

Exploring the Experiences of Cambodian Labor Migrants: The Journey to Thailand under the Framework for Bilateral Agreements

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, millions of people from Cambodia have migrated to Thailand. Much of this migration can be characterized as “irregular migration” as many of these migrants did not have proper legal documents or work permits. The Thai authorities have employed two parallel strategies for regularizing temporary migration to Thailand. The first has been to register migrant workers already in Thailand. The second has been to enter into bi-lateral MOUs with the Cambodian government. The present study explores these migrants’ experiences under the framework for bilateral agreements. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews with migrants, their family members, brokers, and recruitment agencies in four provinces in Cambodia. From this study, it is clear that an increasing number of migrants have become more aware of laws and regulations. However, there are major differences in the cost of formal and informal migration procedures. Formal procedures for migration between Cambodia and Thailand are relatively expensive, complex, time consuming, and based on networks. Some prospective migrants revealed that they have experienced being cheated in Cambodia during the processing of their documents. They did not have a complete understanding of each type of document and its purpose, and that is the reason they used passports with no work visas for working purposes. The findings of the study make clear that an investment in hands-on public awareness of documentation and trusted channels is needed so that prospective migrants and

their families are fully informed before making the decision to migrate. There should be laws and standards in both the sending country and the receiving country (Thailand), specifying the costs and duration of the process to import labor, and this information should be publicly disseminated to the relevant offices/agencies/personnel in both countries.

Keywords: experiences, Cambodian labor migrants, bilateral agreements, Cambodia, Thailand

Introduction

Thailand is among the twenty largest migrant destination countries and hosts 3.6 million international migrants. The rate of increase in the number of international migrants residing in Thailand is considered high, as the average annual growth rate has been six percent or more from 2000 to 2017 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2017). One of the main purposes for this migration, both short- and long-term, is work, as migrants aim to find employment opportunities leading to a better future for themselves and their families (International Labour Organization, 2017). Thailand, since the 1980s when it had a rapidly growing economy, has become an attractive destination for large numbers of Cambodian migrants, both legal and illegal (Chantavanich and Jayagupta, 2010; Huguet and Chamratrithirong, 2011).

In responding to the migration situation through policy formulation, the Thai government issued its first migration policy in 1992 to allow migrant workers to register for work, initially in only four provinces bordering on Myanmar (Chiang Rai, Tak, Kanchanaburi, and Ranong) before extending it to ten more. Four years later, to accommodate a rapid increase of migrant workers, the second policy was expanded in scope to include workers from Cambodia and Lao PDR and it provided more opportunities for them to register for seven different types of work in 43 provinces throughout Thailand. The third policy came out four years later, when registration was opened to 47 types of jobs in 54 provinces (Huguet and Chamratrithirong, 2011).

Subsequently in 2010, the Thai government introduced policies to facilitate the recruitment of millions of labor migrants. A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed between the Thai government and the governments of the three other countries in support of a formal recruitment process. The Thai and Lao governments have supported migrant labor regulation through MOUs since 2002 and the MOUs with the governments of Cambodia and Myanmar were signed in 2003 (Walsh and Ty, 2011). In principle, under the MOUs, Thai employers have their need for migrants verified by Thai authorities. Origin country governments then recruit and select migrants to fill these positions and issue them passports so that they can receive entry visas at the appropriate Thai embassy or consulate. Migrants travel to Thailand, report to their Thai employers, and receive two-year work permits that can be renewed one time. They are then entitled to the same wages as Thai workers (Molland, 2012). However, deploying a worker from any of the MOU-sending countries is a complicated process involving workers, employers, recruitment agencies on both sides of the border, as well as provincial and central level labor ministries in both the origin countries and in Thailand. In addition, as part of the MOUs, proper brokerage, which was designed to facilitate the movement of migrants under the broad umbrella of bilateral agreements, has been promoted in many recruitment companies. The argument is that this labor movement combines a modern bureaucracy with personalized patron-client relationships with no distinction between the public and private spheres and so is susceptible to systemic corruption (Un and So, 2011).

