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## **MIGRATING TOWARDS A BETTER FUTURE**

**A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON MIGRATION CHOICES  
AND OUTCOMES IN CAMBODIA**

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## **ABSTRACT**

By answering the questions *(1) What are the underlying reasons for choosing to migrate irregularly rather than regularly, and what are the implications of this choice? and (2) How and under what structural conditions are Cambodian migrants and their households using remittances?* this study seeks to understand labour migration and development interactions in Cambodia, by examining why migration and remittances bring about positive social transformations in some Khmer households and much less so, or even negative transformations, in others, in order to comprehend how their impacts can be better realised through policy in Cambodia. The research employed a case-study, based on 36 semi-structured interviews with migrant workers and their families, and 3 interviews with experts on migration. Findings display irregular and regular migrants going through profoundly different experiences, which seem to originate from structural obstacles and inequalities related to the absence of migration fee standardisation, an inefficient and highly corrupted governance framework, low levels of education and limited infrastructure. Remittances outcomes also follow the red thread of legal status and structural constraints deriving thereof: regular migrants' households use remittances for more, diverse and beneficial purposes, whereas irregular migrants' are limited in their choices to everyday consumption, health-related expenses and paying off debts.

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## **LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS**

GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GMS	Greater Mekong Subregion
ILO	International Labour Organization
IOM	International Organization for Migration
MFI	Microfinance Institution
MOFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MOLVT	Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
MRC	Migrant Work Resource Center
NEA	National Employment Agency
NELM	New Economics of Labour Migration
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
ODA	Official Development Assistance
PRA	Private Recruitment Agency
PDOLVT	Provincial Department of Labour and Vocational Training
ROAP	Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific
TRIANGLE II	Tripartite Action to Enhance the Contribution of Labour Migration to Growth and Development in the ASEAN
UN	United Nations
USD	United States Dollar

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Purpose and Research Questions

In the last decades international migration has rapidly increased, occupying significant room in the political agenda, and in the lives of migrants (Castles and Miller 2009). In particular, academics have been debating the relationship between migration and development<sup>1</sup> for over forty years, considering migration as a developmentalist strategy on the one hand, or a source of increasing inequality on the other. In current theories and empirical evidence, scholars and researchers emphasise the heterogeneity of labour migration and development interactions, and acknowledge that migration and remittances are important tools in bringing about fundamental social transformations in both countries of origin and destination (Castles & Wise 2008). This rationale, together with the call for achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)<sup>2</sup> addressing women and men migrant workers, justifies the current extensive focus of academics and policymakers in the labour migration area, and motivated this very study to examine its effects in Cambodia.

Labour migration has become an enduring and accelerating reality in Cambodia, both internally and internationally (Chan 2008). Moving across borders in search of decent work and income represents a strategy for moving out of poverty for many families in the Kingdom. Empirical studies show that migration and remittances *can* improve the welfare of Khmer migrants and their households, in terms of gaining greater income, more consumption power and improved healthcare and education. Nevertheless, this improvement does not universally apply: often times migrants see their rights denied, are abused, exploited or even trafficked and either have very little to remit, or remittances do not have developmental impacts on their families at all (Maltoni 2010). Thus, academics and international, non-governmental and civil society organisations working for migration in Cambodia advocate that there is still room for migrant-receiving countries and Cambodia to realise the developmental impact of migration and remittances on social and economic dimensions of Khmer households (ILO & IOM 2017).

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix A for a list of concepts and definitions, such as “development”.

<sup>2</sup> The SDGs address sub-goals and targets for decent labour for migrants (SDG8), remittances and migration policies (SDG10) and human trafficking (SDG16) respectively; cross-cutting themes also relate migration targets to women equality and empowerment (SDG5) and poverty eradication (SDG1) (World Bank 2016a).

The purpose of this research originates thereof: drifting away from outdated debates on whether migration has positive or negative developmental impacts (since I assume that developmental potential in migrating exists), this study seeks to understand why migration contributes to development in some Khmer households and much less so, or even negative transformations, in others (De Haas 2007); it aims to explore the underlying factors explaining this differentiation, in order to comprehend how migration and remittances impacts can be better realised through policy in Cambodia. I thus decided to explore the themes of irregular migration on the one hand, and remittance sending and spending behaviours on the other, with the aim of understanding why some Khmer households incur failures while other are successful in migrating.

Studies on irregular migration and remittances have already been conducted in the Kingdom, nevertheless, because they are primarily of quantitative nature, the relevance of this research lies in its qualitative design, which has the capacity to show light on causal mechanisms and provide insight to help gather a more complete picture of the context. Albeit I recognise that findings from this study are not generalisable, if they are complemented with previous studies one could grasp a more holistic picture of migration impacts in Cambodia, as the representativeness of quantitative studies is added to the complex descriptions and interpretations of a qualitative one. Furthermore, my contribution fills another knowledge gap in existing empirical evidence: it aggregates the experiences of Cambodian migrants from Thailand, together with those from South Korea and Japan, thus exhibiting a bigger, and perhaps clearer, picture of the topic. With reference to Cambodian migrant workers, the study then addresses two research questions:

*1) What are the underlying reasons for choosing to migrate irregularly rather than regularly, and what are the implications of this choice for Cambodian migrants?*

*2) How and under what structural conditions are Cambodian migrant workers and their households using remittances?*

In order to answer them, and fulfil the purpose stated above, I have conducted qualitative research, employing a case study that relied, among others, on 36 interviews conducted with migrant workers and their families.

## **1.2 Delimitations**

The thesis, because of its limited scope, only discusses the experiences of international labour migrants that have migrated from Cambodia to other countries and covers theirs and their families experiences and attitudes towards remittances expenditure. It does not focus on internal (rural-urban) migration; nor on broader macro-level impacts of remittances on Cambodia as an economy. Moreover, the analysis concerns effects of migration in a sending-country, and neglects impacts on receiving countries. Finally, it does not cover Cambodian migrants in Malaysia (though it is one of the top destinations), as the sample did not include interviewees who moved there.

## **1.3 Thesis Outline**

The thesis is organised as follows: Chapter 2 highlights the background to the research, with an overview of numbers and characteristics of migration and remittances on global, regional and national scales; it further presents existing empirical research conducted in the field. Chapter 3 introduces the theoretical framework that backed the research from earlier to ending stages; in the specific, it illustrates the debate on migration–development fueled in the last four decades by migration optimists and pessimists, and it then focuses on the New Economics of Labour Migration. Chapter 4 informs the methodological choices of this study. Chapter 5 describes empirical findings and their analysis, making reference and comparisons to findings from previous studies. Lastly, Chapter 6 summarises findings and draws conclusions, further discussing policy implications.

## 2. SETTING THE SCENE

### 2.1 Migration and Remittances Flows: Global, Regional and National Scale

According to the World Bank's Migration and Remittances Factbook 2016, there were more than 250 million international migrants throughout the world in 2015 (World Bank 2016a); this stock almost tripled since 1965, and more than doubled since 1985 (King 2012). Following the common classification of migration flows according to their directions between the *North* and the *South*<sup>3</sup>, in 2015 the volume of South-South migration was larger than South-North migration, which dominated past decades (World Bank 2016b). However, these numbers are only best estimates, because criteria for defining migrants vary by country, and there is an unknown quantity of irregular immigrants, thought to be growing quickly (King 2012). More specifically, irregular migrants are defined as people who have entered, or live in, a country without holding the right visa or authorization to work, violating laws governing entry and exit of foreigners (World Bank 2016a; Vutha et al. 2011).

With the number of migrants continuously increasing, remittances amount has been rising as well: remittances sent back to so-called developing countries increased from \$31 billion in 1990 to \$441 billion in 2015 (not including those sent through informal channels), and are expected to rise again (World Bank 2016a; De Haas 2007). Already a decade ago, remittances volume was surpassing by three times all aid provided by donor nations to developing countries (IFAD 2009), and not surprisingly this led scholars and policy makers to research and debate this issue extensively. Today these monetary inflows, almost three times larger than overseas development assistance (ODA), constitute up to 10 per cent of GDP in many low-income countries, contributing to augmented investments in health, education, and businesses (World Bank 2016b).

Moving to the regional scale, data shows that in Asia more than 20 million workers are estimated to be living outside their native countries (Hugo 2005); zooming into the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS)<sup>4</sup>, a growing cross-border labour migration has been registered (Deelen & Vasuprasat 2010; Jampaklay & Kittisuksatit 2009). General migration features of the GMS are

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<sup>3</sup> The study along with Castle and Wise (2008) recognises that this classification by the United Nations is oversimplified, since many countries cannot be readily classified as either North or South.

<sup>4</sup> The GMS is an international region of the river Mekong basin in Southeast Asia; it includes Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, Viet Nam, Lao PDR, and two provinces of People's Republic of China.

its being temporary (Deelen & Vasuprasat 2010), and that the great majority of workers migrate through irregular channels, relying mainly on family or friends networks, or employing (unlicensed) brokers (ILO 2017; Maltoni 2010). As far as remittances are concerned, in 2014 Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and Myanmar alone received \$17 billion worth of remittances<sup>5</sup>, well outpacing the inflow of ODA (UNCDF 2017).

Cambodia, situated in Southeast Asia with a population of 15.6 million, is listed among the world's least developed countries, and one of the poorest in the GMS (Zimmer et al. 2008; Maltoni 2010). Since the early 2000s, Cambodia has been one of the fastest growing economies in the world (Bylander & Hamilton 2015), however, despite this rapid growth its rural population still represents 80 per cent of total population (ADB 2014) and poverty remains pervasive in rural areas with 4.8 million poor (IFAD 2014); and even though employment has slightly increased, much of this growth concerns rural areas and the informal economy (Tunon & Rim 2013). Labour migration has then become a "*persistent and accelerating reality*" of Cambodia (Zimmer & Knodel 2013: 157). According to the National Institute of Statistics (NIS) 2013, 28.9 per cent of population is constituted by internal and international migrants. Hundreds of thousands of young Cambodians enter the labour market each year, and with a labour market characterised by limited opportunities, low wages and a slow economic growth, more Cambodian workers are looking at employment opportunities and wages abroad. Furthermore, more and more Cambodian women are migrating too (Tunon & Rim 2013).

The majority of studies show that migrants from Cambodia are young, of working age, and generally have low levels of education (Jampaklay & Kittisuksatit 2009); the key destinations countries for international migrant workers are Thailand, Malaysia and South Korea (MOLVT 2014). Thailand is the primary receiving country, employing more than 680,000 migrants (MMN 2014). However, this number is much bigger if one takes into account all migrants with irregular status (MOLVT 2014). Indeed, because of the relative ease of crossing the Thai border, less than half of Cambodians migrate through legal channels, under the 2003 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the two countries (ILO & IOM 2017). The Republic of Korea, with which Cambodia has stipulated a government-to-government system for their migration corridor, has become the second most popular receiving country. Malaysia, which still sees the lack of an MOU in place, attracts many Cambodians, particularly women for domestic work.

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<sup>5</sup>This data does not take into account informal remittance flows.

Finally, Cambodia also established an MOU with Japan, however has not been a popular destination due to too demanding technical requirements (MOLVT 2014).

International formal remittance flows to Cambodia were \$400 million in 2015 (2.3 per cent of GDP; 5.1 per cent net of ODA)(UNCDF 2017). The World Bank lists Cambodia among the top 10 emigration countries (2013), and remittances recipients (2015) in East Asia and the Pacific (World Bank 2016b).

## 2.2 Review of Existing Research

In light of the relationship between migration, remittances and development which was thoroughly theorised and debated upon in the last decades (see Chapter 3) and because of the boom in migrants in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, empirical works researches and case studies has been engaging academics and policy makers.

Globally, evidence suggests heterogenous results, though a few common traits prevail: migration, which is often a strategic decision<sup>6</sup>, has the potential to improve well-being, stimulate economic growth and reduce poverty directly and indirectly (De Haas 2007). There is a wide range of empirical literature on the effects of remittances on various dimensions of social development, and often "*migration and remittances seem to be a transformative rather than a disruptive force*" (ibid.: 19). Even if remittances are private transfers, they not only offer possibilities for improving migrants families' status, but also their communities and countries of origin (IOM 2009): at macro-economic levels, remittances have the potential to spur economic development in poor migrant-sending communities, especially those that do not have coherent national development strategies (UNCDF 2017; World Bank 2016b; De Haas 2007); at the micro-level, remittances can have positive impacts on household income, health, education and housing (De Haas 2007). However, along with optimistic views, more pessimistic ones have also taken room. The most common reason for skepticism is the belief that migrants rarely invest their money in productive activities, instead preferring daily consumption or non-productive investments (ibid.; Maltoni 2010); remittances are also said to generate dependency and enlarge economic and social disparities (Maltoni 2010). Finally, Maltoni (2010: 15) pointed out that in countries where domestic policy settings are inefficient, the effects of remittances can be wasted ("sucked into a

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<sup>6</sup>To improve livelihoods, allow for investments, and diversify income (insuring against shocks and stresses) (De Haan et al. 2000).

