

Reconsidering the Impact of Migration on Older Age Parents: Evidence from Two Battambang Communes¹

Introduction

The movement of people from rural areas in developing countries to cities and across borders, primarily in search of employment, is an inescapable consequence of development and the globalisation process. This type of labour migration has become persistent and an accelerating reality in many developing countries, including Cambodia (Chan 2008). However, how this impacts on family members including intergenerational solidarity remains a matter of considerable debate. International forums concerned with advocacy and mass media accounts tend to view migration as undermining the family and leading to the loss of economic, social and psychological support and personal care for elderly parents from absent children (Knodel *et al.* 2010). Older people being left behind to fend for themselves in rural areas due to the emigration of their adult children has also been a common account in the Cambodian literature (FitzGerald *et al.* 2007; Murshid 2007).

Meanwhile, there are alternate perspectives that view the impact of migration on the family in the developing world in a less negative light. In much of this literature, migration is seen as part of a household strategy to diversify risks for families and benefit both migrant and non-migrant members, including older age parents who typically remain behind in the place of origin. However, the focus of these studies is typically limited to economic exchanges rather than the fuller range of support that

children potentially provide parents, such as social interaction, assistance with daily living and care-giving services related to health. One perspective that does consider a broader range of impacts and focuses more broadly on how family relations and structures change as societies pass from agrarian to industrial and then to post-industrial forms is that of the “modified extended family”. Rather than development leading to the demise of extended family relations, a modified form emerges that is adapted to the changed circumstances. According to this view, advances in technology, especially transportation and communication, permit family members to maintain close contact and to fulfil some, if not all, of the responsibilities to each other, including obligations to older age parents that previously required geographical proximity (Knodel *et al.* 2010).

Research Questions

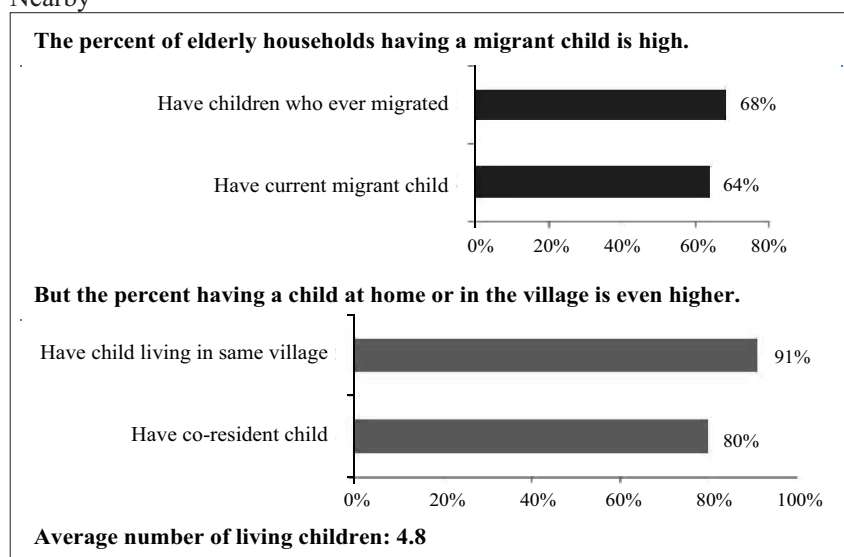
The overarching questions addressed in this research are: How does migration of adult children affect the well-being of rural older age parents who remain behind, and how does this migration impact intergenerational solidarity? More specifically, the study seeks to examine whether the migration of adult children leads to the desertion and neglect of older parents, whether types of intergenerational exchanges differ depending upon the location of children, whether migrants and their parents maintain social contact and whether the net balance of material exchanges over the duration of the separation favour parents or children.

Research Methods

The study was undertaken in two communes of Battambang province in June 2010. Traeng commune in Rotanak Mondol district lies on the western side of the province, near but not along the border with Thailand. Highway 67, a main road that connects the Battambang provincial capital and the provincial capital of Pailin province, runs through

¹ This article was prepared by Hak Sochanny, Oeur Il, So Dane, Khuon Chandore, Chen Sochoeun, Houn Kalyan and John McAndrew, who were all staff members of the Analysing Development Issues (ADI) project of the Cooperation Committee of Cambodia at the time of the study. The researchers gratefully acknowledge the collaborative contributions of Professor Zachary Zimmer of the University of California, San Francisco, and Professor John Knodel, Population Studies Center, University of Michigan. Collaborative support was provided by the Doha International Institute of Family Studies and Development.

