

# Policy Briefing

## Cambodia's Covid-19 Response and Migrant Workers

As in many Southeast Asian countries, the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic and policies to limit its spread greatly disrupted Cambodia's economy. Workers in Cambodia overwhelmingly operate in the informal sector and remittances from migrant workers abroad constitute a significant portion of the country's overall gross domestic product. This briefing examines Cambodia's Covid-19 response to highlight how knock-on effects have disproportionately impacted vulnerable migrants and informal domestic workers, including human-trafficking survivors. The government should provide social support to these vulnerable groups. Future efforts to manage Covid-19 must consider how they will affect the most vulnerable.

### Key messages

- Cambodia's efforts to prevent the spread of Covid-19 have been relatively successful. Businesses have not been subject to closures and stay-at-home orders that were either as widespread or long-lasting as in other countries. Nevertheless, authorities implemented periodic lockdown orders, travel restrictions within the country, and closures of national borders in sudden, unpredictable ways that disproportionately harmed migrants and informal domestic workers.
- Many displaced workers have not been able to access social support. Migrants were stranded abroad, unable either to continue working legally in host countries or to return to Cambodia. Workers on both sides of borders faced pressure to attempt illegal migration journeys, opening them to risk of exploitation and trafficking.

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## **Covid-19 response policies and enforcement**

The Cambodian government between 10 January 2020 and 31 December 2021 announced at least 2,200 policies related to Covid-19. Researchers consider that these policies often did not take account of the vulnerability of communities in border areas and at sea, or workers in informal sectors. The policies can be divided into four main categories: (1) curfews and restrictions on business operating hours; (2) suspension of domestic and international flights; (3) restrictions on individuals gathering; and (4) closures of schools and universities.

During the first year of the pandemic, Cambodia reported only 400 cases of Covid-19. This suggested the country might be undercounting cases, but also that in closing its borders and implementing targeted lockdowns its response was effective at keeping infection rates down and preventing the health-care system from being overwhelmed. However, Covid-19 infections spiked in 2021 as the Delta variant hit Southeast Asia. The government introduced harsh penalties for anyone breaking curfews and new lockdowns: up to three years in prison for breaking lockdown orders and up to 20 years for groups judged to be intentionally spreading the virus.

While light-touch response measures in the first year prevented excessive impacts on the most vulnerable, authorities implemented measures in the second year rapidly and without clear communications. In some cases,



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police used violence against people who left their homes and sometimes arrested residents for breaking Covid-19 containment measures. This compounded uncertainty among Cambodians; it panicked many and severely affected some of the most vulnerable people, about whom reports emerged that they were going hungry. Further, robust border closures in neighbouring countries – namely, Thailand and Vietnam – severely affected international migrants and communities in border areas.

A group of migrants we spoke to had been deported from Thailand and spent lockdown in their village. They noted severe hardships because of mobility restrictions. They could not sell local produce and even if they could have done, prices had fallen. To buy food, they had to negotiate with local officials to break lockdown rules. Local authorities struggled to implement the official Covid-19 response, since they faced pressure from their superiors to strictly enforce rules and from local people not to enforce them to their detriment. As well as revealing how the policies impacted vulnerable people living in villages, this shows how local officials implement policies: with significant levels of informality and contingent on negotiations.

## **The Covid-19 response and migrants**

Before the pandemic, an estimated 1.5 million Cambodian migrants were living and working in Thailand, about 40 per cent of whom were undocumented. Many migrants in Thailand lost their jobs and were required to leave the country, but there were few repatriation flights and many could not return home. In December 2021, Cambodia's National Committee for Counter Trafficking announced that since the start of the pandemic at least 260,000 Cambodian migrant workers had returned, mostly from Thailand, after a massive wave of job losses due to the closure of many industries. Many, though, chose or were forced to remain in Thailand as illegal migrants, whether they originally had legal migration status or not. Thousands clustered near the border, hiding in forests to avoid arrest, with no



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access to health-care or other services. Social workers we spoke to described a dreadful humanitarian situation in which people were also more vulnerable to contracting Covid-19.

