



CLIMATE CHANGE, VULNERABILITY AND MIGRATION:

IMPACTS ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH
IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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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

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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



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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 executive summary. To download the full 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.

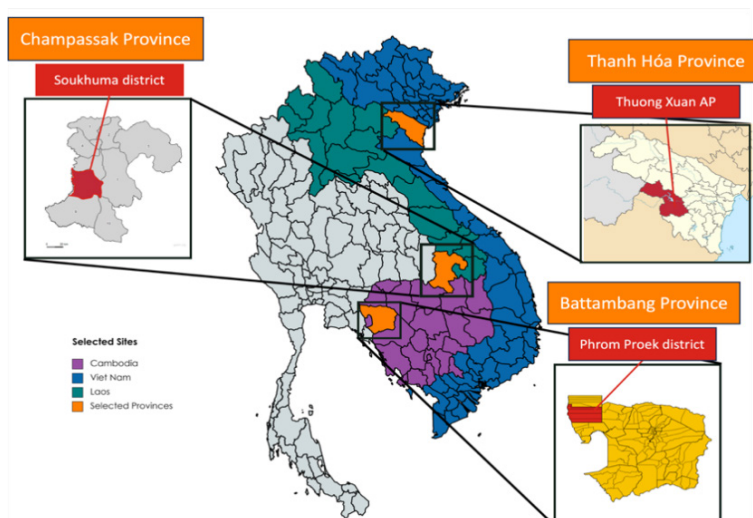
Of the three countries profiled, Viet Nam faces the most daunting climate hazards, including extreme heat and major flood risks linked to sea-level rise and coastal storms, which have led the World Bank to identify northern Viet Nam as a likely climate migration "hotspot" by 2050. The country's national 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, DESTINATIONS AND OUTCOMES

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.

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

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.

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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.