The present study aims to explore migrants' experiences by focusing on the regularizing of temporary migration under the framework for bilateral agreement, which encourages Cambodian labor migrants and their families to make rational choices according to recognizable rules under which resources are distributed. Research consisted of in-depth interviews with migrants, their family members, brokers, and recruitment agencies. The findings are of fundamental importance to recommendations for the development of a policy framework for future consideration.

Literature Review of Migration between Cambodia and Thailand

Over the past two decades, more than a million people from Cambodia have migrated into Thailand because of a variety of pull and push factors. As of March 2018, 390,840 Cambodians had registered to work in Thailand via the nationality verification process, the MOU process, or as daily and seasonal workers permitted by agreements between governors of border provinces in Cambodia and Thailand (International Organization for Migration, 2019).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these migration flows were linked with complex exchanges and opportunities associated with the global trade in commodities. Wars and major economic shifts reduced movements in the 1930s and 1940s, and by the 1970s labor migration flows had resumed a significant role in the region's geopolitics, coinciding with the independent Southeast Asian states' greater integration into the global economy, the redistribution and relocation of manufacturing production to the region, and regional labor shortages (Kaur, 2010).

International labor migration in Southeast Asia and migration between Cambodia and Thailand has been the subject of a vast amount of academic literature in the past twenty years. The common push factors in a sending country are low productivity, unemployment, poor economic conditions, and lack of opportunities for advancement. Opportunities for better employment, high wages, facilities, better working conditions, and attractive amenities are pull factors in a receiving country (Cassarino, 2004). Migrants, most of whom are in search of employment, either voluntarily or involuntarily move to a new country (Buller et al., 2015). In Cambodia, insufficient work opportunities, increasing landlessness, joblessness, and indebtedness as well as the growing youth population, cultural similarities, language, and daily wage rates are the significant push factors driving decisions to migrate to Thailand, particularly for low-skilled workers looking for employment (Walsh and Ty, 2011; Buller et al., 2015; Dickson and Koenig, 2016).

To explore the migration phenomenon, development studies migration theory has historically relied on optimization assumptions: individuals seek to maximize their income by migrating from a labor surplus in rural areas to urban destinations for more remunerative wage employment. In the 1980s, this model was directed at households rather than individuals as the decision-making unit for analysis (Todaro, 1969). The increasing complexity of the migration phenomenon from the late 20th century has meant that the processes of global economic change have generated conditions for the emergence of displaced labor, which reflect the diverse dimensions of migration and other drivers beyond economic factors. There are differences in motivation for migration, the context of decision-making, and the impact of migration. These changing contextual factors mean that the application of previous theories is not sufficient to allow an understanding of migration in the new millennium. The study of migration in recent years has, therefore, shifted focus to the study of migration dynamics and includes a concentration on both micro-and macro-analyses. It also includes the study of interactions of social, economic, and political structures, the role of households, social networks, and individual decisions (Constant and Massey, 2005; Faist, 2010; Castles, 2010; Nurick and Hak, 2019). Applying the concept of circular and cumulative causation as suggested by Massey (1990), this study views international labor migration as a unified social process with individual decisions and actions being conditioned by contextual factors (structural forces) operating at each stage of migration. In addition, in view of the fact that most of the recent research on migration from Cambodia to Thailand is based on research conducted in Thailand, where fear of employers and officials sometimes hinders forthright answers, research in this study was conducted through in-depth interviews in Cambodia in the Cambodian language. The study seeks to answer this key research question: What are the experiences of Cambodian migrants in navigating the process of leaving Cambodia to settle in Thailand?

Research Methodology

This study used qualitative case study methodology, carrying out in-depth interviews and observation in four provinces in Cambodia. Face-to-face interviews with migrants and migrants' families were conducted in three provinces, namely Siem Reap, Battambang, and Pursat, from which a high number of migrants, particularly those going to Thailand, originate. Brokers and recruitment agencies were interviewed in Poipet. Semi-structured, in-depth interview guidelines were developed covering interview themes, such as motivations for migration, migrant support, benefits of migration, decision-making, migration experiences, and realization of and information concerning future plans. The guidelines were translated into the native languages of the migrants and the interviewers translated their questions into the respondents' language where appropriate during the interview.

