

Demographic and Economic Profile of Returned Migrant Labourers*

1. Overview

Following the outbreak of violence along the Cambodia–Thailand border on 24 July 2025, around 910,000 migrant labourers returned home by 11 August 2025, losing their main source of income. A clear picture of returnees' demographic and economic profiles is essential for designing timely and effective support measures.

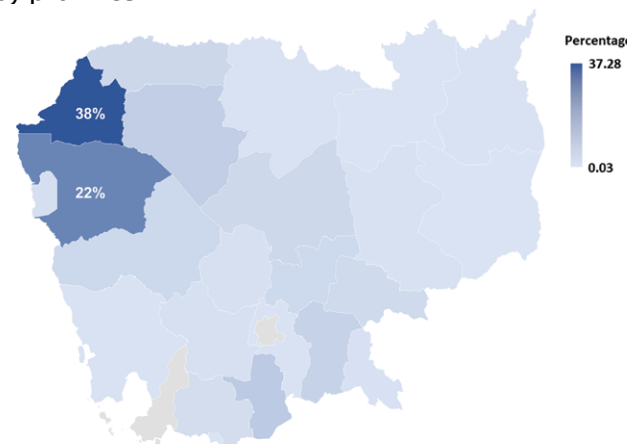
2. Facts

- 1.1 million Cambodian migrant labourers were estimated to be in Thailand based on the 2023 Cambodia Socio-Economic Survey (CSES). The true number of migrants is likely higher after accounting for families that migrated to Thailand in full.

Migrant Profile

- Gender:** 50.8% male, 49.2% female.
- Age:** 96% are between 18 and 40 years old.
- Education:** Most have low levels of formal schooling.
 - 57% have some primary education.
 - 36% have some secondary education.
 - 4.3% have no schooling.
 - <1% have higher education or vocational training.
- Origin:** Over 70% of the return migrants are from provinces bordering Thailand, such as Banteay Meanchey, Battambang, Preah Vihear, Oddar Meanchey, and Pailin (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Geographic distribution of migrant labourers, by province

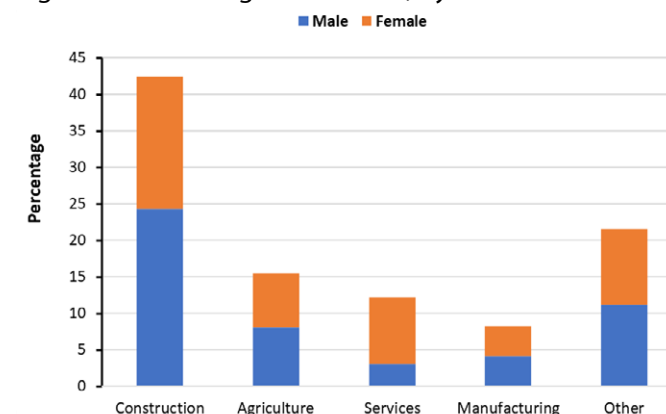


Source: CSES 2023

- Remittances:** Migration to Thailand is common and relatively easy, especially from Banteay Meanchey and Battambang. However, the annual remittances per household member are not significant compared to local remittances - about USD650 from Thailand versus USD450 locally. By contrast, the few Cambodians who migrate to Korea send much higher remittances (USD3,000 per member).
- Past employment:** Migrant labourers primarily worked in construction (42%), agriculture (15%), services (12%) and manufacturing (8%) in Thailand (Figure 2).
- Approximately 30% of migrant households are classified as poor according to poverty estimates derived from household consumption data. This is nearly double the national poverty average of 19%. If returned migrants are assumed to be unemployed and contribute no income while increasing

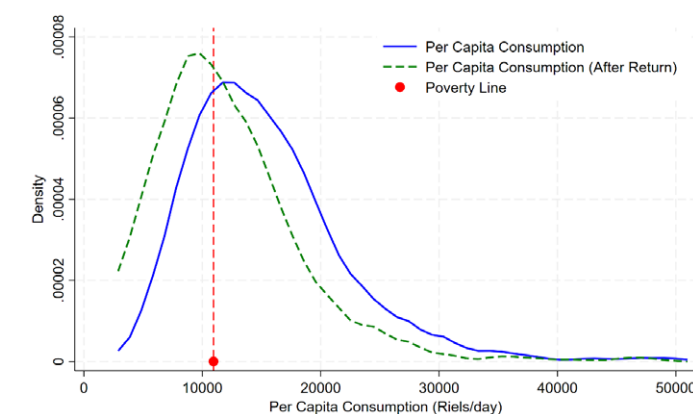
household consumption, the poverty rate among migrant households could rise to around 50% (Figure 3).

