

# Youths heed city's siren call

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**W**HEN 29-year-old store manager Srey Mom sent her mother in Takeo province some money to pay young people to help with the rice planting, her mother told her it was no use – the young people had abandoned the village to seek their fortunes in Phnom Penh.

Srey Mom already knew the situation. Eight years ago, she herself left to find work and study, followed by three of her six siblings.

It's a familiar story in a city teeming with young rural immigrants, a new in-depth report into the unprecedented Cambodian migration trend shows.

According to the Cambodian Rural Urban Migration Report Project (CRUMP), undertaken by the Ministry of Planning and United Nations Population Fund Cambodia, young people from the provinces are flooding into the capital for work and education opportunities, creating a sometimes detrimental chain reaction for villages back home.

On average, four per cent of a village's population migrate away each year. One village



Migrant garment workers board a transport truck near the Vattanac Industrial Park in Phnom Penh's Meanchey district in June. WILL BAXTER

sampled in the 18-month study lost 600 people in a single year.

"An exodus", is how analyst Chea Vannath describes the flow, which saw Phnom Penh's population double in roughly 11 years. "It's normal when the infrastructure is concentrated only in Phnom Penh. It's happening everywhere, not just Cambodia. That's why we need

to fill the gap between urban and rural development."

One big question the CRUMP report seeks to answer is if money sent back home had any wider economic impact on the village.

The average remittance is about 40,000 riels (\$10) a month, with women giving over a dollar more than their male counter-

parts, despite earning less. Garment workers, who earn the third-lowest salary of rural migrant workers, send 100,000 riel – about a quarter of their salary – to family back home.

"When I started, my salary was \$30 a month, so I couldn't send money to them," Srey Mom said. After three months, it increased to \$50, and after two

years, she was able to pay for her siblings' vocational training.

Microfinancing institutions or self-help groups could boost the wider village economy, the report suggests.

But Vannath disagrees. "It's a survival situation ... The people that have the money are in the city. So even if they provide microfinance, it's not enough. [For example] people don't buy food from others, they make their own."

As well as facing a labour shortage on farms, more parents are also raising their grandchildren. Of the eight per cent of workers with children living "elsewhere", the majority leave their children with their parents.

The study shows migrant households in Phnom Penh own many more durable goods than the average Cambodian house, but more significant is the change in values, Srey Mom believes. Young people become swept up in materialism and village life holds little appeal.

"They work [out of the sun] and their skin is white. They go back beautiful," she said, adding that education is the key to making a life in the city.

"If you can finish high school, then come to uni, it's good." ■