Data were collected from April to August 2017, with a purposefully selected sample of participants, key informants, and in-depth personal interviews. Each interview lasted between 40 and 60 minutes and was conducted by two researchers, one conducting the interview, and the other taking notes. The interviews were audio-recorded with consent, then transcribed, translated, and coded manually. The interviews were conducted in Khmer and recorded and transcribed into English. This study relied mainly on NVivo 8 software for its analysis. The initial findings of the research were presented and discussed with the research team. The interview data were analyzed using a flexible thematic analysis approach based on prior knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This allowed the researcher to identify and analyze interview passages that were linked by a common theme and categorize them in order to address the main research question.

Research Findings

There were a total of 127 respondents as follows: migrant workers (60), household members (62), recruitment agencies (2), and brokers (3).

The migrant workers were recruited and identified on the basis of provincial-level administration and the employment sector and purposive sampling based on migrant profiles, including migration status, gender, age, and sector of employment. Table 1 summarizes the number of interviewees classified by type, place of origin and gender.

Table 1 Number of interviewees classified by type, place of origin, and gender

Type of interviewees	Place of origin and gender of interviewees										
	Siem Reap		Battambang		Pursat		Poipet		Total		Grand
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Total
Migrant	12	8	5	15	11	9	-	-	28	32	60
Migrant family	7	15	3	17	3	17	-	-	13	49	62
Broker	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	-	3	-	3
Recruitment agency	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	-	2	-	2
Grand Total	19	23	8	32	14	26	5	-	46	81	127

Migrant workers were recruited and identified on the basis of work sector and provincial level administration through purposive sampling. Of the total, 60 migrants were interviewed. Table 2 provides the characteristics for the data collected from each migrant. Forty-seven percent of interviewees were 26-35 years old, with 35 percent over the age of 35. Over 62 percent of migrants interviewed were married, with 28 percent being single. The construction sector accounted for 42 percent of migrants’ work sector and a significant proportion also worked in services. Only 7 percent of migrants reported that they had no schooling, with 22 percent having attained Grade 5 or less. Most of those interviewed had some form of documentation, with 60 percent having full documentation. About 25 percent of respondents migrated through the MOU process and 22 percent held a passport, work permit, and MOU documentation.

In the following section, some key results will be presented.

Table 2 Characteristics of migrants interviewed

Characteristics		Percent
Age	18-25	18
	26-35	47
	Over 35	35
Total		100
Marital status	Single	28
	Married	62
	Divorced	10
Total		100
Sector	Construction	42
	Agriculture	15
	Domestic work	1
	Services	42
Total		100
Level of education	None	7
	Grade 1	7
	Grade 2	13
	Grade 3	10
	Grade 4	22
	Grade 5	12
	Grade 6	12
	Grade 7	13
	Grade 8	2
	Grade 9	3
Total		100
Migration status	Migrated through MOU with passport and work permit	25
	Border pass	17
	Pink card holder registered with One-Stop Service Centre and MOU processing	22
	Pink cardholder not registered with One-Stop Service Centre	5
	Passport with visa on arrival, no work visa or work permit	32
Total		100

Reasons for Migration

There are several reasons Cambodian people migrate to work in Thailand. These include the lack of local employment opportunities, debts, health costs, costs of house building or renovation, crop failures, and the encouragement of relatives and neighbors.

The majority of the participants shared their problems of being poor, lacking land for rice cultivation, and the high input costs for production as key factors for migrating to Thailand. For those who have rice fields for cultivation, they used chemical fertilizers and pesticides, which are costly and often produce low yields. Some reported having as little as 1,600 m² of land, which is not enough to cultivate for household needs. Flood and drought regularly destroyed their rice and other crops. There was also the impact of agricultural machinery that replaced labor as large-scale farmers use machines to transplant and harvest rice, rather than human labor as in the past. Some others reported not having sufficient agricultural implements to cultivate their land. The stories of the following two married women are typical.