*vicious circle of mismanagement, inefficiency and corruption")* or even induce governments to procrastinate on reform.

Recognising the significance and relevance of the developmental potential of migrants stock from Cambodia, and further aligning with Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) first and SDGs now, in the last decade scholars, international organisations and policy makers conducted extensive research on migration, remittances and their impacts on Cambodian households. These studies have mainly been conducted through large-scale quantitative research by international organisations and UN agencies, such as the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and International Organisation for Migration (IOM), or the Khmer Government. Other smaller-scale studies were also undertaken, using quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods. A brief description of the studies from Cambodia that help contextualize and frame my research and findings follows below, including topics of reasons for migrating; migrants' irregular status; expansion of microcredit; why and how remittances are sent; and use and impact of remittances on Khmer households.

### ***2.2.1 Reasons for Migrating***

The main forces driving Cambodians to migrate are push factors in Cambodia, which are mainly problems of economic and employment nature (Maltoni 2010; Vutha et al. 2011). Particularly in rural areas people are affected by chronic poverty, landlessness, debt and natural disaster; and this is accompanied by a domestic labour market with limited opportunities and disproportionately dependent on an informal economy<sup>7</sup> (Maltoni 2010; Tunon & Rim 2013). To these, pull factors in receiving countries such as the demand for low-skilled labour and attractive wages add up (Tunon & Rim 2013).

### ***2.2.2 Irregular Migration***

The great majority of Cambodians migrate through irregular channels. Irregular migration is facilitated by pioneer migrants or unlicensed brokers; this process is easier and cheaper than formal recruitment, plus geographical proximity (in the case of Thailand) further encourages the informal flow. Nevertheless, irregular migrants earn less than regular migrants, and are often

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<sup>7</sup>The informal economy is vulnerable, does not provide benefits or social protection, is characterised by low salaries, and is more at risk to the effects of shocks (MOLVT 2014).

subjected to abuse, exploitation, and denial of rights (Deelen & Vasuprasat 2010; Vutha et al. 2011). They also experience problems more often (e.g. bad working conditions, lack of safety, irregular salary) (Maltoni 2010; ILO & IOM 2017), and in the worst scenarios are victims of human trafficking (Maltoni 2010). Finally, a survey undertaken by Vutha et al. (2011) observed that households of irregular migrants had a lower economic status than regular migrants and non-migrants.

### ***2.2.3 Loans, Microcredit and Migration***

Microfinance has extensively expanded in Cambodia since the 2000s. Cambodia, described by Bateman (2010: 101) as an example of a “*microfinance-saturated country*”, by 2009 registered 60 per cent of its household to have loans sourced from formal institutions, such as microfinance institutions (MFIs), banks or NGOs (Bylander 2014). Through a qualitative study, Bylander (2014) showed that in rural areas of Cambodia, it is a widespread practice to use microcredit in combination with international migration<sup>8</sup>. She lists three common reasons for which migrants households use microcredit: to finance the migration of a household member; for non-productive investments with the intention of paying back the loan through remittances; and as a response to over-indebtedness from other MFIs loans (*ibid.*). In a later quantitative study among households in Cambodia, Bylander and Hamilton (2015) again found complementary between migration and borrowing. The authors’ findings do not imply a causal relationship between borrowing and migration, because of the quantitative nature of their research, however, the scholars hypothesise that this relationship result from either direct causation (one borrows to migrate), reverse causation (one migrates to pay off debts through remittances), or spurious associations (other factors explain the correlation). Previous qualitative research from Bylander (2014) and a survey from ILO and IOM (2017) support the first hypothesis.

### ***2.2.4 Remittances: Sending Channels and Financial Inclusion***

Migrants from Cambodia use diverse means to send remittances, such as banks, credit unions, money transfer operators, and post office services; or rely on physical delivery by themselves, family, friends or other parties (informal brokers) (Jampaklay & Kittisukhsathit 2009). A recent survey shows that Cambodian households receive remittances primarily from non-bank

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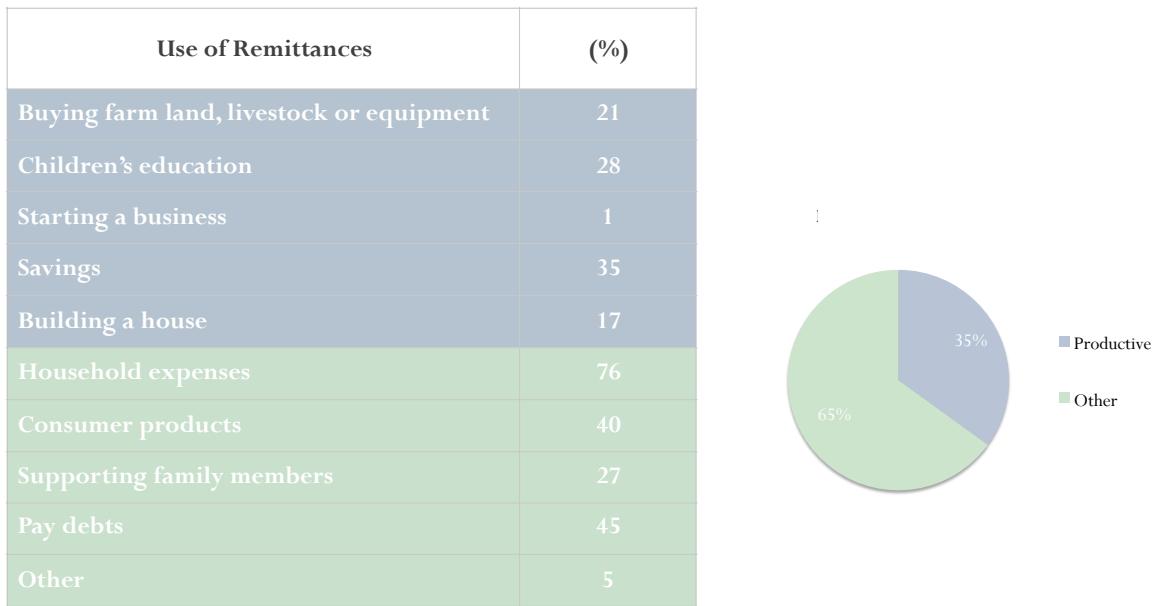
<sup>8</sup> Studies such as Maltoni (2010) and ILO & IOM (2017) also obtained the same results, quantitatively.

institutions (money transfer companies, postal services, MFIs) and digital finance formal channels (UNCDF 2017). However, informal channels (all unregulated channels for which there is no remittance receipt), remain common, as they are convenient, easy, and fast (*ibid.*); whereas formal channels are characterised by barriers such as time and cost to reach and use services of a bank; mistrust in the bank; and rigidity and length of the forms required to be filled (*ibid.*). This situation “restricts the opportunity for remittance recipients to become economically better integrated” (*ibid.*: 4); as with more migrants using formal channels, there would also be more financial inclusion. At this stage, a detour on financial inclusion is due: according to Finscope (2015), financially included people are those utilizing financial products or services with either formal or informal institutions; whereas financially excluded are those who do not use any financial product or service; formal institutions can be banked or non-banked (e.g. MFIs), and informal institutions are those not regulated and operate without legal governance. Finscope’s survey (2015) shows that Cambodians rely on a combination of mixed financial products and services; however, almost 30 per cent of adults are still financially excluded, and only 17 per cent are banked.

#### **2.2.5 Remittances: Usage and Impacts**

A survey from Deelen and Vasuprasat (2010) exhibits that 82 per cent of responding Khmer migrants sent remittances home, with women sending more money than men (88 and 79 per cent respectively); and parents being the main recipients, followed by siblings and spouses. In the same survey, migrants’ intentions for remittances expenditures were primarily daily expenses, followed by health-related expenses, loans repayment, household amenities and education; only a small share would have been invested in agriculture or business-ventures (*ibid.*; Maltoni 2010). Furthermore, Deelen and Vasuprasat (2010) registered that remittances increased annual household income among surveyed families, but do not provide a legal status break down. Lastly, 40 per cent of Cambodian migrants in Thailand said that their remittances were the main sources of income for their families. Up-to-date data from ILO and IOM (2017) reconfirms the unchanged 2009 picture: Figure 1 shows that substantial amounts of remittances are dedicated to households expenses, and only a small share to economically *productive* investments.

**Figure 1. Use of remittances and “Productive” vs. “Other” use breakdown**



Source: ILO TRIANGLE II/IOM PROMISE Baseline Survey (ILO & IOM 2017: 48).

Recent empirical research conducted in Cambodia confirms that, despite the presence of positive results, there is still room – and the necessity – to increase the potential of international labour migration in the country, hence the starting point of my research shapes. In order to study how this potential can be realised, this study explores the thematics of migrant irregularity and the usage of remittances in Cambodia. It does so through a qualitative approach (often missing in existing literature) and extending a gender lens at every step of the analysis: in fact, even though nearly half of the world’s migrants are women (IOM 2009), in the past decade the necessity to consolidate the positioning of gender in migration theory has been recognised, a research has been mostly “*gender-blind*” (King 2012: 27; De Haas 2007). I intend to bring gender into the picture, acknowledging that migration has the potential to reshape gender relations, contributing to women empowerment (Kabeer 2005; Mahler and Pessar 2006; King 2012). This is especially applicable to Cambodia, where migration is rapidly feminising (Tunon & Rim 2013), but women migrants are particularly at risk, as Khmer women have generally lower levels of education and limited formal employment opportunities than men (MOLVT 2014); it is thus imperative to give women the proper attention so that they can also benefit from migration, and take advantage of its gender empowerment potential.

### **3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The theoretical framework for this study is based on the theory of New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM). Because I have mentioned the debate on migration and development dealing with developmentalist optimism and pessimism (De Haas 2010), it is pertinent to explain such debate and illustrate migration theories<sup>9</sup> that dominated academic and policy arenas in the past decades, to then explore NELM, and the role of remittances thereof.

#### **3.1 Optimistic vs Pessimistic Views**

In the last four decades, optimistic and pessimistic views in relation to migration alternated in parallel with shifts in social and development theories. Migration optimists dominated the 1950s and 1960s, with developmentalist and neoclassical theories; they were later opposed by migration pessimists over the 1970s and 1980s, who instead supported historical-structural and neo-Marxist dependency views; finally, more optimistic views came back into the picture in the 1990s and 2000s, bringing in pluralistic perspectives, such as NELM (De Haas 2007; 2010; Taylor 1999).

##### ***3.1.1 Neoclassical Approach and Developmentalist Theory***

The neoclassical migration theory sees migration as a form of optimal allocation of production factors, beneficial to both countries of origin and destination (Todaro 1969), and driven by a set of push factors (e.g. poverty, unemployment, population growth or political and social constraints) existing in the sending country and pull factors (e.g. better income and job opportunities, good living conditions, political freedom) operating in the receiving country (King 2012). This theory is based on the principles of utility maximisation, rational choice, factor-price differentials between countries, and labour mobility (*ibid.*); and it perceives migrants as atomistic, utility maximising individuals (De Haas 2010).

These assumptions are in line with developmentalist views dominating the same years, whereby “*freshly decolonised countries were expected to quickly follow the same path of modernisation, industrialisation, and rapid economic growth as many Western countries had gone through*” (*ibid.*: 231).

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<sup>9</sup> Different types of migration exist (highly skilled migration, retirement migration, refugees, etc.), but for the scope of this study, the chapter examines the literature that attempts to describe, model and explain the migrations from poor countries to richer ones (Massey et al. 1993; King 2012).

Critiques of the neoclassical theory address its being deterministic, functionalist and ahistorical (Arango 2004). Moreover the theory does not take into account family or socio-cultural factors; political realities; and histories of colonialism; instead relying on the systemic structuring of the world economy in terms of dependency and underdevelopment (*ibid.*; King 2012).

### **3.1.2 Historical–Structural Models**

With the shift in social and development theory and the rise of historical-structuralist and dependency theories, migration was perceived as increasing spatial disparities in development levels, thus aggravating problems of underdevelopment (De Haas 2010).

Directly in opposition to the neoclassical school, neo-Marxist dependency theory considers migration self-perpetuating and reproducing inequality through the mechanism of “cumulative causation” (Myrdal 1957), whereby capitalist development inevitably deepens spatial welfare inequalities (De Haas 2010). Dependency theory further argues that migration dislocates millions of people in poor countries from their traditional way of life (King 2012).

Typical arguments of migration pessimists of the historical-structural current are the “brain drain” (Adams 1969) and the leakage of remittances investments (De Haas 2010). Supporters of the “brain drain”, expect migration to *“undermine national economies by depriving them of their valuable...human capital...exploited for the benefit of industrialised countries; and increase dependence on core countries, stimulating further out-migration”* (De Haas 2010: 234). The remittances argument predicts that migrants barely invest their money in productive activities; rather they spend remittances on *conspicuous consumption*, intended as non-productive enterprises (e.g everyday consumption, imported or luxurious goods, etc.) (Lewis 1986). This leakage of investment is said to further reinforce inequalities, corroborating the cumulative causation theory (De Haas 2010).

