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Vulnerability and Migration in Cambodia

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Following the drought associated with the 2015/2016 El Niño event, the World Food Programme (WFP), together with the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), and in collaboration with the National Committee for Disaster Management (NCDM) conducted a national household survey in May 2016 to better understand how households are impacted by and recover from shocks, their risks and vulnerabilities, and how their resilience can be built. A subsequent round of the national household survey was conducted in December 2016. This report is based mainly on the December 2016 survey (and to a lesser extent, the May 2016 survey) together with secondary data.

This report was prepared by Kimchoeun Pak, an independent researcher, based on analysis by Sodany Saing, an independent analyst. Additional analysis, inputs and review were provided by World Food Programme staff, namely Yav Long, Chanvibol Choeur, Jonathan Rivers, Kurt Burja, Indira Bose and Francesca Erdelmann. The report was designed by Chamroeun Chim and Ratanak Leng. Data collection was done by SBK Research and Development. Technical review was provided by Brett Dickson from the International Organization for Migration.

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Executive summary

With a young population and fast economic growth, Cambodia has experienced a big and rising wave of migration, both within and to outside the country. This report provides new data and analysis to generate a better and updated understanding on the trends, drivers and impacts that migration has created so far, with a focus on rural vulnerability. The findings presented by the report also contribute to the future strategy on food security and nutrition in Cambodia. The findings are based on a household survey which was conducted in December 2016 with a total of 2,341 rural households in all 24 provinces (160 villages) in the country.

For the period of 2010-2016, the data shows about 35 percent of the households in rural areas report having at least 1 member migrating. Plateau areas, however, have the lowest percentage of households with a migrant (17 percent). The duration of migration varied: 33 percent of migrant households report that migration is short-term/seasonal (6 months or shorter), 43 percent report it is long term (6 months to 3 years) and 24 percent report it is permanent (longer than 3 years). In terms of destination, rural-rural migration accounts for 13 percent, rural-urban 57 percent and cross border (mostly Thailand) for 31 percent, of total migration. Phnom Penh is the most preferred option for both permanent and long-term migrants, while migration to Thailand has been high not only for long-term but also seasonal and permanent migration.

Four out of five (79 percent) migrants are aged between 17 to 35 years old. More than 50 percent of them are men (mostly, sons of the household heads). However, for households that have more than 1 migrant, the chance that the second and third migrants are women (mostly the daughters of the household heads) become higher. The gender of the migrants did not make any difference to the duration of migration. The preferred destination among all migrants, regardless of gender, is Phnom Penh. However, the proportion of women migrants going to Phnom Penh is higher than the proportion of men, while the proportion of men going to Thailand is higher than the proportion of women. Men migrants are about five times more likely than women migrants to work as construction workers, while women migrants are about four times more likely than men migrants to work as factory workers. Only women are reported to have engaged in domestic work. Other types of work, however, do not display substantial gender differences.

The type of work differs by destination. 30 percent of those going to Thailand are reported to be working as construction workers and 23 percent as agricultural workers, while the largest proportion of migrants to Phnom Penh work as factory workers and in construction. There is no strong correlation between migrants' work and/or what they did before migrating and what they do at the destination. About 78 percent of households having one or more migrants reported that their migrated members send back remittances.

About 6 percent of the migrants are reported to have faced some safety issues. Migrant and non-migrant households are similar in terms of family size (on average 5 people), number of income earners (on average 2), and number and types of income generation activities. However, they differ on two important economic aspects: (i) migrant households have 1.7 ha of land on average compared to 3.5 ha for non-migrant households. This difference is more pronounced for the Tonle Sap and Plain areas; and (ii) the annual income of migrant households accounts for 61 percent of their annual expenditure per capita, while it is 87 percent for non-migrant households. This indicates that a proportion of the expenditure of migrant households are likely to be covered by remittances. About 55 percent of both migrant and non-migrant households report having debts.

As to what drives migration, the data suggests that poverty (exacerbated by natural disasters) might have pushed people to out-migrate, especially when those migrant households have insufficient land to engage in farming and high expenditures that cannot be covered by their income. The data, however, also suggests that, at least over time, poverty might have become less a factor compared to a combination of key pull and facilitating factors, such as the prospect of higher income generation opportunities, better connectivity, mobility, and youth's overall aspiration to live a life outside of their villages.

The impacts of migration are varied. On one hand, migration has helped young people get higher paying jobs in the cities and abroad to support themselves and, in most cases, their families back in the provinces. Migrants, through mobile phones and other forms of communication, have been able to regularly contact their families back home. However, a few key concerns are worth noting. The first, as indicated in other studies, is the limited impact that migration has made on skill development of the migrants. The second is migration potentially leading to school drop-out and its negative impact on children brought along. The third is the safety and vulnerability status of the migrants, both those coming to the cities and to other countries.

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