We were in debt because we bought chemical fertilizer for the rice field. My husband and I discussed whether we should migrate to Thailand in order to work to earn the money to repay the loan. (Fa [Pseudonym], 2018)

My father decided to let me go to work in Thailand because of debts. He had borrowed money from a private moneylender to pay back a micro-finance loan, and then he used the micro-finance loan to pay back a private moneylender. He had to lie to the micro-finance agency saying that he would use the loan for doing business and buying pigs. (Ma [Pseudonym], 2018)

Debt to private moneylenders, micro-finance institutions (MFIs), and banks was the major reason for migration. Examples of debts that justified leaving Cambodia included the following: a) rice cultivation

using resources such as water pumps, fertilizer, and hired labor; b) loans for children's weddings and for funeral expenses; and c) health expenses for parents and children. Some migrants borrowed up to 6,000,000 million riels (about US \$1,500). Some went on to say that their debt was about 100,000 to 150,000 baht (about \$3,000 to \$4,600). Some others owed MFIs and private lenders as much as \$10,000 dollars. Some borrowed from private moneylenders at interest rates of 10 percent per month. They continued to get loans from MFIs and banks, and they borrowed money from private moneylenders to pay the MFIs, but the debts still remained.

For employment, they lacked the monetary resources to start up a business in their village, and they expected to earn enough money from migration to be able to return home and start a business to support their children. Others mentioned the low wages that they earned, generally 20,000 riels (about \$5 per day), and in some cases, like that of unskilled construction workers, got only 16,000 riels (about \$4), which they felt could not cover their daily household expenses. Others engaged in wage work on corn and bean farms, but still had low incomes. Another factor was irregular pay and the unclear roles assigned to them in Cambodia. For example, a person who spent two months doing construction work received only the first month's wages, others did trash cleaning and collection (400,000 riels or \$100 per month) as well as agricultural wage work. Another example is a person who worked in Kampong Som province for two months and received only 100,000 riels (about \$25). Jobs were available in Cambodia, but the problem was low wages and hard work. In other cases, they were asked to do tasks outside their regular jobs, for example being asked by the boss to wash his car, wash the dishes, and do his laundry.

The Journey to Thailand

The process of travelling to and obtaining work in Thailand is very complicated. Cambodian migrants deciding to migrate illegally inevitably face numerous challenges. The majority of illegal migrants

are contacted by and pay money to informal guides or are assisted by relatives who have experience living in Thailand. The biggest challenge migrants face is that when they contact informal guides, they have to follow their instructions and pay them. Migrants following an informal guide have to wait until night to walk along small paths to cross the border. Then they face the problem of hunger because there is no place to buy food in the jungle. It is even worse if they get arrested by the police. Normally, if the police come, the informal guide abandons the migrants in the forest. Sometimes migrants have to travel in cars full of people along informal roads. Some migrants have to remain anxiously in the forest for two or three days without food and water.

Once the migrants arrive safely in Thailand, the business owners come and transport them to the workplace. Many migrants stated that once they arrived at the workplace they started working as soon as possible. Sometimes, however, they were too sick to work after their journey. One of the most serious problems is when migrants get arrested for not having the required documents, in which case they are sent to jail for three months and then returned to Cambodia.

Data interviews show that Cambodian migrants who leave their hometown and go to the Cambodia-Thailand border mostly pass through Poipet, Ban Laem, Phsar Prum, Sampov Loun, Obei Choan, O Smach, and Boeng Reang. A significant number of migrants who decide to migrate illegally go through Ban Laem, Phsar Prum, Pallin, Boeng Reang, Sampov Loun, Obei Choan, and O Smach. The majority of them have friends and relatives who have experience in living in Thailand. They pay informal brokers to help them cross into the country. They stay two to three nights in the forest and wait until night time, then walk along small paths across the border. The illegal brokers arrange accommodation in Thailand for them before they continue on to their workplaces in Bangkok, Sisaket, or Pathum Thani. Those who decide to migrate legally go from Poipet, Cambodia to Sa Kaeo, Thailand, and then on to their workplace. Figure 1 shows Cambodian migrants' routes to Thailand based on interviews from April to August 2017.