All in all, pessimistic views argue that migration induces migrant-sending communities to consumerist, non-productive and remittance-dependent behaviours (*ibid.*).

The main critique posed to historical-structural models is that they view migrants as passive, at the mercy of capitalist powers (Arango 2004), and deny them any sort of agency (King 2012).

In light of the critiques to previous theories, and embracing the heterogeneity of migration–development interactions, new pluralist views emerged in the 1990s, recognising the relevance of structure and agency; among these, we find NELM (Massey et al. 1998).

The shifts in thinking on the migration–development debate and the emergence of pluralist perspectives appear to be strongly influenced by the paradigm shift in social theory in which social scientists sought to harmonise actor and structure-oriented approaches<sup>10</sup> (De Haas 2007).

### 3.2 Social Networks

Regardless of the different theories and views of labour migration, contemporary scholars converge on the concept of social networks as a key engine to migration (Castles & Wise 2008), and this study does recognises the significance of social networks too. Social networks “*are sets of interpersonal ties that connect migrants, non-migrants and former migrants in webs of kinship, friendship and shared origin*” (King 2012: 21). They represent a form of social capital that facilitates international migration because they share information that lowers costs and risks of migration (*ibid.*; Massey et al. 1998).

### 3.3 The New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM)

#### 3.3.1 NELM Model

The most innovative assumption of the NELM theory, first elaborated by Stark (1978; 1991), is that the household, and not the individual, is the most appropriate decision-making unit when it comes to migration decisions (Stark 1978; De Haas 2010; King 2012). Secondly, the rational-choice decision-making is not only about maximising income (like in the neoclassical model), but also diversifying it, and minimising risk. NELM contextualises households in the imperfect credit (capital) and risk (insurance) markets that characterise most developing countries (Massey et al. 1993; Stark and Bloom 1985; Taylor 1999). Thus households, through migration, are able to control risks to their economic wealth by diversifying their income and livelihood resources into “*a portfolio of different activities, spreading their labour resources over space and time*” (King 2012: 23). Thirdly, NELM identifies migration and especially international remittances as a household strategy and the latter are viewed as essential reasons for migrating: such monetary return allows for hedging against other activities failing, overcoming market constraints, sustaining the costs of daily life, or investing in new projects (house, land, small business, etc.) (Stark 1980; Lucas and Stark 1985; De Haas 2010). Finally, NELM, in contrast to the neoclassical theory, gives an

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<sup>10</sup> See Giddens' (1984) structuration theory for more details.

important role to return migrants and “*circular migration*”, whereby workers should be encouraged to move temporarily where they can earn money and gain skills and knowhow, to then return and have positive developmental effects in their own communities (Portes 2009; King 2012).

### **3.3.2 The Role of Remittances in NELM**

At the micro-level, NELM attributes to international remittances the capacity to diversify and substantially increase income; they exhibit insurance potential in protecting households from shocks and stresses of absent or imperfect markets, and from poor state policies (De Haas 2010). At the macro-level, savings and investment deriving from remittances have the potential to impact the economic growth of sending countries, by being an indirect market based source of national saving and development finance – remittances can then be a substitute to development programmes or development aid (De Haas 2005).

Shifting from theorisation to empirical works supporting NELM, evidences from Latin America, Asia and Africa have shown that remittances allow migrants and their households to invest in agriculture and enterprises; and other researches have suggested that migration does not necessarily lead to passive dependency on remittances (as argued by migration pessimists) but to increased income-generating activities (*ibid.*; Jampaklay & Kittisukhsathit 2009). Nevertheless, these assumptions do not necessarily imply that remittances alone can contribute to poverty alleviation. Because migration is a selective process, international remittances often times do not reach the poorest members of communities or countries. This said, on the other hand poor non-migrant families in countries of origin can be affected indirectly through positive multiplier effects for which employment and income are generated. Therefore, remittances do reduce poverty, at least to a limited extent (De Haas 2010).

### **3.3.3 Parallelism with the Livelihood Approach**

De Haas (2010) has shown conceptual parallels between NELM and the livelihood approach that are worth being explored. Geographers, anthropologists and sociologists defined “livelihood” as the set of capabilities, assets and activities required for a means of living (Carney 1998); it comprises “*household’s income-generating activities but also social institutions, intra-household relations and mechanisms of access to resources through the life cycle*” (De Haas 2010: 244; Ellis 1998). A livelihood strategy is then the strategic choice of activities chosen by families to support, secure and improve

their livelihoods (De Haas 2010). Thus, the poor are no longer reduced to being passive victims of global capitalist forces, and instead actively try to improve their livelihoods within local development constraints. This encompasses the fundamental role played by human agency, which was missing in previous theories on migration, and migration is acknowledged as a household livelihood strategy, whereby groups employ it to diversify, secure and improve their livelihoods (*ibid.*).

Empirical evidences largely support NELM and the livelihood approach, and the view that migration is a deliberate choice by social groups to reduce risks, improve social and economic wealth and overcome the constraining conditions they live in. However, the evidence also suggests that migration and remittances “*are no panacea to overcome structural development constraints*” (De Haas 2010: 249; Taylor 1999).

### **3.3.4 Critiques and Limitations of NELM**

Among the other critics, Arango (2004) addresses NELM’s being limited to the supply side of labour, and that it works best if applied to poor, rural setting<sup>11</sup>. Moreover, it supposes that intra-households relationships are harmonious: this criticism holds both for NELM and the livelihood approach, which are said to have the rigid assumption of households as “*monolithic, altruistic units taking unanimous decisions*” (De Haas 2010: 252; Carling 2005). Nevertheless, the increasing body of empirical evidence supporting heterogeneity of migration-development interactions should soften this critique. Feminist researchers, because of the gender blindness in migration theory, also criticise NELM for the same reason: by treating the household as a monolithic unit, intra-household power inequalities are masked, and gender inequalities reinforced (Rodenburg 1997).

In conclusion, empirical and theoretical evidence – by stressing the heterogeneity of migration-development interactions and their being contingent on other development conditions – suggest that structure matters and factors pertinent to specific political, economic and social dimensions in both countries of origin and destination also affect the extent to which the potential of these interactions is realised (De Haas 2005). Hence my research departs from this recognition of both agency and structure, and through migrant stories seeks to understand the above-mentioned structural factors that limit their agency and the migration developmental potential.

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<sup>11</sup> This argument, on the other hand, confirms that NELM is a very suitable framework for this case-study.

## **4. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **4.1 Research Design**

In order to gain insights on Cambodian migrants' experiences, their legal status choices, the consequences deriving thereof, and on how they choose to spend remittances, this study adopted a qualitative research design, as it facilitates the analysis of people's understanding of their experiences, and seeks to illustrate complex descriptions and interpretations, raising the voices of participants (Creswell 2007). In terms of philosophical assumptions, this study adheres to an ontological stance of constructivist nature, and an interpretivist epistemological approach (Bryman 2012). According to a constructivist ontology, the world is filtered by subjects that look differently at it and subscribe different meanings (Abbott 2004), and social phenomena are outcomes constructed and shaped by social interactions between individuals (Bryman 2012). Therefore, the research aimed at raising the perspectives of migrants and their interpretations of their experiences, by exposing how people's beliefs are constructed, as well as disclosing their subjective meanings. An interpretivist epistemological position attempts to build knowledge through individuals, their perspective and behaviour. According to this approach, institutions, culture and identities are produced and reinvented by individuals and their social context (Moses and Knutsen 2012): the inquiry on the social world thus occurs through an examination of the interpretation of such world by its participants (Bryman 2012). Furthermore, this qualitative research besides being inductive<sup>12</sup>, context-specific, and focused on details before generalizations, constantly revised and adjusted its research questions, to reflect the questions necessary to understand the problem under scrutiny in a superior manner (Creswell 2007).

### **4.2 Research Strategy**

The research has been undertaken through a case-study, exploring the experiences of a small sample of migrant workers and their families from different provinces of Cambodia, questioned about their migration and remitting experiences. This strategy enabled me to create detailed and context-specific knowledge through in-depth data collection (Stake 1995; Yin 2003). Because there is controversy around the definition of case-study among scholars, this research espouses

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<sup>12</sup> Whereby theory is generated by research (Bryman, 2012).

Creswell's, whereby a case-study is "*a methodology, a type of design in qualitative research, or object of study, as well as product of inquiry* (Creswell 2007: 73). This case-study took place between October and December 2016, through detailed, in-depth data collection, involving multiple resources of information.

## 4.3 Data Generation

Data was generated through semi- and unstructured interviews, and observations, reflecting the interpretivist epistemological standpoint that this study wants to adhere to (Bryman 2012).

### 4.3.1 Sampling Strategy

The sample include 36 participant interviewees, whose age ranged from 18–70 years, coming from three different provinces<sup>13</sup> of Cambodia (see Appendix B), with a gender distribution of 21 women and 15 men. The sampling strategy for the participant interviews is that of purposeful sampling, where I selected either returnees or relatives of migrant workers<sup>14</sup> that were abroad at the time of the interview, because they could purposefully give an understanding of the research topic (Creswell 2007). I complemented this sample with interviews of three experts.

The sample location was strategically chosen for two reasons: first, the three provinces are have the highest concentration of Cambodian migrants (Vutha et al. 2011); secondly (and because of the former assumption), in these provinces my host organisation had local partners who became my gatekeepers.

Sample size was finalized only when no more new information and insights were being gained by adding new cases, and this depended extensively on the metamorphosis of the research questions (Silverman 2013): sample size continuously increased throughout the two months as the questions were adjusted and I gained more insights in the field,. This process was enabled by my gatekeepers, who provided extensive support, and the snowball effect on which I relied (Bryman 2012).

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<sup>13</sup> Battambang, Prey Veng and Kampong Cham respectively. They have different characteristics, as Battambang is located in the North-West of Cambodia, bordering with Thailand, whereas Prey Veng is inland and situated in the South-East of the country, and Kampong Cham, in the East, confines with Viet Nam.

<sup>14</sup> Who are direct recipients of remittances.

#### **4.3.2 Interviews, In-field Observations and Document Review**

In line with Yin (2003) and Creswell's (2007) recommendations for a case study, I have employed multiple methods of data collection, summarised in Table 1 (more details in Appendix C).

**Table 1. List of interviewees and observations**

Method	Participants / Event	Quantity
Semi-structured participants interview	Return migrant Workers	23 ( 11 men, 12 women)
Semi-structured participants interview	Relatives of migrant workers	13 (3 men, 10 women)
Expert Interviews semi- and unstructured	Experts	1 (for Cambodia) 1 (for GMS) 1 (for other perspective)
Observations	Policy Evaluation Workshop Training on Ethical Recruitment Field visit to MRC	50 people (ministries, NGOs, CSOs) 30 people (ministries, NGOs, CSOs) 8 people (Provincial labour officials)

First, I have conducted 36 participant interviews, through the help of a Khmer (amateur) translator. The interviews took place in remote villages of the country, that I was able to reach thanks to my gatekeeper, who arranged the logistics for me. Informant in-depth interviews were semi-structured in order to get a richer understanding of migrant workers' experiences as well as to allow for their point of view to emerge (Ragin & Amoroso 2010; Silverman 2013). I have interviewed around 10 people in each of the four villages where I conducted fieldwork, and each time the setting was either the garden or the house of the village chief, who kindly offered his accommodation. The interviewees talked one at the time, except for when married couples were involved – in this case, they were interviewed simultaneously. All interviews were set on the floor, in a private and comfortable atmosphere, where migrants felt comfortable enough to share the most touching stories (to the extent that an interviewee started to cry whilst talking).

The expert interviews were both semi- and un-structured. The three experts were Benjamin Harkins, Veth Vorn and Marc Rodriguez respectively. Harkins, based in Bangkok, Thailand, is the Technical Officer for the Tripartite Action to Enhance the Contribution of Labour Migration to Growth and Development in ASEAN (TRIANGLE II project) of ILO; his expertise concerns labour migration in the GMS region. Vorn, based in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, is the National Project Coordinator of ILO TRIANGLE II for Cambodia; he is Khmer himself and is very

knowledgable about the context and stakeholders<sup>15</sup> of Cambodia labour migration. Rodriguez is Associate Professor of History and Managing Editor of the *Pacific Historical Review* at Portland State University; his current research focuses on Khmer migrants in Portland, United States.

The observations were conducted both as a participant (e.g. whilst attending commune meeting on safe migration, where potential and return migrant workers were present) and as an observer (e.g. whilst facilitating trainings for the Ministry of Labour and other labour migration stakeholders.).

Finally, the documents I have gathered are diverse, consisting in primary and secondary data, ranging from my personal journal to public documents, letters from participant, biographies from the web and academic literature (Yin 2003).