Those migrants who returned to Cambodia struggled to find work, often competing with other domestic informal workers for a diminished supply of jobs. Many had gone abroad in the first place because of limited opportunities at home, often taking on debt to finance their journeys. Having returned, with already limited opportunities and unable to pay off debts, they became desperate.

We heard reports from migrants and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that, even as Cambodian migrants were being stranded abroad, workers were risking crossing illegally from Cambodia into Thailand and Vietnam with the help of brokers to find informal work in those countries. Desperation and the impossibility of legally migrating made many people vulnerable to dishonest brokers who were likely to traffic them rather than help them. Further, restrictions on mobility meant that counter-trafficking NGOs and officials were much less able to monitor trafficking or respond to victims.

### **Vulnerabilities of workers in the informal sector**

The vast majority of Cambodia's workforce (about 96 per cent) operate in the informal sector. Informal services including street food, restaurants, and rickshaw and taxi services were forced to stop operating during lockdowns and could not access compensation through policies meant to

help workers. For example, curfews severely negatively impacted informal businesses as they had predominantly operated during the evening, when the curfews were now in effect. This meant that within this group of workers, many were willing to risk crossing the border during the pandemic in search of employment elsewhere. Moreover, the pandemic continues to disproportionately impact women: 22 per cent of women in informal work are reportedly unemployed, compared with their male counterparts, at 13 per cent.

Border provinces and tourist hotspots suffered the greatest losses: with provinces near neighbouring countries facing the consequences of border closures, informal workers in Pailin, bordering Thailand, saw the greatest decrease in their weekly earnings. In the provinces of Koh Kong and Banteay Meanchey, also bordering Thailand, 31 per cent reported being unemployed. Along the Vietnamese border in Svay Rieng, between July and October 2020 informal workers' weekly earnings decreased by 38 per cent. In Siem Reap, a resort town in northwestern Cambodia whose economy is mostly based on tourism, informal workers continue to see a significant reduction in their weekly earnings. In Sihanouk, another tourist hotspot, informal workers have reported borrowing additional money due to financial and food insecurities, exacerbating existing debts.

Media and NGOs have stated that Cambodia's Covid-19 response policies were not transparent, ignored public sentiment, and led to excessive restrictions on movement without significantly protecting people. A study in July 2021 by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Food Programme found that many people had difficulty purchasing food and accessing cash in the immediate aftermath of stringent lockdowns. An estimated 135,000 garment workers and 17,000 tourism workers were made unemployed, as well as countless other informal sector workers. Without access to sufficient social protection, workers were extremely vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, and trafficking.

## Policy recommendations

- **The Cambodian government should provide more effective support to migrants living abroad** to ensure that they are not stranded – stranded citizens are forced into informality and illegality, leading to disproportionate risk from Covid-19 and other health issues, as well as socioeconomic exclusion.
- **Stringent border controls may sometimes be necessary to control the spread of Covid-19**, but countries should understand the limits to absolute control over borders – desperation makes people take risks to cross illegally and many who attempt to cross become victims of trafficking.
- **Stringent border controls must be accompanied by effective processes to identify victims of trafficking and exploitation** – governments must not treat all those who attempt to cross borders as criminals.
- **The government should provide wider coverage and more effective targeting of social support** to workers facing hardships because of Covid-19 response policies.
- **Public government communications on Covid-19 response policies and guidance must be accessible and clear to vulnerable groups**, including migrant workers, using people’s native languages, and effective translators and interpreters.
- **The government must ensure support for migrant workers and vulnerable groups during times of disruption** – in this way, Cambodia will help unlock the potential of these people to contribute to their country and society, rather than languishing in poverty. ■

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### Further reading

Cambodian Center for Human Rights (2021) **Joint Statement: The Impacts of Covid-19 on Formal and Non-Formal Workers, Phnom Penh**

Kasper, E. and Chiang, M. (2020) **Survivors' Perspectives on Successful Reintegration After Trafficking**, USAID Asia Counter Trafficking in Persons, Winrock International and Institute of Development Studies

OpenDevelopment Cambodia (2020) **Socio-economic Impact of Covid-19 on Cambodia**, 29 September

United Nations Cambodia (2021) **Information Note #8: UN Cambodia's Support to Returning Migrant Workers in the Covid-19 Response**, press release, 22 June

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