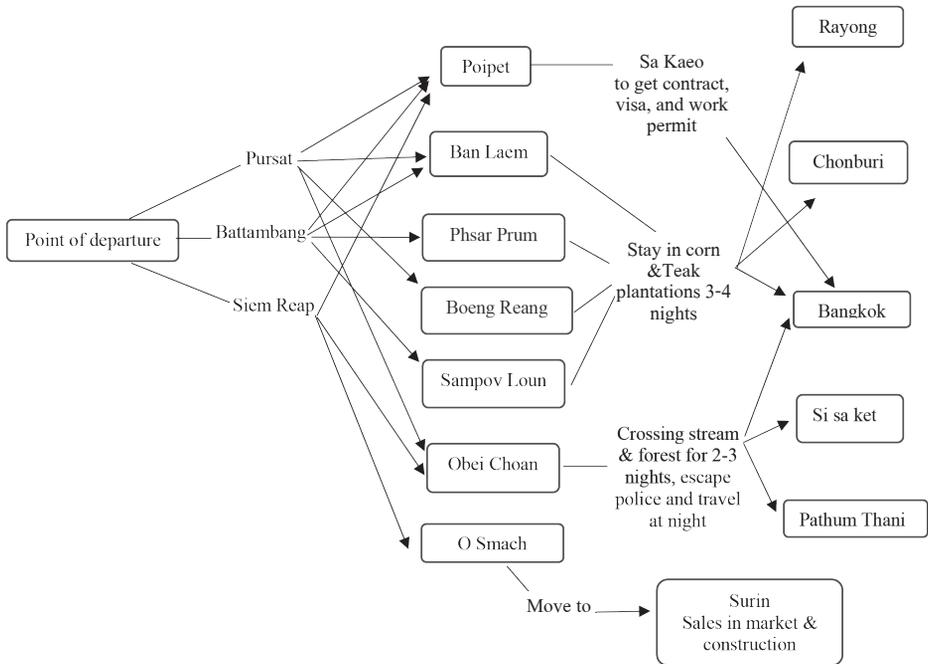


Figure 1 Cambodian migrants' routes to Thailand based on interviews in April to August 2017

However, with the greater efforts made by the Thai government to regularize migration under the framework for bilateral agreements, illegal crossing migration is becoming riskier. Interviews from the brokers and recruitment agencies provide examples.

It's very difficult for all of the brokers. A lot of brokers need to stop doing this business. The illegal border crossing has been closed especially on the Thai side where it is difficult to cross. Thai brokers as well as drivers are afraid of heavy punishment. Now I think migrants will have more and more legal documents and travel through formal border checkpoints. (Man [Pseudonym], 2018)

Since the migrant management law was implemented and it's very strict, I told the migrants to get the legal documents, such as a border pass, or passport, but some of them didn't understand, or didn't believe. They kept wanting to go via the illegal route. (Tan [Pseudonym], 2018)

I think in the future, workers will come through MOUs but the problem I see now is that the original country is so slow in processing the documents and does not prepare them properly for the workers before they depart. One suggestion is to reduce the cost of applying through MOUs. Right now it is 18,000-22,000 baht via a broker agency, the service fee is variable, but I don't know why. (Karn [Pseudonym], 2018)

Departure Arrangements

Parents played a key role in taking care of grandchildren, supporting travel expenses, and providing advice to migrants. Many respondents sought support to facilitate migration through both legal and illegal agencies. However, it is clear from the data that most relied on brokers who were known through relatives, which made them seem more trustworthy. Some brokers offered interest-free loans (of up to a million riels or \$250), to be returned on commencement of employment in Thailand. Relatives and siblings already working in Thailand also provided important support.

Many migrants chose to work in provinces bordering Thailand with a document known as a border pass. Normally, the cost is about 2,500 baht (about \$80), but some of them paid only 1,900 baht (about \$60) or less through their networks.

Interestingly, migrants said that Thai employers often helped to extend the duration of border passes, so that migrants could continue to work with them. Generally, the border pass can be extended at any border gate three times every six days, and a migrant would pay 300 baht (about \$10) for a one-month extension. Some managed to obtain

health cards by paying 1,000 baht (about \$30) and whenever they got sick, they simply paid 30 baht (about \$1) each time they went to the public hospitals or health centers in Thailand.