To conclude, this study required for me to be open throughout all steps of the research process, in order to capture opportunities and to adapt to arising challenges (Ragin & Amoroso 2010): following this mindset, I continuously redeveloped my research design, either by adjusting the research question, the size of the sample, and especially the interview guide through a pilot testing.

#### **4.4 Data Analysis**

Data generated to draw conclusions on migrant's experiencers and answer the research questions has been analysed by highlighting certain information, identifying patterned regularities, and contextualising it in literature frameworks, such as NELM (Wolcott 1994).

First, each interview, previously recorded under interviewees' consent, has been transcribed with Nvivo Software (see Appendix F). Acknowledging that transcripts are restricted versions of original interviews that decontextualise them from their setting, and disregard information on body language, atmosphere or personal interaction (Kvale 1996), during each interview I wrote down notes detailing such information, and notes have complemented the transcripts during data analysis.

Then, I created files, read through text and margins notes, described cases and context, and made use of coding using nodes in Nvivo, in order to find themes and emerging findings. Categorical aggregation and Word Frequencies served to establish themes and patterns and to formulate analytical generalizations, which I then compared with secondary data (Bryman 2012).

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<sup>15</sup> Including stakeholders from grassroots and government level, NGOs, civil society, and employers organisations.

Finally, I created tables, figures and charts to allow for a visualization of the findings (Creswell 2007). On this regard, I would like to stress that I am aware that this is a qualitative case study, of a very small sample, and thus it is not representative of the entire migrant population in Cambodia. However, tables and charts, which are commonly utilised by quantitative research dealing with large samples, seemed appropriate to illustrated the data analysis to the reader, for a visual impact purpose (rather than a statistical one). With the same caveat, I sometimes used the number of cases (e.g. “23 cases from the sample were subjected to...”) to describe trends among migrant workers.

#### **4.5 Quality Criteria**

The credibility and validity of the findings have been ensured through employing different strategies. An initial validation strategy is the prolonged in-field engagement necessary to build trust with participants and become familiar with their culture. Other strategies are the comparison of findings with secondary data, and data triangulation, which enhances internal validity and trustworthiness (Silverman 2013; Bryman 2012). Triangulation took place through the use of different sources of data and different methods such as interviews with migrants, interviews with experts, group observations and comparison of primary data with secondary data (such as large-scale quantitative studies).

#### **4.6 Limitations and Potential Biases**

This study is exploratory in its character, however its findings are by no means representative of the entire migrant population in Cambodia. The sample is in fact too small to be statistically representative, and there might also have been selection biases during the sampling: in light of this limitation, the analytical issues that emerged are thus to be treated with caution. Qualitative research may be optimal to gain insights on the complexity of a phenomenon and especially on its causal relationships, nonetheless it would be worth complementing further research on the topic, with a quantitative approach which I did not employ (making it a mixed-methods) to support findings and enable generalizations. As for now, the best effort to check that my findings were at least to a small degree reliable was to compare them with secondary quantitative findings.

Another limitation is the language barrier. Not only I do not know Khmer, but also Khmer interpreters translating the interviews were amateur (due to financial constraints): this could have misled findings and altered the flow of information from migrants.

Finally, cultural factors represented a constraint, and this has been already stressed in previous research on the same topic, in the same region by Maltoni (2010: 29): at times it can happen that an “*interview very quickly becomes a communal event, involving all the villagers in the answering process*”, and one time during a face-to-face interview the people waiting the back tried to get involved, with a police officer being particularly intrusive and taking over a migrant woman’s interviews (which made her and me uncomfortable). After that experience, I have found ways to keep the queue of interviewees engaged through participatory activities (such as writing positive and negative keywords for their experiences, etc.), which was beneficial to them, the current interviewee (who now had complete privacy) and me (who could also use the material afterwards).

#### **4.7 Ethical Considerations**

Urging to undertake an ethical and participatory research, throughout the research process I recognised the relevance of issues of reflexivity, positionality and power relations (Sultana 2007). Whilst in the field, I thus continuously engaged in reflection and critical examination on myself as European privileged female immersing myself in Cambodian rural settings, and the consequences, power and political relations deriving thereof. I recognise that knowledge is always partial and representations of knowledge produced during fieldwork embody power relations that as researcher I must be aware of: I then made constant efforts to negotiate my positionality, especially through everyday acts, such as sitting on the floor – making sure to be on the same level as the participants, or compromising on what I ate, where and in which conditions, while having lunch with my gatekeeper, etc. (ibid.).

Aware of the inequalities and other problems of accountability and corruption existing in Cambodia, I wanted to hear the voices of marginalized people, the “*voices of the voiceless*”, in a way that could empower them (Scheyvens & Leslie 2000: 127; Pratt & Loizos 1992). This strongly interlinks with the choice of a qualitative study, which has the potential to empower participants by sharing their stories, raising their voices, and altering power relations often existing between inquirer and participants (Creswell 2007; Sultana 2007).

Further reflecting upon the issue of reciprocity, and acknowledging that the migrants studied are not a mere source of data through which I foster my academic career (Kapoor 2004; Scheyvens & Storey 2003), on the contrary I, as a researcher, ensured to be accountable and that the research is a two-way process of interaction (Scheyvens & Leslie 2000): hence, at the end of each interview I always provided migrants with small gifts and, at times, information on safe migration, so that to some extent they benefitted from the experience (*ibid.*).

On this note on mutual benefit, I further believe that for a researcher it is important to be honest and transparent; at each round of interviews, I thus stayed open and honest about my research and my role (in simplistic terms, in order to be easily understood); and waited for informed verbal consent and permission to record from all interviewees before starting the interviews, as suggested by Bryman (2012). Participants have also been granted anonymity, and their names have been substituted with codes.

## 5. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

In this chapter I analyse my empirical data, making reference to previous research, and contextualizing findings within NELM framework. The analysis is presented in two sections, referring to each research question respectively: section 5.1 deals with the different features characterising the experiences of regular and irregular migrants, and tries to list and explain the reasons for the choice of irregular over regular channels; section 5.2 explores patterns of remittances from the moment they are sent to the way they are spent in Cambodia.

### 5.1 Features of Regular & Irregular Migration and Reasons for their Choice

#### 5.1.1 Demographics

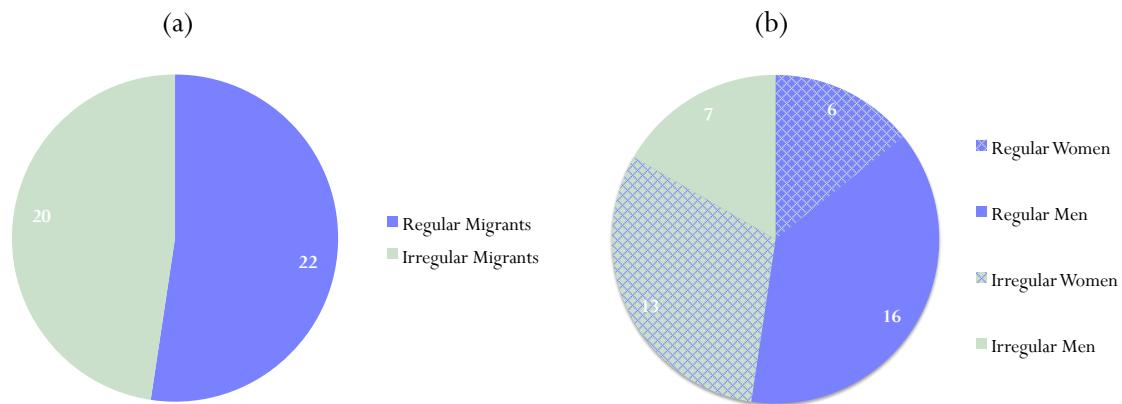
The 35 participant interviews shed light on the detailed experiences of 42 migrant workers, 19 women and 23 men<sup>16</sup>, coming from four rural villages of the provinces of Battambang, Kampong Cham and Prey Veng. Migrants' age varies significantly, with the youngest case of a girl that left Cambodia when she was 17, and the oldest of a woman that came back at 57. In general, it is possible to distinguish between two trends: young girls and boys migrating on their own, and middle-aged men and women leaving either alone or with their families. The length of stay also varies from 4 months to 10 years, but generally migrants tended to stay abroad for a couple of years. Finally, reasons for migrating include higher salaries abroad and lack of jobs in Cambodia; followed by repayment of an existing debt; and the desire to support their families. A few also expressed the wish to learn new skills, or creating a new business.

Among migrants almost half (20) declared to have migrated *irregularly*, whereas the other half is composed by *regular* migrants (Figure 2a). These figures partly align with the quantitative studies mentioned in Chapter 2, whereby most migrant workers within the GMS, generally young and of working age, move through irregular channels (Jampaklay & Kittisuksatit 2009; Maltoni 2010). However, these studies describe the typical migrant as male, whereas my sample sees an equal share of women and men migrants, consistent with more recent studies addressing the feminisation of migration (Tunon & Rim 2013).

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<sup>16</sup> Part of the interviewees were migrants themselves, and sometimes migrated with partners; other interviewees were relatives (wives, husbands or parents) of migrant workers.

**Figure 2. Distribution of irregular and regular migrants in the sample (a) and gender breakdown (b)**



Further examining the gender break down of migrants (Figure 2b), women constitute double the amount of men in terms of irregular migrants, and less than half of regulars. Chapter 2 already discussed the inequality affecting women in Cambodia because of their higher levels of illiteracy and unemployment, and this finding is a proof that in the sample women are more likely to be at risk also when they migrate.

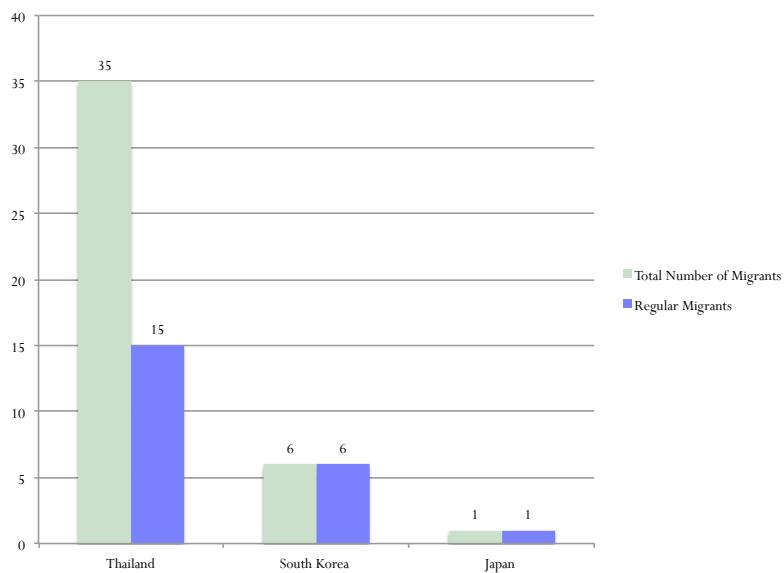
The great majority of the interviewees also specified to have siblings or friends working abroad, having positive migration experiences, that suggested them to migrate too: this reflects the family bonds and social networks theories, according to which social capital represents a source of information or assistance that individuals obtain through their social ties to prior migrants (Castle & Wise 2008).

### 5.1.2 Destination Countries

The sample registered three receiving countries: Thailand, South Korea and Japan. As pictured in Figure 3, the great majority of migrants migrated to Thailand (35 cases), and only a few to South Korea (6 cases) and Japan (1 case). Everyone who migrated to South Korea and Japan did so regularly, whereas migrants from Thailand are more likely irregular. The latter figure aligns with the baseline study conducted by ILO and IOM (2017), showing that only 69 per cent of Cambodian migrant workers choose irregular channels to go to neighbouring Thailand.

Cambodian migrant workers in Thailand are heterogeneous with respect to age and gender: out of 35 cases, half are women and half are men, and their age ranges between 17 to 58 years; in South Korea all cases are of young men, between 20 to 26 years old; finally, the migrant working in Japan is a 25 years old woman. It can be noticed that among 7 cases of regular migrants in South Korea and Japan only one refers to a woman: this stems from the fact that the sectors of work in these countries are male-dominated, making women choices limited to Thailand (Tunon & Rim, 2013).

**Figure 3. Destination countries (irregular and regular migrants breakdown)**



### 5.1.3 Financing Migration Costs

One common pattern to both regular and irregular migrants in the sample concerns the method of financing migration costs. In fact, more than a half of the interviewees – women, men, regular and irregular – say to have borrowed money in order to migrate. The great majority of these interviewees turned to MFIs and village microcredit, some got loans from banks, a few had money deducted from their salaries once abroad, some borrowed from neighbours and relatives and only a few used their own money. According to NELM, when financial services are lacking or inaccessible, labour migration can act as a solution (Stark 1982; Taylor et al. 1996): thus, the theory suggests that migration and credit work as substitute solutions. Bylander and Hamilton (2015) quantitative findings (Chapter 2), displaying the correlation (but not the causation)

between being a migrant household and relying on credit, can be thus complemented with qualitative data of my findings, which do offer the causal effect: in this sample, half of the migrants said to have borrowed credit *in order to* finance their migration. These results from this limited sample thus challenge the NELM hypothesis that migration is undertaken as a substitute for credit.

