Parental migration significantly reduces children's school performance in rural Cambodia

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Key messages

- Policies are needed to support left-behind children in rural Cambodia
- Children of migrant parents significantly lag behind other rural children in terms of completed years of schooling
  - This effect is attributed to a lack of parental care for left-behind children

Thousands of Cambodian children left behind when parents migrate for work

Millions of Cambodians are migrating in search of work. Over one million adults have migrated internationally – encouraged by national government policy1 – with neighbouring Thailand being the main destination. But it is the growth of urban jobs, particularly opportunities for low-skilled workers in the garment, textile and construction industries, that has led to high internal (rural-to-urban) migration. Nearly a quarter of Cambodia’s population2 (over four million people) have migrated within the country, principally for work.

Most children are left with their grandparents3 – who are usually illiterate or have very little formal education4 – when both of their parents migrate. Cambodia’s Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) and UNICEF have raised concerns that parental migration is having a detrimental effect on children’s education in the country.

A team of local PEP researchers sought to investigate the effect of parental migration on children’s education and the reason for this effect.

The analysis

The research team analysed household-level panel data for rural villages. The data were taken from a survey conducted in 2014 and 2017 by the Cambodia Development Research Institute (CDRI).

In their analysis, the team assessed the effect of parental migration on left-behind children’s completed years of schooling. They also investigated why this happens, and the relationship between parental migration and child work.

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1 Policy on Labour Migration for Cambodia 2010, Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training
2 2013 Cambodia Inter-censal Population Survey, National Institute of Statistics
3 Migration and Families Left Behind in Cambodia, International Organization for Migration, Press Release 02.02.2018
4 Executive Summary Study on the Impact of Migration on Children in the Capital and Target Provinces, Cambodia, UNICEF, 2014
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