In order to work in the central and other provinces of Thailand, the majority of migrants were aware of all required documents. For the passport, the fees are between \$300 and \$500, depending on the period. There was confusion among the migrants, as some believed that paying \$250 for a ten-year valid passport would enable them to work in Thailand for ten years, but when they arrived at the workplace they realized that a visitors' passport did not allow them to work, and they ended up trying to get a work permit in Thailand, which cost them more than 10,000 baht (about \$300). The migrants who went to Thailand for the first time were helped by brokers all the way from the village to the workplace until they met the employers, who covered the initial expenses and then asked for repayment later. However, there are cases in which the migrant went initially without a card or a passport and was forced to return home.

I first came and worked without documents. But later on, my employer helped me to get them. Now that I have the docs, they allowed me to do them via MOUs, so I returned to Ban Laem and went to Sa Kaeo province to get training. My employer paid 18,500 baht for this legal document but deducted 3,000 baht per month from my salary. It's finished now, no more deductions. (Porn [Pseudonym], 2018)

Decisions to migrate without documents are rational decisions based on the difficulties in getting passports in Cambodia, which can take several years if applicants are not willing to pay bribes to officials at the passport office to facilitate the process.

It is very expensive in Cambodia. I was cheated when I applied for my passport in Cambodia, they charged me \$250 and told me this passport was for 10 years. But when I went to Thailand, I showed my passport to the business owner I was to work for and he told me that it was a visitor passport. In Cambodia, they

told me a lie. Therefore, I paid for my work visa again in Thailand. It cost me more than 10,000 baht (\$320). Now, the passport and work visa cost 25,000 baht (\$800). We are poor. For me, I spend just a little money to cross the border and get stamped at the border. It's cheaper. (Pa [Pseudonym], 2018)

The Cost of Migration

The participants in the study indicated that there are substantial differences in costs between going through informal and formal recruiters to get into Thailand legally. For Cambodian workers, where private recruitment agencies are the primary agents facilitating the process at the origin site, migrating for work under the MOUs requires approximately a three-month time period and a total expense of between \$250 and \$600. These costs are typically borne by the migrant workers through a combination of upfront payments and payroll deductions, with the services of a Thai private employment agency to complete the bureaucratic hurdles on the receiving end.

Migrants borrow money from banks, micro-finance institutions, and relatives in order to obtain passports and visas, and also pay their informal guides. If the migrants do not have enough money to prepare their documents or pay their informal guides, the business owner normally provides loans to them.

Since the fees are rather high, some migrants decide to migrate illegally through brokers or their relatives and spend about \$60 to \$150 to get through checkpoints and to cover the costs of transportation and food along the way. Table 3 illustrates some of the costs associated with the formal recruitment of labor migrants as described by the study's interviewees.

Table 3 Breakdown of costs in formal recruitment for labor migrants

Item	Expenses on Thai side (US\$) (\$1=31 Thai baht)	Expenses on Cambodia side (US\$) (\$1=31 Thai baht)
Medical examination	16	
Social security (5 percent per month for 2 years)	16	161
Work permit	61	
Passport and Visa		129-258
Thai Visa		97-161
- Single entry	32	
- Multiple entry	119	
Employment service fee		97-161
- Work permit form		
- Training and orientation session		
Total cost	277	484
Traveling cost	Based on place of origin	Based on place of origin

Migrants are well aware of the fact that recruitment agencies are considerably more expensive than informal migration channels, but they have no choice because these agencies are the only way to migrate legally, as the following example illustrates.

I didn't get cheated. But I borrowed money from someone in my village. For example, for 1,000 baht, I need to pay an interest rate of 100 baht, and he knew that the money I borrowed is for my trip to Thailand. It has taken several months already but I paid back 20,000 baht. My husband has been working many years in Thailand and he knows the place very well, so it's better for us to go with him. He did not want to do a legal working document because it's too expensive and you have to wait so long in order to get to the job. (Ta [Pseudonym], 2018)

Working and Living Conditions

Most migrant workers were allowed to live at the workplace dormitory where all services were provided by the employer. However, in-depth interviews with migrants revealed that good living conditions depend on agreements with the employer and whether he/she respects the law. Generally, the migrants stayed in crowded rental rooms in order to save money and have funds to send back to their families in Cambodia. For those who were living alone, it was unsafe for them but they had felt they had little choice. The majority of migrants wanted the employer to give them an on-site dormitory with or without charge because they believed that it would be more secure than living outside in rental rooms.