#### **5.1.4 Outcomes of Migrating Regularly vs. Irregularly**

A direct question on whether migrants would overall judge their experiences positively or negatively (and why so) was present in the interview guide<sup>17</sup>. “Positive experiences” are interpreted as those whereby migrants had their expectations met, did not experience problems in the workplace, received a satisfying wage, and were able to remit. “Negative experiences”, on the contrary, refers to episodes of denied rights, unmet expectations, abuse or exploitation, and low-(or non-received) wages, factors that could induce migrants to judge migration as “not worth it”. The results from this question are heterogeneous, as slightly more than half said to have had positive experiences, while the rest consider theirs negative. However, with only a few exceptions, almost everyone migrating regularly to Thailand and all migrants from South Korea and Japan refer to have had a positive experience (and would migrate again), and, in contrast, irregular migrants tend to have negative experiences. Some interviewees make even reference to the fact that they consider their migration a positive choice *because* they did so regularly:

*“I had a good job. I went regularly – and this contributed to the good experience. I would like to go again if I have a new visa, because with the right documents it is very easy, and you can find a good job, in a good company.”* (PV5, November 2016)

Viceversa, some realize how migrating irregularly negatively affected their experiences:

*“I had a bad experience because I did not go regularly. I went there to work in a factory irregularly and came back to collect my passport [from unlicensed brokers], but I was scammed! The guys in charge of making my documents, after I had already paid twice, disappeared. Now I have no money at all. I want to go back only if it’s through the regular way.”* (BTB7, October 2016)

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<sup>17</sup> The same question, elaborated in a different manner, was also proposed to the non-migrant interviewees with relatives abroad.

The answers from the direct question on whether one considered his or her experience positive or negative can be further complemented with common trends characterising regular and irregular migrants, as they emerged in the interviews, so to better frame, and in a more holistic manner, the picture of migrants experiences according to their legal statuses. The following data is analysed in two sub-sections, the former concerning everything related to migrants whilst in the receiving country, and the latter concerning experiences of migrants and their households upon return to Cambodia.

### **Experiences in the Receiving Country**

Irregular migrants from the sample are generally more likely to have low-skilled, low-paid jobs (farming, animal husbandry, street sales, fishing, and gardening), whereas regular migrants typically work in factories (electronics, iron, furniture) or in construction, which, they confirm, are more profitable. This is consistent with other reports addressing significant sectoral differences in wage terms and that irregular migrants, especially women, are less likely to receive minimum wage (MOLVT 2014; ILO & IOM 2017). People migrated to South Korea and Japan all had highly-paid and medium-skilled jobs, and received a three-months training before leaving, and had contracts with a fixed length (around 4 years).

Working conditions also vary among regular and irregular migrants, with the latter often expressing that their job was too heavy, working hours were too long, the salary was not provided on a regular basis, and employers were exploitative, in line with previous findings (Maltoni, 2010). However, there are a few exceptions of regular migrants admitting that their working conditions did not meet their expectations. One feature shared only by irregulars that negatively impact their lives abroad is fear, whereby many returnees confessed how tiring and stressful it was to hide from the police, with a few of them being caught by the Thai police and deported to Cambodia.

Lastly, some irregular migrants (BTB7,8; KMC17; PV5) (and none of the regulars) were scammed (unlicensed brokers asked them for money, promising to deliver documents to migrate, but then disappeared; employers deducted money from salaries for migration fees that did not exist; or brokers cheated on working conditions or jobs). In the worst scenario, a scam led to a

case of human trafficking, where an irregular migrant from Battambang was scammed in Thailand by his broker, and kept on a fishing boat<sup>18</sup> for three years against his will:

*“My broker made me work for many diverse things and I had no choice but agreeing. First I had to do agricultural work in a sugarcane farm, then in a potato farm; later I moved to construction; then I was selling on the street. After that I had to work in a factory, and then he put me on fishing boat for three years. I have been scammed by my broker who gave me the wrong visa. When I was on the boat I could not get out of it or contact my family. I was trapped on the boat... They [employers from the boat] didn’t pay me for 2 years, and on the last year I received 30.000 baht<sup>19</sup> that I had to use to repay my debt with the broker. I was left with 7000<sup>20</sup> baht that was just enough to come back home.”* (BTB8, October 2016)

This example is an extreme case, nonetheless other findings from the sample support the argument that irregular migrants experience difficulties while abroad: some interviewees mentioned the severity of their bosses, both when bosses were Thai (BTB8) and when the boss was Khmer (BTB3). Moreover, many stress that they did not receive salaries on time, and that their working conditions and jobs were too difficult (BTB3,8; KMC15):

*“The company treated me badly. I had no permission to have lunch breaks, and I was expected to work at night time. If I did something wrong, I had to do it again. I was very bad treated and so I ran away – losing my passport... Initially I worked for a bricks factory, but it was too exhausting; so all my siblings and I moved... but the new job was hard too so we had no choice but going back to the bricks factory.”* (BTB8, October, 2016)

This issue of moving from one employer to another arising in this interview is far from being an isolated case: other 12 interviewees (all irregular migrants) experienced the same (BTB1,10; KMC1,12,13,16,17; PV1,2,3,5,7), moving back and forth (either within Thailand or more commonly between Thailand and Cambodia) in search for new jobs. This finding has already been

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<sup>18</sup> Vutha et al. (2011: 11) describe working on fishing boats as “*the most dangerous and abusive job for male migrants... from Cambodia*”, because of low wages and harsh working conditions. Migrants are forced to work long hours (up to 15 or more) with no breaks, and sometimes they were forced to take drugs to be able to bear the work (ICSW 2007); some are trafficked and sold without knowing, and must work many years to repay their debt (*ibid.*).

<sup>19</sup> The equivalent of 870 USD.

<sup>20</sup> The equivalent of 200 USD.

examined by other studies, such as that of Deelen and Vasuprasat (2010), who suggest that migrants change employers in search of higher wages or better working conditions.

### **Experiences in the Sending Country**

First, regular migrant households are more likely to assess their life as improved as a result of migration. A more sophisticated analysis (discussing remittances and their usage) that might help reveal improvements in a family's condition follows in section 5.2.

Recalling the credit theme, of the 23 cases who borrowed money, all regular migrants' households were able to repay the loan quite soon (through remittances), whereas many of irregular migrants' households are now indebted and still paying off loans (irregular salaries, scams, and a high interest rate contributed to debt increases). There are also examples from irregular migrants that fully paid back MFIs, etc., but they are then left with no savings at all most of the time (in contrast to regular migrants). Irregular migrants are not only more likely to earn less, but also to be paid with less regularity – this affects their ability to remit and thus to pay back their loans (when interest rates may be already high). Hence, if debt initially was listed among the reasons pushing Cambodians to migrate, it appears now to be one of the outcomes affecting those who choose to migrate irregularly.

Linking the above to savings, hardly anyone among the irregulars in the sample was able to save money or is left with savings now, and conversely regular migrants' households are more likely to have savings left.

Briefly analysing job opportunities upon return, when talking to return irregular migrant answers primarily deal with worsened situations or status-quo: some are now unemployed (even if they had jobs prior leaving) and some are back to their old family jobs (such as farming) that saw no improvement. There is an exception of a woman from Battambang, who at 50 years of age migrated irregularly to Thailand (she had to lie about her age to be able to go), who even in the worst adversity (she was caught by the police) was able to start a new job and considerably improve her family's condition:

*"I am a mother of six, I had to leave to give my children a better future... Thank to the money I have earned in Thailand my kids are now going to university and I started a new business: I am producing handmade bags. I was not able to do it before and now I can, and I have a better income than before."* (BTB9, October 2016)

Finally, with respect to regular migrants, the trend in the sample sees no one unemployed upon return, with some able to start new income-generating activities (such as animal husbandry), and many continuing their old business that have notably improved thank to remittances. Lastly, because regular migrants are more likely to have medium-skilled jobs, the hope of their relatives reveals explicitly how such skills could serve once back:

*"I think that by going to Korea my grandson will learn a lot and acquire new skills. When he comes back he can do in Cambodia the job that he does in Korea, and maybe he can do it in Kampong Cham."* (KMC5,

November 2016)

The technology transfer potential emerging in this extract can be related to the concept of circular migration promoted by NELM.

### ***5.1.5 Factors Inducing Migrants to Choose Irregular Channels Over Regular Ones***

Given the findings depicted above on the benefits of regular migration and negative consequences of irregular migration, this study intends to understand the mechanisms leading migrants to choose irregular over regular channels of migration, thus exploring the origin of their inequalities. With a mixture of research strategies (expert and participant interviews, observations and published documents) I have reflected on the factors that push potential migrant workers to choose to migrate irregularly. The key emerging reasons and factors, described in detail below, are: fees cost, governance framework, corruption, geography and level of education.

Migrating regularly requires migrants enormous expenses. Usually the expenses to obtain the regular legal status include the provision of a passport, transportation costs, visas costs, training fees, facilitation fees and other documentation fees requested by PRAs. Fees are very high, but the foremost hindering issue is that there is no fee standardisation agreed upon by PRAs and MOLVT. As a result, any party (PRAs, MOLVT, PDOLVTs and licensed brokers) can charge whatever they want in exchange for their services. Regular migration is therefore extremely costly and makes migrants prefer irregular channels as they are perceived to be cheaper: one only needs to pay the transportation costs to the border with Thailand, where officials let you cross the

border upon the payment of a “pink card”<sup>21</sup> and then unlicensed brokers take care of everything else. However, this study as well as previous ones have shown how expensive (and malicious) brokers can be. A quantitative study from ILO and IOM (2017) examining migration costs shows that the average cost of migrating regularly is \$588 against \$138 for migrating irregularly.

Evidence supporting this argument can simply be found by looking for the price of issuing a passport in Cambodia: different sources cite different prices. The price of a Cambodian passport is the highest in Asia and one of the highest in the world: it is common knowledge that normally a passport costs \$130, and it takes around 1.5 month to have it made; however, if someone desires his or her passport to be made within two weeks, its cost increases to \$200; and to receive it in a week the price ranges between \$250 to \$300.

Governance framework also makes the obtainability of regular legal status complicated. In fact, all needed documentation requires the cooperation of PRAs, two ministries (MOLVT and MOFA) and the embassy of Cambodia, plus the coordination with parties in destination countries (employers). Officials often delay when processing the documentation that has to go through to the next party, resulting in a system that is not very efficient (Vutha et al., 2011). Once a potential migrant worker has contacted a PRA, this submits a request to the ministries, which in turn contact the embassy; the latter then has to send the list of candidates to the employing company in the destination country, wait for its approval and ultimately sign the contracts to be sent back to the PRA. This process takes a very long time, up to two, three or even four months. Moreover, the commitment and accountability of the duty-bearers (at the government level) is often missing. When officials do not understand the functioning of the stages and do not commit to coordinate, potential migrants’ applications can get stuck at one stage and be delayed or not make it to the next stage. According to ILO and IOM (2017) the average time to migrate through irregular channels is 26 days, conversely is 135 days through regular ones.

To better comprehend the choices of migrants, it is necessary to shift to their perspective, and visualise their perceptions, those of a Khmer worker, typically from a rural area, who decides to migrate – and a study of qualitative nature helps pursue this objective. Participant interviews reveal that the typical migrant worker from this case-study needs money to pay for food, for health-related expenses and for living costs necessary to make it through the day. Since regular

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<sup>21</sup> *Pink cards* are legal documents issued by Thailand allowing migrant workers to work in Thailand within a limited amount of time and space (otherwise the penalty is their deportation). Pink cards alone, however, are not sufficient to be registered as a regular migrant worker.

channels would take up between two to four months in order to be able to migrate, the potential migrant worker cannot wait, and thus chooses to migrate irregularly. Irregular migration is fostered by being cheaper and faster, as the governance framework is neither cost- nor time-effective.

According to Transparency International Corruption Perception Index (2016) Cambodia, listed as a highly corrupted country, ranks 156<sup>th</sup> out of 176 countries, and places itself at the bottom rank among all ASEAN countries. Through expert and informal interviews and observations, it came to light how transparency and accountability are often missing in the labour migration scenario:

*"If you secretly pay money to certain police officers or government officials, you can get the documents you need much quicker...or you can wait those two or three months to get it through the regular way"* (Expert Interview, March 2016)

This practice is widely spread all over the country and determines a further factor discouraging potential migrant workers to go through the regular channel: when migration fees are already high, and all the procedures complicated and time-consuming, knowing that there are also people that bribe to migrate faster, one's credibility in formal channels diminishes. A study from ILO and IOM (2017) shows that 24 per cent of surveyed return migrants made an informal payment to Thai or Malaysian government officials.

