



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.



Photo: Alex Berger

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



Photos (clockwise from top left): Classroom in rural Cambodia by GPE/Deepa Srikantaiah; Migrant mother prepares her son for school by ILO/Emmanuel Maillard; Garment factory in Phnom Penh by World Bank/Chhor Sokunthea.

Key findings

Children of migrant parents lag behind significantly in terms of completed years of education.

- Children with migrant parents complete around half a year less schooling than other children in rural areas.
 - This is a substantial reduction in education, particularly for Cambodia where children complete seven years of schooling on average.
- This effect is strongest among children aged 12 to 19, children whose parents migrated abroad, and children whose mother migrated.
- The effect persists over time: parental migration observed in 2014 continued to affect children's education in 2017.
- Migration of other adult household members does not have a negative effect on children's education.
- Parental migration had no effect on the likelihood of left-behind children engaging in child labour, or family or farm work.

Conclusions and policy implications

When parents migrate, children's years of schooling decrease significantly even though the children are not replacing the migrant family member in family or farm work. These findings suggest that **parental absence causes children's reduced school performance**.

With the evidence pointing to a **lack of parental support as the main factor explaining the negative effect on children's schooling**, policymakers should seek to **establish a special education support programme for left-behind children in rural Cambodia**. In particular, **support is needed for children aged 12-19** who are most vulnerable to this negative effect of parental migration.

Policies that promote rural employment for women could reduce mother migration, which has a particularly detrimental effect on left-behind children's schooling. Similarly, **policies that encourage rural parents to take their children to urban areas when they migrate** – for example, to facilitate education registration in urban areas – **could help address the parental absence problem**.