Both Thai workers and migrant workers come under the scope of the Labor Protection Act of 1998, which guarantees a national minimum wage. By law, migrant workers should be fully informed about their benefits. Some of the participants reported not receiving full information and believed that what was offered was much more desirable than in their home countries because of their lack of skill and their poor education. The wage rates varied based on employers, the nationality of migrants, employment sectors, provinces, and specific occupations. They ranged from 141 to 184 baht per day. Some migrants stated that employers gave them more benefits than required by law.

The company arranged the rooms for me and my workers, five rooms for 10 workers. The company provided a free room for two or three people or with their family, and charged 25 baht/month for garbage service, one living room, together with cooking, no separate bathroom for men and women. (Bom [Pseudonym], 2018)

I earned 300 baht per day and with overtime, I can earn around 12,000-13,000 baht per month. I spent approximately 5,000 baht per month for food and other expenses and sent 7,000 baht home through my employer. I called my wife to tell her to get it from a money exchange shop or sometimes through the bank where

my relative works. My wife always called me when she got the money and I called her after my employer called me to say that he sent money to her with the amount of money sent. With the money that I sent, my wife managed to pay for construction materials, labor costs, and workers to have a house built. The rest my wife and son spent for food and living expenses. This house cost more than \$7,000, it was a lot of money. I saved for at least three years for this house construction while I stayed with my employer. (Ball [Pseudonym], 2018)

Remittances

Earning relatively large sums of money by working in Thailand can be considered the main priority for migrants. For this reason, remittances play a major role for Cambodian migrants and help support their families in their home country. The majority of migrants who work in Thailand leave their children in Cambodia with their parents or other relatives and send remittances for food and to use in emergency situations. The remittance can also be used to pay off debts owed to banks/MFIs/relatives. Additionally, some migrants send their money to their home country to save for investments, such as land purchases, small business investments, farm vehicles, and building materials. Some of the migrants in this study reported that sending money to their children for schooling should be prioritized, so that the children would have better opportunities than they have had. The majority of migrants stated that they sent at least 40 percent of their salary as remittance to their family in their home country. However, there were still some migrants who could not manage to earn enough to send back home because of low pay and high costs, including those of loans. Some migrants sent remittances to their family more often than others, depending on their salary. Regardless of the amount of salary, most of the migrants indicated that they sent money to their family twice per year (during the Khmer New Year and the Phchum Ben festival).

Nowadays, there are many ways to send remittances. The most common way is through Kasikorn Thai Bank because many money transfer agencies in Cambodia, including Wings and Hatha Kaksekar, are co-partners with this bank. The migrants found it more convenient to send their money through banks and they alerted their family members or relatives in Cambodia to come to pick the money up from Cambodian transfer agencies. However, sending money from Thailand with their relatives who were leaving to return to Cambodia constituted the most cost-effective method and was considered safer than using brokers. Normally, sending remittances through banks costs 100 baht per 10,000 baht. Many migrants found it more helpful and convenient to send money through banking agencies.

Returning Home

The vast majority of respondents reported returning home for Khmer New Year and Phchum Ben (Ancestors' Day) holidays to visit family and friends for a short period – typically three to six days. Other reasons to return home included to participate in national elections or ceremonies, deal with homesickness, and join family celebrations such as weddings and house openings. There are no official Thai employer prohibitions on returning home. A significant group of respondents cited insufficient financial means or inadequate financial security as the primary reasons they chose not to return home to visit family. Some of them worked continuously in Thailand without direct family contact for two to three years, largely due to the cost of traveling from the workplace to their hometown. Below are two examples.