Another dimension affecting migrants' decisions is geography, in a twofold way. First, proximity to a destination country may tempt migrants to "just go and cross the border" (BTB3; BTB7; BTB8): this truly holds for Battambang sample. In fact, migrants would have to go all the way to Phnom Penh (around 6 hours or more) – or pay someone to do that – in order to have a passport made and then come back, and wait those 2-3 months of legal procedures before being able to leave regularly; alternatively, they can rely on a 3 hour drive that separates them from the Thai border and a pink card. Secondly, geography intended as the accessibility to remote areas also affects migrants' choices. Indeed, with 80 per cent of the population living in rural areas, many villages are very remote: it is difficult for information and opportunities to penetrate such villages, and it is difficult for villagers to reach PRAs. During a conference on labour migration to which I participate as an observant, a labour official from Battambang PDOLVT raised this very problem:

*“The PDOLVT in Battambang is having troubles in promoting safe migration opportunities and procedures to remote villages. They are difficult to reach, it takes too much time and is very expensive because the roads are in bad conditions”*(Observation 2, October 2016)

One further discriminating factor is education. By conducting participatory activities with interviewed migrant workers, I found out the some were illiterate and this forced them to rely on unlicensed brokers, with high risks of being scammed. Illiteracy rates affect migrants' ability to understand contracts, pre-departure training (when in place), and methods of education about safe migration and their rights at work (Tunon & Rim, 2013). On the contrary, people with higher levels of education have more chances to access beneficial opportunities. For example, the whole selection process to be deployed by South Korea requires candidates to have minimum education qualifications. In fact, after South Korea sets a deployment quota for Cambodia, then potential migrant workers have to properly register with MOLVT (through a formal system with a form to be filled), then candidates must attend a training programme (on Korean language, culture, policy framework and on technical skills needed for the job they apply for). Later, candidates undergo an examination and MOLVT sends the list of people who passed to the committee in South Korea, that selects the best candidates. Therefore, candidates for these kinds of partnerships (Korea, Japan) must have solid basic education that the typical migrant going to Thailand does not have. Not surprisingly, migrant workers from the sample who migrated to South Korea were young students who recently graduated or quit higher secondary education.

To sum up, the key factors that induce migrants to prefer irregular channels over regular ones are the following: fees costs, which are too high and non-standardised; governance framework, that makes the process time-consuming or even vain; corruption, discouraging potential migrants to opt for regularity; geography, that on the one hand makes it easier to cross the border with Thailand, and on the other makes opportunities impenetrable to remote areas limited by poor infrastructure; and low levels of education, that decreases the chances to get good jobs abroad. Relating to the theory, these findings support NELM and the stances put forward by current academics: migrants from the sample indeed actively try to improve their livelihoods by choosing to migrate, thus exhibiting agency, but their migration decisions are limited and shaped by the institutionalised context in which they live. As De Haas (2005) addresses, besides agency structure also matters and the political, economic and social dimensions of Cambodia (such as

governance framework, corruption, education, and infrastructure) indeed affect migration impacts on Khmer households.

Now that the impacts deriving from the choice of migrating irregularly rather than regularly have been explored, together with the main drivers of such choice, the first research question has been discussed; it is time to move on to the second one, dealing with remittances.

## 5.2 Remittances and their usage

In the next paragraphs, features emerged from the participant interviews on remittances trends (in relation to senders and recipients profiles, how the money is sent and how it is then spent) will be illustrated. On a methodological note, it urges to precise that the word *remittances* was never used during the interviews, as translators were not familiar with the terminology. When interviewing on the remittances theme, the key question simply involved *money sent back home* (see Appendix D and E for Interview Guides).

### 5.2.1 Senders and Recipients

Among the 36 cases in the sample, all return migrants and households with members abroad either used to send or are receiving remittances respectively. In the sample, generally husbands remitted to wives, wives to husbands, children to parents, and married couples also to parents – independently of whether the latter take care of grandchildren or not.

**Figure 4. Nvivo Words Frequency of interviewees' answers on remittances recipients**



Figure 4 illustrates in detail the persons to whom respondents referred to during the interviews, when they were asked to whom they send money to. The most common recipients were parents (23 cases): this is due to the fact that the greatest part of migrants is composed either by young unmarried migrants and by married couples who have migrated together, and both of these categories chose to remit to their parents. Secondly, when one of the partners in a couple left, the recipients were respectively wives (six cases) or the husband (one case): this reflects that it is more likely for husbands to migrate alone, rather than for wives (in line with old-fashioned theories). Nevertheless, this applies only when couples are under scrutiny, as the sample also sees eleven single women migrating. Finally, there are two cases where children are old enough (17-18 years old) to receive and manage the remittances; and a case where a migrant remits to his sister specifying that his parents passed away. From this analysis, two patterns, which were not expected, emerge: (international) migration of couples and the tendency to remit specifically to mothers.

The traditional approach treats migration decisions as a single person's mobility with labour migrants who do not usually bring their spouse with them. The case study displays that, besides taking decisions together (consistently with NELM), some households also migrated together. According to migration experts, this seems to be specific of Thailand, although it is not uncommon elsewhere. The reasons for this can be diverse. First, there are policies in Thailand that enable dependents to register upon employment of their relatives, and this can be an incentive for spouses to go (in line with social network theories, for which it easier to find a job when friends or family already work abroad). Secondly, it could be a choice encouraged by employers, who, in order to foster stability and accountability in the employees, let them bring their spouses too, so that if they are offered better jobs, they are less likely to run away. Moving beyond the motivations for such choice, it is interesting to understand its effects, if any, on the households. By further scrutinising the interviews, a new finding emerges: of the nine cases of migrant couples, seven assessed their migration experiences as positive, and their wealth improved. Not surprisingly, these cases all concern regular migrants, whereas the two couples who did not perceive their migration as worth it were irregular migrants couples.

Moving to the second finding, existing research supports that migrants predominantly remit to parents. Due to their quantitative nature, when these studies do not break down the category *parents* into *mother* and *father* in their questionnaires (e.g. Jampaklay & Kittisukhsathit, 2009 and Maltoni 2010) they potentially miss shedding light on what my qualitative case study demonstrates. By looking at Figure 4, the reader can visualize how, out of the 23 cases of parents

receiving remittances mentioned above, the great part actually refers to mothers. Initially, my recipients analysis was meant to picture solely the categories *parents*, *wife*, *husband*, *children* and *sister*, however, following a thoroughly discourse analysis, the fact that more interviewees made the effort to specify mother instead of just saying parents, it seemed necessary to analyse this trend more in detail. The first thing that needed to be checked was the Khmer terminology: are *mother* and *parents* words that are used interchangeably, or did respondents intentionally use the word *mother*? Following an interview with a Khmer key informant, it turned out that Khmer terminology is very precise, especially when referring to gender, and between the words *mother*, and *parents* there is not a thin line, on the contrary they are very distinct words (impossible to be interchanged). Therefore, the interviewees that said *mother* really meant that *she* was the physical person to receive and manage the remittances. According to the same key informant, there is a shared belief and perception among Cambodians whereby women would better control household finances with respect to men. This statement is not generalisable (as to fully understand interviewees motivations to remit to mothers, follow-up interviews with them would be the most appropriate approach), however the consequences on women deriving from this choice are worth being explored. In fact, studies such as that of Debnath and Selim (2009) showed evidence that where women are direct recipients of remittances, there is significant potential for greater economic empowerment and decision-making for themselves and for their family. Remittances are also said to be drivers for women's financial inclusion (UNCDF 2017), and females' status as senders and recipients of remittances can "*act as a catalyst for change in gendered power relations, by improving women's decision-making, economic status and inclusion in the labour market*" (UN-INSTRAW 2009; IOM 2010: 5).

### **5.2.2. How, and How much Money is Remitted**

The channels in which money is remitted to Cambodia are very relevant, as they have profound impact on the size of remittances and subsequently on recipient households; because of time constraints and language barriers, I was not able to gain insights on this particular topic through the interviews. Relying on the secondary data (UNDCF 2017), this study recognises that when migrants are irregular, they are very likely to use informal channels to send remittances. These however are risky: when migrants rely on brokers to deliver remittances, the former risk to either be charged too high fees, be scammed, or loose their money (*ibid.*). This might have occurred to

irregular migrants in my sample; in fact one migrant woman spontaneously discussed how she had no choice but to rely on an informal agent to send remittances, even if she did not trust him:

*"I used to send money to Prey Veng through a guy. He was based in Poipet [town at the border with Thailand], received the money and brought it to my family. I did not trust this guy but I had no other choice, since I had to repay the loan"*(PV 3, December 2016)

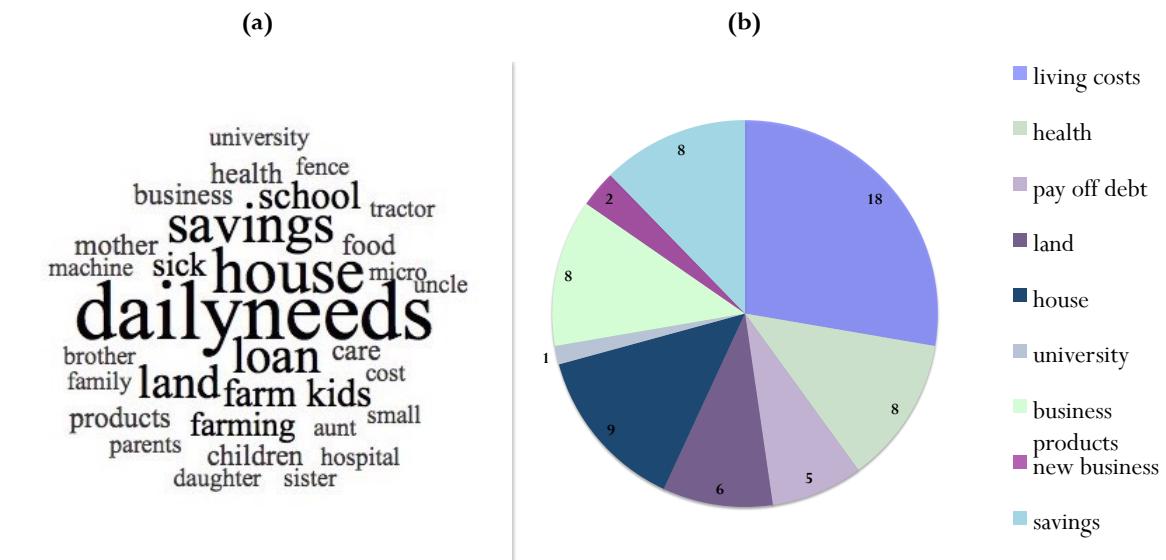
With respect to the amount of money remitted in the sample, it is hard to make inferences. A quantitative study would have been more appropriate to undertake this task, as through anonymous surveys, people are more comfortable in revealing how much they have remitted or received; on the contrary, face-to-face interviews can easily compromise their sensitivity. This explains why the participants' interview guide did not include questions on the amount of money remitted. However, a few participants spontaneously discussed it, and their experiences varied a lot whether one migrated regularly or irregularly. Five irregular migrants working in Thailand sent the least substantial amount (\$100 per month on average); one regular migrant from Thailand, instead, sent \$250 per month to his wife; finally, the regular migrant woman working in Japan remitted to her husband \$600 every month.

### **5.2.3 Use of Remittances by Recipient Households**

Figure 5a shows the words frequency of what regular and irregular migrants from the sample said to be spending their remittances for. Migrants and their families freely mentioned as many "items" as they wanted to, ranging from material objects, to savings, or other extended family members (aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces) that they were supporting.

The pie chart in Figure 5b, using the same data, counts the mentioned items (excluding the relatives) and codes them according to a series of categories that can help to better analyse migrants' choices. By analysing the pie chart clockwise, the first half can be identified with what pessimistic views define as non-productive investments ("leakage of remittances") (De Haas, 2007). The biggest share of remittances is spent on *living costs*, the households' daily consumption needs (food, electricity, rent and school fees are included here). This is followed by health expenses, and repayment of loans to MFIs, banks and others lenders.