Figure 1: Older Age Households with Migrant Children and Children Living Nearby



the commune. Ta Loas commune in Mounge Russey District is situated on the south-eastern side of the province near Highway Number 5, a main highway that runs north to south across the province and connects the provincial capital to Phnom Penh. A survey was conducted in five villages in both Traeng and Ta Loas communes with 265 people aged 60 to 70 who had at least one living child. In all, the respondents had 1268 living children.

Living Arrangements of Parents and Children

The study defines migrants as children who have moved away from home, out of the districts of their parents. Children who remained in the original districts of their parents after their parents had migrated to the study sites were not considered as migrants. The findings of our study indicate that migration but not desertion characterises the older age households surveyed. A high percentage of the elderly households reported having a migrant child. Yet an even higher percentage stated that they had a child living at home. Just less than two-thirds of the respondents had a current migrant child while four-fifths had a co-resident child.

This indicates that the elderly parents had not been left alone despite the high migration rates of their children. This may be explained by the high fertility rate of this cohort of parents. On average, the respondents had 4.8 living children. This allowed some children to migrate and others to remain behind in the homes or villages of their parents (Figure 1).

The study also compared living arrangements between respondents who had a current migrant child and those who did not. If older age parents with a migrant child were typically left

alone, we would expect large percentages of them to live without a child in the household. This was not the case. More than three-fourths of the respondents with a current migrant child also lived with a child. Interestingly, respondents with a current migrant child were less likely to live alone than respondents with no current migrant child, although the former were more likely than the latter to live only with a spouse or with a grandchild but no child. However, the differences in all these cases were small (Figure 2).

Migration Impacts on Parents' Well-Being

Migration of adult children from rural areas is often said to erode the well-being of elderly parents. Our findings do not support this observation. In general, the situations of elderly parents with or

Figure 2: Living Arrangements of Older Age Respondents

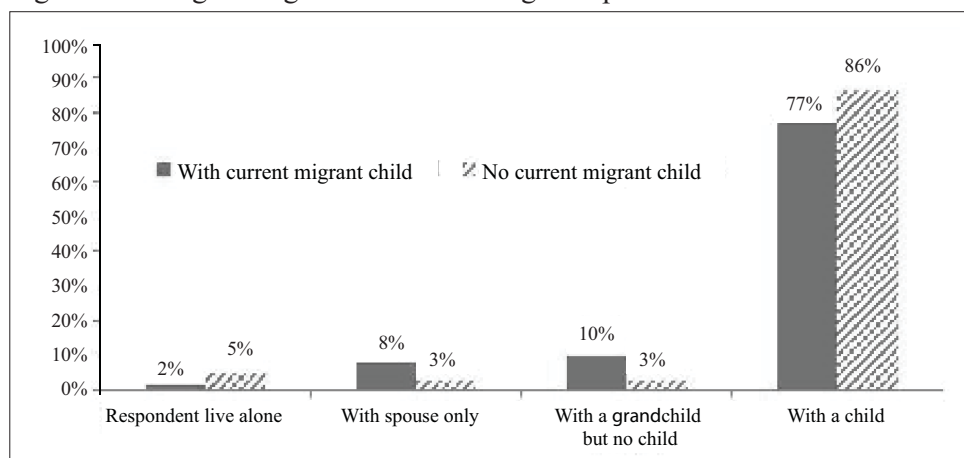


Table 1: Selected Indicators of Respondents' Well-Being, by Migration Status of Children

	Migration status		
	Has current migrant child	Has no current migrant child	Total
Number of cases	171	94	265
Wealth score ¹ (mean)	4.8	4.6	4.8
Percentage of those who do not have land	36	21*	31
Physical ability score ² (mean)	4.5	4.6	4.5
Percent with daily activity limitation ³	10	7	9
Family satisfaction score ⁴ (mean)	7.4	7.5	7.4
Psychological well-being score ⁵ (mean)	11.1	11.4	11.2

Significance level: *=.05 level based on chi-square test and T-test.

1. Measured as a summed score of 13 household items plus two housing characteristics.

2. Physical ability score is based on respondents' perception on three measures; ability to walk 200 metres, ability to lift a 5 kilogram bag of rice and ability to maintain the house, all without help from others. Highest score is 6 and lowest 0.

3. A limitation with an activity of daily living means that either respondent or spouse needs help caring for themselves, such as bathing and getting dressed.

4. Family satisfaction score is based on respondent's perception of how the family gets along and depends on each other and how children are doing with their lives. Highest score is 9 and lowest 3.