I went back twice a year to take care of my parents, pay debts, and visit relatives. I returned by myself, without needing a broker because I had legal documents. I paid 300 baht for travel to the border. I had no risk when I returned. (Bell [Pseudonym], 2018)

I went just one time to visit when I had the legal work documents. I went with a relative. I called the pickup truck to pick me up and take me to the border and paid 450 baht. From the border to my home town I paid 100 baht for the car taxi. No risks during my return as I have the legal docs, but on the way to the checkpoint the border police asked me to pay 100 baht (normally the police ask for money from migrant workers during the visit to Cambodia before Songkran). No one has any idea why we need to pay. (Pat [Pseudonym], 2018)

The main driver of migration for migrants was indebtedness. Their motivation to migrate emanated from a variety of issues, including lack of sufficient crop yield from farms/income to purchase food and the inability to pay school fees, medical bills, or to clear debts. Many migrants aspired to improve their lives through migration beyond managing their debt. Nevertheless, migrants expressed a deep wish to achieve the overarching goal of re-settling in Cambodia.

Conclusions

In the past two and half decades, Thailand's economic growth has generated employment opportunities and absorbed millions of workers from other countries, mainly from the Mekong sub-region. Cambodian people, especially unskilled laborers, have benefited from this important opportunity by getting regular jobs that bring in income for their families back home. Many Cambodians migrated to work in Thailand because of several push factors in Cambodia, including the lack of employment opportunities; rising debts to private money lenders, banks, and MFIs; rising health costs; hope for earning income for house building or renovation; having small land plots and crop failures; and encouragement from relatives and neighbors who already work or worked in Thailand.

The majority of the work that Cambodian migrants are involved in is the construction industry and service sectors. The networks that

exist amongst Cambodian migrants and employers can help them shift from one type of work to another in search of better pay and working conditions.

In the past, migrants decided to go to Thailand undocumented through the support of brokers and they had to pay about US\$ 80 per person to cross the border and reach the workplace.

However, according to this study, in recent years, due to strict measures taken by the Thai government to prevent employers from accepting migrants without documents as well as increased public awareness, they have started getting the required documents, including border passes, passports, work permits, and others. Employers, brokers, and recruitment agencies in Thailand play a role in preparing documents for migrants.

Depending on the connections that the migrants had, they paid different amounts, but not without any challenges. Some prospective migrants experienced cheating in Cambodia during the processing of their documents. In addition, because they did not have a complete understanding of each type of document and its purpose, they mistakenly tried to use passports rather than work visas for working purposes. The formal procedures for migration between Cambodia and Thailand are relatively complex and time consuming, and the majority of Cambodian migrants have used agencies to assist them, adding to the cost of migration. According to the interview data, there are substantial differences in costs between informal and formal recruiters.

Remittances were used to pay off debt to the banks/MFIs/relatives, to support family at home, and to assist parents in emergencies such as health problems or children's needs. Other uses included savings in order to buy land, future small business investment, and farm vehicles. Generally, migrants could remit substantially from their salary to their parents or relatives at home, and they did so twice a year – for the Khmer New Year and the Phchum Ben festival. However, the most common way to remit was through Kasikorn Thai Bank as it has links to local money transfer agencies in Cambodia.

From this study, it is clear that an increasing number of migrants have become more aware of laws and regulations. Getting a job in Thailand appears not to be problematic because of networks of friends and relatives who have already worked in Thailand. As policy mechanisms become more strongly enforced, access for migrant workers will be easier in the future. This can lead to the well-being of migrants and their families and ultimately offer mutual development benefits for both countries.

Exploring the migrants' choices about migration and migration journeys is essential to more effective policymaking on migration. The migrant decision-making processes and experiences should serve as information for future guidelines.

The findings of the study indicate that migration systems are generally composed of the governance system, which is also coordinated by migrants, migrant families, agencies and employers working together through bilateral labor agreements and governing migration between the two countries. An investment in hands-on public awareness of documentation and trusted channels is needed so that prospective migrants and their families can be fully informed before making the decision to migrate. There need to be laws and standards in both the sending country and the receiving country (Thailand) which specify the costs and duration of the process to import labor, and this information should be publicly disseminated to the relevant offices/agencies/personnel in both countries.

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