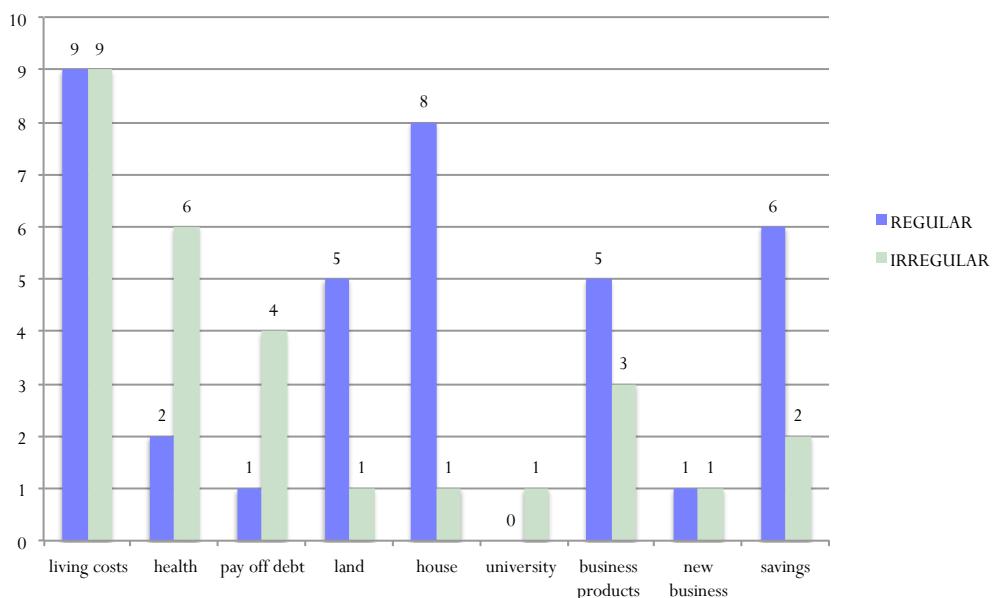
**Figure 5. Nvivo Words Frequency of remittances expenditures in the sample (a) and their coded distribution (b)**



Moving on to the second half, it is possible to see almost equal shares of items that NELM defines as investments in direct productive activities: land, house (this item is controversial, and there will be a focus on it later), university, business products and savings. *Land* refers to the purchase land, to either do farming activities or build a house. House stands for the usage of remittances for both the construction of a house or the expansion of a house (addition of floors, rooms, or a fence). *University* refers to the one case where a return migrant used part of her remittances to send her children to university. The item *business products* represents all assets listed by the interviewees, whose usage has been funded with remittances and served to improve an existing business. Only two cases see the investment of remittances in the creation of a *new business*: one family started a pig farm and opened a butcher shop; and one woman began to produce and sell handmade bags. Finally, a few households transferred remittances (part of or the whole amount) into their savings (during their interviews, some specified how they intended to use the savings in the future with general trends of buying land or extending the house).

Following the red thread of the dichotomy between regular and irregular migrants, by breaking down previous results into the two categories of regular and irregular workers, new insights are revealed (Figure 6).

**Figure 6. Distribution of remittances expenses: irregular and regular migrants breakdown**



First of all, by visualising the sum of values, which is different for the two categories (regulars indicated 37 items; irregulars 28), it can already be recognised that regular migrant workers have been able to use remittances for more, diverse purposes<sup>22</sup>. Because previous (quantitative) studies already highlighted *what* remittances are used for, this section seeks to understand *why* are remittances used in a certain manner in my sample.

The item *living costs* does not see differences between regular and irregular migrant workers: in fact, both categories during the interviews addressed it very often, bringing to light that migration was a choice made primarily to sustain their daily livelihoods, rather than to achieve a premeditated business-related goal (exceptions are illustrated later).

*Health*, instead, is an expense mainly addressed by irregular migrants: this does not mean that only irregulars are affected by bad health, but rather that they can afford to use remittances to pay primarily for health, whereas regulars use remittances primarily for other purposes (it is very much likely that they use remittances for health-related expenditures too, but when asked *what do you use remittances for* they rather indicate only those items for which they spend greater amounts). Here is one of the examples of an irregular migrant that did not earn enough money (she was also scammed) and was able to use remittances only for health-related expenses:

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<sup>22</sup> This rationale stems from the composition of interviewees, who were half regular and half irregular migrant workers.

*“Because I earned a little salary, I was only able to send enough money to cover for my mother’s hospital expenses. She was very sick, every month I was sending money for her...after the scam I came back and had no money at all and no job”*(BTB7, October 2016)

The item *pay off debt* can be treated like *health*. Indeed, costs of migration are extremely high for regular migrant workers, and they do borrow money as well – however, they pay off loans quicker than irregular migrants. Hence, by the time of the interview, it is more likely for regular migrants to have already paid off their debts (and thus be able to spend remittances on other things); on the contrary, irregulars were sometimes forced to use remittances only to repay debt, such as the following:

*“The interest rate of the loan was very expensive. I had to pay big amounts every month, and it was a difficult situation because I could not use remittances for other things. No I have no money, no job and no savings”*(BTB2, December 2016)

So far I have explored the first half of the pie chart (Figure 6): it is predominantly related to irregular workers (light-coloured bars). Instead, the items in the second half are predominantly characterising regular workers (dark-coloured bars).

Of the six cases informing to have bought *land*, five are regular migrants. They chose to migrate in order to buy land to start a farming activity or build a house on it.

A similar proportion is found in the category *house*, where eight cases are of regular migrants and only one an irregular migrant. Migrants either built a new house or, more commonly, expanded an existing one in order to host a new married generation. The interviewees that used remittances to buy land were all men migrants; those that built houses were either men or couples.

The item *university* refers to an irregular migrant. *Business products* are mainly bought by regular migrants (five cases), nevertheless a few irregulars (three cases) could also afford them: some households bought products for their farms (chemicals, fertilizers, etc.), one household bought stock for its local shop, one household purchased a machine for its farm and another one a tractor. Of the two *new business* cases, one (pig farm) was started by a regular migrant, whereas the other (handmade bags) by an irregular migrant (the same that funded her children’ university). The example of the pig farm comes from a household whose migrant member moved to South Korea:

*“My grandson is sending money from Korea to his parents. They are using the money for a pig farm, and to build him an extra floor in their house in Kampong Cham... The pig farm was started after he migrated to Korea, because, before my grandson went there, they did not have money for the farm and the for the butcher shop, which also opened in the village after the money from Korea was received.”* (KMC4, October 2016).

In conclusion, two trends characterise the sample: first, regular migrants are able to spend more effectively than irregular migrants; second, there is a tendency to spend a great share of remittances on daily expenses, rather than investments. This finding is supported by both old and recent quantitative studies: almost a decade ago, ILO found that 37 per cent of Cambodian households used remittances for daily household consumption, and only 8 per cent was invested in agriculture or business venture (Jampaklay & Vasuprasat 2009); and recent data from UNCDF (2017) and ILO and IOM (2017) shows that remittances are primarily used for daily expenses rather than longer-term productive investments.

### **5.3 Do Empirical Findings from the Sample Support NELM?**

Given its premises, whereby migration is a coping strategy where financial services and insurance markets are limited, Cambodia represents a suitable country for NELM to be applied. One conflicting argument relates to capital markets: microcredit expansion seems not to be a substitute solution for migration, instead, this qualitative study shows that half of interviewed migrants borrowed money to finance their migration. This said, the fundamental assumption that NELM seems to hold in the sample is that migration represents a household strategy to increase and diversify family income (Maltoni 2010; Zimmer & Knodel 2013). The participants interviewed in fact reveal how households members strategically decide to leave in order to support their families; and household would eventually benefit from this decision once remittances are sent back. Indeed, all interviewees confirm to have sent or received remittances. However, even if the role of agency holds as per the theory, structural constraints seems to play a more decisive role in the Cambodian context.

When it comes to analysing remittances impacts, inferences are heterogeneous and depend to a great extent on migrants’ legal status. Findings exhibit that regular migrants are somewhat investing their remittances in productive activities, thus mirroring NELM rationale; in contrast, irregular migrants are very limited in their choices. Despite regular migrants make

productive investments (from a strictly economic viewpoint), they are still predominantly tied to daily consumption; nevertheless, this study agrees with academics suggesting that consumptive expenses and non-productive investments can have highly positive multiplier effects on household themselves and employment and income for non-migrants (De Haas 2007). For example, investing remittances for food may lead to food security and better nutritional status; spending for health or education may improve the livelihood prospects of future generations; investing in physical capital and production inputs can affect local employment and economy (Jampaklay & Kittisuksathit, 2009). Thus, if one thinks in terms of capabilities (Sen 1999) and not mere economic wealth, consumptive investments can also lead to development. The housing theme of the sample can be the best example: many indeed chose to invest in expanding or improving their house; this may not be an income-generating activity for the household itself, it contributes to their *freedoms* (*ibid.*) and is beneficial for all other people involved in the construction of the house, supply of material, and so on. To conclude, the heterogeneous findings on return migration do not always reflect NELM: some regular migrants returned with savings, and generally to better jobs than before; whereas a bulk of irregular migrants are unemployed upon return, have no savings, or are indebted.

## **6. CONCLUSIONS**

The purpose of this study was examine the labour migration scenario and its structural conditions in Cambodia, particularly focusing on those dimensions that hinder Khmer migrant workers to realise the full developmental potential of their migration experiences. The research, which due to its qualitative nature is not generalisable, aimed to position itself within and in comparison to existing research and theoretical assumptions, in order to be relevant and contribute to accumulated knowledge, with the purpose of being able to get insights and explain causal relationships that better describe the specificities of Cambodia. Once insights are grasped, it is indeed possible to suggest for policy implications that can favor the developmental potential of migration in the Kingdom. This chapter summarises the key findings from the case-study and lastly discusses policy implications and suggests for further research.

### **6.1 Key and Emerging Findings**

First, the case-study displays irregular and regular migrant workers going through profoundly different experiences when they migrate. Regular migrants, especially those in South Korea and Japan, generally have positive experiences in terms of jobs, working conditions, and salary; on the contrary, irregular migrants – of which a predominant share are women – earn less, have more chances to be exploited, abused or worse trafficked, and are often scammed. Further exploring the reasons leading some to choose a channel of migration over another, a few structural obstacles emerge. The main reason for migrants to use irregular channels is found to be the absence of fees standardisation with respect to migration costs: without standardisation, fees result extremely high. This is combined with a governance framework that is very inefficient and highly corrupted. Adding up to the expensive and time-consuming procedures for obtaining the regular legal status, other reasons hindering migrants from accessing regular channels, and potentially successful opportunities, are their level of education and geographical location. With respect to remittances, heterogeneous results emerge and the red thread, once again, is the distinction between regular and irregular migrants: the former seem to be able to use remittances for more diverse purposes, such as buying land or assets for their businesses, expanding their houses and save for future plans. Whereas irregular migrants households are limited to everyday consumption, health-related expenses and paying off their debts. Two new findings that were not expected also emerge from

the sample. First, the majority of migrants remit to female figures; if this could be analytically generalised, women's role as managers of remittances would have the potential to question gendered power relations, and improve their decision-making, economic status and inclusion in the labour market. Further, the case-study particularly sheds light on the inequalities amongst men and women migrants in the sample: women were more likely irregular, and thus exposed to greater risks. Secondly, there is a tendency among households in the sample to migrate as a couple; on the one hand this questions again gender power relations, and on the other it drifts away from common theoretical frameworks.

## **6.2 Discussion, Policy Implication and Further Research**

Assuming that, agreeing with NELM, migration does have the potential to bring about social development, this case-study highlighted the fundamental importance of agency and structure in shaping such potential in Cambodia. If Khmer migrants are the primary agents of innovation and development, their choices result however extremely limited due to structural obstacles that need to be enhanced, and the role of the state is decisive in this regard (De Haas 2007). Current evidence shows that migration and remittances do not bring about economic and social changes where fundamental political, legal, economic, social, and cultural context are neglected (De Haas 2010; Castles & Wise 2008). For the developmental potential of migration to be fully realised, the policy implications specific to this case-study involve the opening of regular migration opportunities, and this requires structural changes in transparency and accountability with respect costs of migration; further the Khmer government should direct its policy into higher levels of education, a well-functioning financial sector, reliable infrastructure and combating corruption. It is advisable to strengthen bilateral cooperation such as the MOU with South Korea, as it demonstrates to be extremely beneficial for the migrants in the sample. Lastly, skills and reintegration need to be addressed for return migrants to exploit their full potential upon return. Remittances appear inextricably interconnected with migrants' legal statuses in the sample: thus, by investing in the opening of regular corridors, remittances potential may also increase. Other policies may involve cheaper, faster and more secure ways to send remittances, and perhaps linking them to savings, as suggested by UNDCF (2017). What urges is to recognise that remittances are privately held funds: paternalistic views where the government channel

remittances or tell migrants how to use them should be avoided (De Haas 2007); instead one should think of their impacts in terms of capabilities (Sen 1999) and not mere economic wealth.

Further research needs to be conducted, especially shifting the focus on women and their capabilities, and on the new dynamics of migration in Cambodia (such as the phenomenon of couple-migration, to the extent that is analytically generalisable). I particularly advocate for an interdisciplinary synthesis, which can increase our understanding of the full complexity of migration interactions (Arango 2004). This study often reflected upon the dichotomy between economics and quantitative research on the one hand, and qualitatively-oriented social sciences on the other, but ultimately advocates for their complementarity: representativeness should thus be complemented with qualitative insights, and the indicators of monetary wealth with human well-being, community and equality-related ones (Castle & Wise 2008).