Figure 2: Sex of migrant workers, by sector



Source: CSES 2023

Figure 3: Distribution of per capita consumption before and after return migration, relative to the poverty line



Source: CSES 2023; author's estimation based on consumption density analysis

3. Challenges

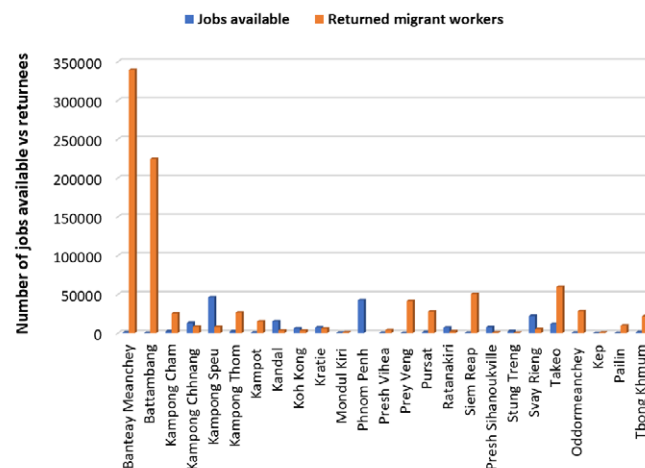
- As of 10 August 2025, the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training (MLVT) reported that about 190,000 jobs were available across Cambodia, mostly in manufacturing and services.
- 80% of available jobs are in six provinces where internal migration is already high, including Kampong Speu, Phnom Penh, Svay Rieng, Kandal, Kampong Chhnang, and Takeo. Few jobs are available in the migrants' provinces of origin, creating a **geographic mismatch** (Figure 4).
- This means an estimated 720,000 individuals may be left without employment.**
- Adding to the economic pressure, 31% of Cambodian households with migrant members held loans averaging USD5,000 and their prior remittances were insufficient to make interest payments.
- More than half of all migrant labourers were previously employed in construction or agriculture - sectors that are now experiencing weak domestic demand. This **sectoral mismatch** compounds the geographic mismatch issue.

Table 1: Amount of agricultural land per member for households with migrants

Province	Return migrant workers	Projected population	< 1 ha/member	1 – 5 ha/member
Banteay Meanchey	339,248	974,934	76.7%	23.3%
Battambang	224,406	1,131,308	89.4%	10.6%
Oddar Meanchey	28,183	317,391	90.1%	9.9%
Preah Vihear	3,658	295,692	100.0%	0.0%
Pailin	9,546	85,760	72.0%	28.0%
Total	605,041	2,805,085	-	-

Sources: NIS-MOP, Cambodia Population Projection 2020–2033, CSES 2023.

Figure 4: Jobs available in relation to returned migrant workers, by province



Source: MLVT and CSES 2023

4. Policy solutions

- If the 910,000 migrant labourers find domestic employment, there will be a large positive significant impact on GDP, increasing the employed labour force by nearly 10%.
- The geographic mismatch between location of economic opportunities and origin of migrant labourers means that facilitating internal migration must be a core part of the response strategy.
- To support return migrants, especially those who are low-skilled, TVET funds can be used for short-term

training. This will buy time for the labour market to generate new jobs while simultaneously increasing workers' long-term economic potential through skills development.

- 30% of migrant households were poor and in debt. Without social protections, a spell of unemployment will further worsen their living conditions. The government can consider identifying and prioritizing support for these households through IDPoor. A temporary rural public works programme could be an alternative or complement to cash transfers.
- Migrant labourers with agricultural experience from Thailand who want to continue in the sector and do not want to engage in traditional paddy farming because it provides insufficient income have two main options:
 - Self-employment:** 10–20% of migrant households in the main origin provinces have 1–2 hectares or more of land (Table 1). For these households, higher-value farming, like vegetables and fruits, is a viable option.
 - Formal employment:** For the 80% of migrants with less than one hectare of land per household member, employment in industry, commercial farms, or agro-processing may be more appropriate. Government and private sector collaboration is needed to develop such opportunities.

* This note is part of the larger report prepared in collaboration with ADB.



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