5. Psychological well-being score is based on respondent's perception on six measures. Highest psychological well-being score is 18 and lowest 6.

without migrant children were comparable. Indeed, their mean wealth scores, physical ability scores, family satisfaction scores, psychological well-being scores and the percentage with daily activity limitations are virtually the same. At the same time, respondents with a current migrant child reported significantly higher rates of landlessness than respondents without a current migrant child (Table 1). This is not surprising since households without land would be under greater pressure to have

children work as migrants.

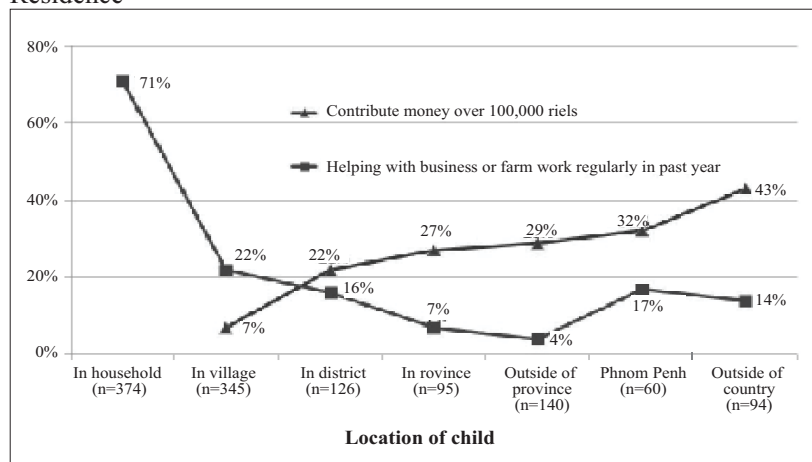
The proportion of respondents with all children outside the village (and who thus may be considered to have been left behind) is less than 10 per cent. Still, many are landless and poor. Their incidence of landlessness is much higher than for respondents with a co-resident child, and their average wealth score is much lower (Table 2). Of note, 18 of the 23 respondents in this group are females and 13 of these females are not currently married.

Table 2: Selected Indicators of Respondents' Well-Being, by Location of Nearest Child

	Location of nearest child		
	In household	In village	Outside village
Number of cases	212	30	23
Wealth score (mean)	5.1	3.3	3.3***
Percentage of those who do not have land	25	40	74***
Physical ability score (mean)	4.5	4.7	4.6
Percent with daily activity limitation	9	13	4
Family satisfaction score (mean)	7.6	6.6	7.1***
Psychological well-being score (mean)	11.4	10.1	10.8**

Significance levels: **=.01 level; ***=.001 level based on chi-square test and ANOVA test. For definitions, see Table 1.

Figure 3: Children's Contributions to Parents, by Child's Place of Residence



Note: The high percentages of children in Phnom Penh and outside the country helping with business or farm work regularly in the past year were due to the fact that they were recent migrants, away for less than one year.

Material and Monetary Support

Migration of adult children from rural areas has been said to leave elderly parents behind to work on their farms with no one to help (Murshid 2007). Our empirical evidence does not support this contention. While children who live with or near their parents provide more regular help with business or farm work, children who live further away contribute more money. This suggests that children make different and complementary contributions to their parents, depending on their place of residence. Children who live with their parents make valuable contributions by providing regular help with business and farm work. The value of this support is crucial and should not be underestimated. Children working outside the district, within Cambodia and outside the country, contribute important monetary support (Figure 3).

Social Contact between Parents and Children

Social contact between parents and adult children is valued in Cambodia. The migration of children away from their parents reduces opportunities for sustained day-to-day interaction and thus threatens to undermine this value. While migration may contribute positively to the economic well-being of migrant families, it may also erode relationships between parents and children. In the past, long

distances separating parents and children prohibited regular monthly visits, and phone connections were not available. Now the advent and wide use of mobile phones greatly facilitates parents and migrant children communicating over long distances. We found that a majority of children living outside the district of their parents, either within or outside Cambodia, talked and/or had visits with their parents at least once a month. Both groups relied heavily on phone calls rather than visits to maintain contact. These levels of interaction are somewhat lower but compare favourably with those of children living outside the village but

within the same district as their parents, i.e. with those of children whom this study does not consider to be migrants (Figure 4).