To conclude, and going beyond ontological and methodological discussions, what is for sure is that the circumstances and vulnerabilities of Khmer women and men migrant workers demand further attention.

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## **APPENDIX A. CONCEPTS AND DEFINITIONS**

### **DEVELOPMENT**

The definition of development that holds for this study is inspired from Sen (1999), whereby development takes place with the expansion of the real freedoms that people enjoy. According to Sen, these *freedoms* operationalise through the concept of human capability, the ability of people to lead valuable lives and to increase their substantive choices (*ibid.*). By conceiving development as a social and human improvement in the quality of people's lives, Sen's capabilities approach challenges narrower views of development that are primarily based on income indicators and material growth, and instead expands it to dimensions of social well-being, poverty alleviation, income inequality, gender equality and education, health and decent work (De Haas, 2007).

By adopting a definition of development based on human and social dimensions in a context of migration and remittances impacts, this study recognises and emphasises the need to look beyond mere income indicators, and rather examine the multifaceted ways in which well-being and capabilities of migrant workers are affected by their migration experiences (*ibid.*). Further, Sen's definition can well co-exist with the qualitative nature of this study, and its constructivist ontology.

### **INTERNATIONAL MIGRANTS WORKERS**

International migrant workers are people engaged or that have been engaged in a remunerated activity in a country they are not a national, and refers to both regular and irregular men and women migrant workers (MOLVT 2014). The term *irregular* is often used interchangeably with terms like *undocumented*, *unauthorized*, *unofficial*, *informal*, or *clandestine* (Vutha et al. 2011). This study refers to international migrant workers simply as *migrants* and to the category of people who migrate irregularly as *irregular migrants*.

### **REMITTANCES**

Funds transferred by migrants to their relatives or other persons in their country of origin (IOM, 2010).

### **MICROFINANCE**

Microfinance comprises the set of financial services targeted for the poor. Because MFIs mostly provide microcredit-related services, the term *microfinance* often is used interchangeably with *microcredit*. In the course of this paper, following Bylander's terminology (2014), I use the latter term when referring particularly to the provision of loans by MFIs and NGOs, and the former when addressing the sector or entities providing these services.

## APPENDIX B. MAP OF CAMBODIA AND INTERVIEWS SITES



Source: [www.wikipedia.org/Cambodia\\_administrative\\_divisions](http://www.wikipedia.org/Cambodia_administrative_divisions)

Interviews sites: one village in Battambang province (October 2016); two villages in Kampong Cham province (November 2016, round 1; December 2016, round 2); one village in Prey Veng province (December 2016).

## APPENDIX C. LIST OF INTERVIEWS AND OBSERVATIONS

### Participant Interviews

No	Respondent	Status (returnee or migrant household member [MHM])	Migrant Gender	Legal status of Migrant	Country of Destination	Location	Date
1	BTB1	Returnee	F	Irregular	Thailand	Battambang	Oct. 2016
2	BTB2	Returnee	F	Irregular	Thailand	Battambang	Oct. 2016
3	BTB3 (a) <sup>1</sup>	Returnee	M	Irregular	Thailand	Battambang	Oct. 2016
3	BTB3 (b) <sup>1</sup>	Returnee	F	Irregular	Thailand	Battambang	Oct. 2016
4	BTB4	Returnee	F	Irregular	Thailand	Battambang	Oct. 2016
5	BTB5	Returnee	F	Regular	Thailand	Battambang	Oct. 2016
6	BTB6	Returnee	F	Regular	Thailand	Battambang	Oct. 2016
7	BTB7	Returnee	F	Irregular	Thailand	Battambang	Oct. 2016
8	BTB8 (a)	Returnee	M	Irregular	Thailand	Battambang	Oct. 2016
8	BTB8 (b)	Returnee	F	Irregular	Thailand	Battambang	Oct. 2016
9	BTB9	Returnee	F	Irregular	Thailand	Battambang	Oct. 2016
10	BTB10	Returnee	F	Irregular	Thailand	Battambang	Oct. 2016
11	BTB11	Returnee	M	Regular	Thailand	Battambang	Oct. 2016
12	KMC1	MHM	F, F, M <sup>2</sup>	Regular	Thailand	Kampong Cham	Nov. 2016
13	KMC2	MHM	F	Regular	Japan	Kampong Cham	Nov. 2016
14	KMC3	MHM	M	Regular	South Korea	Kampong Cham	Nov. 2016
15	KMC4	MHM	M	Regular	South Korea	Kampong Cham	Nov. 2016
16	KMC5	MHM	M	Regular	South Korea	Kampong Cham	Nov. 2016
17	KMC6	MHM	M	Irregular	Thailand	Kampong Cham	Nov. 2016
18	KMC7	MHM	M	Regular	South Korea	Kampong Cham	Nov. 2016
19	KMC8	MHM	M	Regular	South Korea	Kampong Cham	Nov. 2016
20	KMC9	MHM	M	Regular	South Korea	Kampong Cham	Nov. 2016
21	PV1	Returnee	M	Irregular	Thailand	Prey Veng	Dec. 2016
22	PV2	Returnee	M	Regular	Thailand	Prey Veng	Dec. 2016
23	PV3	Returnee	M	Irregular	Thailand	Prey Veng	Dec. 2016

24	PV4	MHM	M	Regular	Thailand	Prey Veng	Dec. 2016
25	PV5	MHM	F, F	Irregular	Thailand	Prey Veng	Dec. 2016
26	PV6	MHM	M	Irregular	Thailand	Prey Veng	Dec. 2016
27	PV7	Returnee	F	Irregular	Thailand	Prey Veng	Dec. 2016
28	PV8	Returnee	F	Irregular	Thailand	Prey Veng	Dec. 2016
29	KMC10	Returnee	M	Regular	Thailand	Kampong Cham <sup>3</sup>	Dec. 2016 <sup>3</sup>
30	KMC11	Returnee	M	Regular	Thailand	Kampong Cham	Dec. 2016
31	KMC12	Returnee	M	Regular	Thailand	Kampong Cham	Dec. 2016
32	KMC13	Returnee	M	Regular	Thailand	Kampong Cham	Dec. 2016
33	KMC14	Returnee	M	Regular	Thailand	Kampong Cham	Dec. 2016
34	KMC15	Returnee	M	Regular	Thailand	Kampong Cham	Dec. 2016
35	KMC16	MHM	F, M, F	both	Thailand	Kampong Cham	Dec. 2016
36	KMC17	Broker	M	-	Thailand	Kampong Cham	Dec. 2016

1. (a) and (b) stand respectively for the two partners of a married couple.

2. When interviewees were MHM, they were either spouses, parents or grandparents of migrants. More specifically, KMC1, KMC16 and PV5 refer to interviewees having more than one child abroad.

3. The second round of interviews that took place in Kampong Cham province (December 2016) was conducted in a different village with respect to those of the first round (October 2016).

## Expert Interviews

No.	Name	Position	Date
1	Veth Vorn	National Project Coordinator (ILO Cambodia), TRIANGLE II project	October 2016 & March 2017 (follow-up)
2	Marc Rodriguez	Associate Professor of History and Managing Editor of the <i>Pacific Historical Review</i> (Portland State University)	March 2017
3	Ben Harkins	Technical Officer (ILO ROAP), TRIANGLE II project	April 2017

## Observations

No.	Event	Participants	Date	Location
1	Workshop to review the implementation of the Labour Migration Policy and to develop an Action Plan for 2016-2017	TRIANGLE II, UN agencies, NGOs, CSOs, officials from PDOLVTs and MOLVT	September 2016	Phnom Penh
2	Field Visit to Migrant Workers Resource Center (MRC) in Battambang	TRIANGLE II, PDOLVT, NEA, commune leaders	October 2016	Battambang
3	Ethical Recruitment and Gender Sensitive Protection of Migrant Workers	Staff from PRAs, officials from PDOLVTs and MOLVT	December 2016	Sihanouk Ville

## **APPENDIX D. INTERVIEW GUIDE 1 (RETURN MIGRANTS)**

### **Information and Consent<sup>23</sup>**

#### **Personal Data**

What is your name?

How old are you?

Are you married? Do you have kids?

#### **Labour Migration Experience**

Did you migrate outside Cambodia for work?

Why did you choose to migrate? Where did you go?

When did you go, and how long have you been there? Did you go once or multiple times? (If multiple) Why?

What job did you do in X? Did you receive any kind of training before going to X? (e.g. skills, safe migration, financial literacy)

Did you go to X with your family? (e.g. spouse, children, siblings, parents)

Overall, was it a positive or negative experience? Would you go back again? Please share some examples to elaborate on your answer.

Did you migrate through regular channels? (e.g. with passport, work permit, etc.). Was it expensive?

How did you pay for the cost of migration? Did you borrow money or receive loans from neighbors, relatives or microcredit institutions? If yes, were you able to repay it?

#### **Remittances**

When you were abroad, did you send money home or save money? Who did you sent it to?

Are you happy with the way your wife/husband/parents spend the money? How did they spend it?

How should the money saved be spent in your opinion? Do you have plans for the future?

What job were you doing in Prey Veng/Battambang/Kampong Cham before going abroad? What are you doing now that you are back?

Do you think your family condition has improved after you went abroad?

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<sup>23</sup> At the beginning of each interview, respondents are provided with information on researcher and interpreter, and research topic, and are asked for consent to be recorded (with anonymity and confidentiality).

## **APPENDIX E. INTERVIEW GUIDE 2 (MIGRANTS RELATIVES)**

### **Information and Consent**

#### **Personal Data**

What is your name?

How old are you?

Are you married? Do you have kids?

#### **Labour Migration Experience**

Did someone from your family migrate? Who?<sup>24</sup>

Why did X choose to migrate?

What job were X doing in Prey Veng/Battambang/ Kampong Cham before going abroad?

Where did X go, when and how long has X been there? Did X go one or several times? (If multiple) Why?

What does X do there? Did X receive any kind of training before migrating? (e.g. skills, safe migration, financial literacy)

Did X go with other family members (spouse, children)? If X moved with spouse, do their kids stay with you?

Overall, is migration for X a positive or negative experience? Is X happy? Please share more insights.

Did X migrate through regular channels? Was it expensive?

How did X pay for the cost of migration? Did X borrow money or make a loan from neighbors, relatives or microcredit institutions? If yes, was X able to repay all debt? If so, did you personally take care of the payment?

#### **Remittances**

Does X send money home or save money?

What do you do with the money X sends? Do you save or use it, or both? Do give it to other family members?

Do you have plans for the future?

Do you think your family condition has improved after X went abroad?

---

<sup>24</sup> If the respondent is a mother or father having more than one child abroad, I ask them to tell me about children's experiences one at the time.

## APPENDIX F. EXTRACT FROM TRANSCRIPT

Extract from the expert interview conducted with Veth Vorn, imported and transcribed with NVivo.

Name	Nodes	R Created On	Created By	Modified On	Modified By	Color
Benjamin Harkins	0	0 0 09/apr/2017 21:33	FP	Today, 14:11	FP	
Veth Vorn	0	0 0 29/mar/2017 21:40	FP	Today, 14:25	FP	

The NVivo interface shows a waveform at the top right, a toolbar with playback controls (Loop, Previous, Next, Stop, Speed), and a transcript table below. The transcript table has columns for Start Time, End Time, Transcript, and Speaker. The transcript content is as follows:

Start Time	End Time	Transcript	Speaker
00:32:42.6	00:33:28.1	Can you tell me how the system works if potential migrants want to go to South Korea?	Francesca
00:33:28.1	00:36:43.8	This is one of the good practices of Cambodia: it's called "government-to-government-system". The government of South Korea provides a quota to the government in Cambodia and Cambodia must meet this requirement through official channels. I think this represents a great opportunity for migrant workers to compete and meet this demand from Korean employers. The first thing to do is for candidates to register properly with MOLVT - they have a system with a form that enables the registration. After the registration, they have to attend a training (on language, culture, policy and technical skills for the area they applied for). Then they have an exam and the list of people that passes the exam is sent by MOLVT to Korea and Korea finally select the best candidates. Then employers from Korea come to Cambodia and meet the candidates in person and select them.	Veth
00:36:43.8	00:37:18.2	I see. It makes sense. Indeed all the guys I talked to that went to South Korea were all young students that quit secondary or higher education, so they had the basic education that let them go through this process.	Francesca
00:37:18.2	00:39:51.9	Correct. Candidates have basic knowledge that is quite strong (computer skills, secondary education, etc) which migrants that go to Thailand do not have. In South Korea they are very strict but everything works: migrants receive good salaries, benefits, insurance - everything that is in the contract is put in place, and nothing unethical happens (e.g.	Veth

At the bottom left, there are icons for zooming in and out, and a 'Synchronize' button. At the bottom right, the navigation path is shown: SOURCES > Internals > Experts Interviews > Veth Vorn.