457/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/asia/projects/WCMS_852457/lang--en/index.htm)

<sup>21</sup> Royal Government of Cambodia. (2013). Cambodia Climate Change Strategic Plan 2014-2023. <https://www.undp.org/cambodia/publications/cambodia-climate-change-strategic-plan-2014-2023>

<sup>22</sup> UN Women & United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). (2021). The State of Gender Equality and Climate Change in Cambodia. <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2021/03/the-state-of-gender-equality-and-climate-change-in-cambodia>

## Recommendations

An effective and coordinated response to these risks is needed by governments and development partners to address the key drivers of distress migration and the specific circumstances that create vulnerability for poor families in rural Cambodian villages. There is need to update national to local climate change, disaster preparedness and migration policies to acknowledge, account for and address the interconnections between climate change and the increasing frequency of disasters on livelihoods and financial hardship and on distress migration.

Specific recommended actions:

**Update national climate change and disaster preparedness policies and policy reach to reduce financial distress as a trigger for unsafe migration by enhancing the resilience of rural livelihoods, especially for those most reliant on natural resources**

- **Update the NDC and NAP** to reflect capacity building needs for vulnerable communities.
- **Scale up support for livelihood adaptation** reaching all vulnerable families, especially those reliant on natural resources, to ensure families can achieve sufficient income stability as weather extremes intensify, taking into account the differentiated needs of women and men.
- **Close the adaptation finance gap and invest in resilient infrastructure of priority to vulnerable communities.** Prioritize development nearest to vulnerable communities. Priorities local infrastructure that will eliminate or reduce the disruption of flooding and droughts on wellbeing, income and production for those reliant on natural resources e.g. climate-resilient transportation infrastructure, schools and health care facilities at the village level, water, production technology and electricity.
- **Address structural inequalities** faced by women, youth, children, people with disabilities, displaced persons, Indigenous Peoples and marginalized ethnic groups particularly with regards to building resilient livelihoods and access to markets through resilient and accessible rural infrastructure.
- **Prepare and respond to disasters with timely livelihood support** enabling the most vulnerable families to restore income and protect against taking on harmful or excessive debt.
- **Strengthen effective shock-responsive and gender and child-sensitive social protection mechanisms** for families in crisis, targeting those most reliant on natural resources. For example, consider crop insurance for rural households which depend on natural resources.
- **Explore ways to make debt more manageable** for those most exposed to financial and environmental shocks such as mandated flexible repayment structures, the ability to refinance aftershocks or other safeguards for climate risk.

**Make migration safer and reduce the unintended negative impacts for vulnerable children and youth**

- **Take coordinated action across governments and development partners to make migration channels more accessible, flexible and just**
  - Create safe legal channels for migration of children alongside unskilled migrant parents, and access to education and healthcare at destination. Update short and long-stay migration policies for unskilled workers, recognising the need for children to contribute towards household income is a reality for the poorest and can be positive where safe channels, monitoring and service access are provided for.
  - Improve oversight of industries that employ migrants, with migrant-sensitive approaches to reporting abuse and exploitation.
  - Explore ways to make known irregular migration routes safer, such as establishing mobile units providing assistance.
  - Raise awareness among the most vulnerable about how to identify and mitigate the risks.
- **Meet the development needs of migrant children and those who stay behind**
  - Monitor children's school participation at home and at destination locations and enhance emotional and social learning support available for migrant children
  - Support the caregivers at home to meet the needs of children who remain behind

- Tailor child and food security programmes to meet the needs of older caregivers/young mothers, especially for elderly living with disabilities with childcare responsibilities.
  - Build on successful approaches in Cambodia such as the 'grandparent' approach where grandparents are recognised for their primary caregiving role and specifically targeted in awareness raising and support.
  - Promote "intergenerational dialogues" to help reduce risks to children from changing caregiving roles and help families stay connected like access to free video calls.
- **Empower children and youth to be active participants in the policy process and help build a better future for themselves**
    - Create spaces for migrant children and youth to meaningfully engage in national, regional and global debates and policy-making at the intersection of children's rights, migration and climate change, including integrating climate change into school curricula.