Material and Monetary Exchanges

Exchanges of support and services between parents and migrant children can flow in either direction or not at all. Parents often provided material support to migrant children, especially in financing costs incurred during the early stages of migration. Among the 344 migrant children away for at least one year, 48 percent received help from their parents to pay migration expenses. Meanwhile, 56 percent of the migrant children away for at least one year provided their parents with regular financial support as migrants. Moreover, 55 percent of 256 migrant children who were away for one year contributed

Figure 4: Children Outside the Village Who Maintain Contact with Parents at Least Once a Month

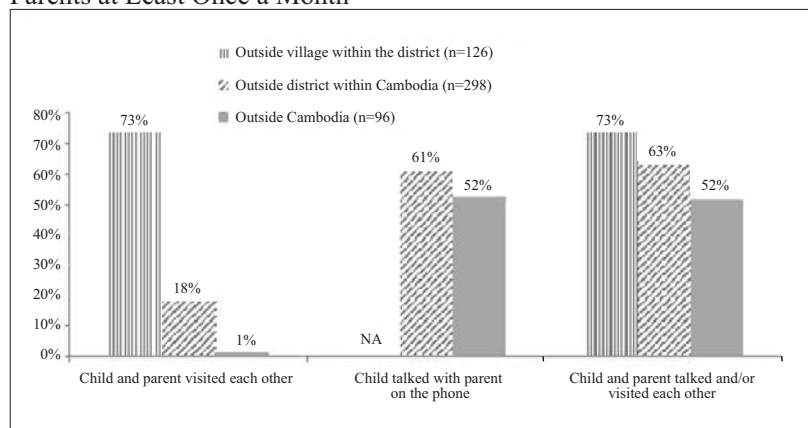
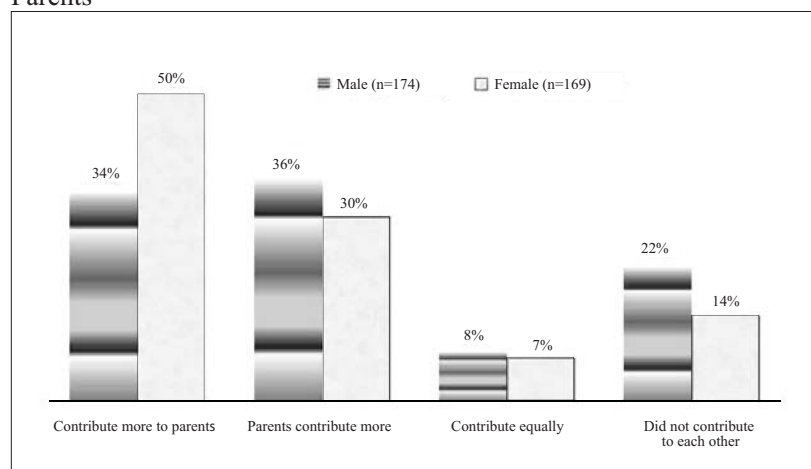


Figure 5: Direction of Contributions between Migrant Children and Parents



to the medical expenses of parents who incurred them.

During the entire time that the migrant children were away, a higher proportion (42 percent) were said to have contributed more to their parent's material support (food, money, assets) than their parents (33 percent) contributed to theirs, although these findings clearly indicate that there is considerable variation in situations with respect to who benefits more. Still, this underscores that a net positive flow in the direction of the parents predominates. Of note, the proportion of female migrants who contributed to this net positive flow was significantly higher than that of male migrants (Figure 5).

Conclusions

Contrary to the view that the migration of adult children in Cambodia has negative social and economic consequences on elderly parents, our research indicates generally positive impacts on the well-being of older age parents. The high average number of living children among the respondents allows them to benefit from complementary contributions from co-resident children, those living nearby and migrant children. Similarly, the migration of adult children does not have a negative impact on intergenerational solidarity. Mobile phones enable parents and migrant children to maintain social contact with each other. This lends some support to the idea that "modified extended family" relationships are emerging between older age parents and migrant children in Cambodia.

While our study reveals generally positive impacts of migration on older age parents, there is one area

of particular concern. Respondents with all children outside the village are fewer than 10 percent, but many are landless and poor. In comparison especially to respondents with a co-resident child, their incidence of landlessness is much higher and their average wealth much lower. Government and NGO policies and programmes developed to mitigate the adverse effects of migration would do well to target such people.

Despite the fact that our study shows intergenerational solidarity between parents and both migrant and non-migrant children, it takes

place within an overall context of poverty. The wealth of elders is not great, and one can imagine that it would be less so without the help of children. It is possible that children play a role in limiting the impact of rural poverty, but poverty still exists. While opportunities for migration will help many rural elders through the support of their migrating children, there is reason to be cautious. Families with fewer children and a future of declining family size could impact on intergenerational exchanges.

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