USAID Asia CTIP and Freedom Collaborative COVID-19 ‘Rapid Response’ Webinar

Updates from the frontlines in Cambodia

*Please note that this is an informal summary of a webinar hosted by Freedom Collaborative and USAID Asia CTIP. For the full recording, please click here.*

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Summary

As in many places all over the world, land borders between Thailand and Cambodia have been closing to restrict movement and try to stem the spread of COVID-19. However, thousands of migrants have crossed in seven border areas of Cambodia in the past several weeks. As of April 7, 68,706 returning migrants have crossed back into Cambodia. Cambodia continues to receive migrants that cross the border on a daily basis, ranging from 10 to 1000+ migrants every day.

Currently, there are four main concerns:

1) Many migrants and clients are still stuck in host countries (China, Malaysia, Thailand) and unable to return home.

2) With the mass return of migrants, there are concerns over increasing transmission of COVID-19 during the crossing of crowded border areas, as they use public transportation (buses, shared taxis) and then return to their final destinations in the provinces.

3) The social economic situation of returned migrants is a significant concern. They have lost their job, often left in a rush (without paperwork or final pay) so they have no income or savings. This is a new impact on communities, as families throughout Cambodia often depend on the income of their migrating family members and may lead to an economic crisis.

4) There is doubt on the capacity of the healthcare facilities to cater to large number of cases of COVID-19 in the provinces, in case of inter-community transmission.

Data collection and information management is a challenge. When migrants cross the border, there is a very fast-paced screening and gathering of data. If the migrant does not show any symptoms of COVID they are asked to return home, or to go to their final destination. If they show any symptoms, they are being isolated, collected for testing and placed in a quarantine area in Poipet or Battambang. Support is needed at the community level (for example, health workers and community leaders to ensure that there is follow up and monitoring of migrants and families to provide them with support and guidance on how to properly quarantine or seeking immediate care when they show symptoms.

Agencies and NGOs are working to coordinate the response to the current situation:

IOM, in collaboration with partners such as UNICEF, Samaritan’s Purse and other CSOs continues to support the government of Cambodia in responding to the mass return of migrants at the port of entry, which means all the border areas. There they conduct screenings, awareness raising activities, providing meals.
A technical group has been formed to look at response strategies for the return of migrants in their final destinations.

The International Committee for Counter Trafficking and local partners are working on information sharing and awareness raising related to trafficking in person.

UNICEF is taking the lead to ensure that children are actually crossing the border with their parents and that there is proper referral and family reunification in case of unaccompanied minors.

IOM is looking at programs that can be reprogrammed or repurposed and discusses with ministries and as well as with donors to see how to build upon current activities and integrate COVID-19 response into the existing programming.

Cambodian embassies in host countries are providing information to migrants on their Facebook pages to stranded migrants unable to travel home.

Current challenges include:

- COVID-19 messaging: Much of the information is from the overseas governments and agencies, so it’s unclear how migrants can understand these messages. LSCW is working to develop very simple messages to reach migrants.

- Victim identification: Some migrants received money from their employers, while others did not. There is no assessment or survey of the returning migrant workers to screen for trafficking, labor exploitation and withholding of wages.

- Providing immediate aid and water clothes and food and transport to migrants as they return to Cambodia. There has been low preparedness, which makes it difficult to source materials and respond to changing situations quickly. Local government in provinces has very little funding available.

- Self-isolation is difficult in practice when migrants return to live with their families in small houses.

Strong village level connections are very important to identify the very vulnerable, so responses can be targeted to those who are very vulnerable, rather than the masses.

Questions from the audience on:

Upcoming Khmer New Year:
The Cambodian government on Thursday issued an order banning most travel throughout the country for a week, in an effort to combat the spread of COVID-19.

Effects on trafficking and exploitation:
It is too soon to notice any changes in trafficking trends. However, once the borders re-open there will be increased risk as migrants will need to earn money and make up for losses.

Needs of migrants:
Panelist opinion: Cash to survive the next 2-3 months seems to be the primary need as expressed by migrants. Because of that it is going to be best for the migrant population is getting the borders open again as quickly as we possibly can and getting them back to Thailand to work. Current priorities include ensuring solid nutrition and a safe, supportive community environment until the economy can start up again.
Short term needs include access to health services, payment for health services, family support if someone gets sick. Food security, other sources of livelihood to support their families and themselves, and cash transfers.

A needs assessment should be carried out to develop a comprehensive response plan for short- and long-term planning. Different partners need to work to be able to support the government in laying out these plans.

**Additional information from ILO Cambodia:**

**ILO response:** ILO is responding to returning migrant workers: providing counselling services on migration and Covid-19 awareness raising, especially on risk communication and social distancing measures for returnees more than 52,000 returned from Thailand from 21 March through to 5 April 2020. This has been offered through five ILO-supported Migrant Worker Resource Centres (MRCs), the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training and its Provincial Departments of Labour and Vocational Training (PDoLVTs), and Provincial Committees to Counter Human Trafficking (PCCTs) along the Cambodian-Thai borders, following direction of WHO and Ministry of Health (MoH). At a later stage, ILO will look at livelihood support and employment promotion.

**Tourism Sector Workers:** ILO is providing educational materials to the Ministry of Tourism (MoT) for disseminating information and raising awareness of the COVID-19 in the tourism sector for both workers in services and those who have been laid off. Also, support the MoT in reskilling/upskilling for workers who have been laid off.

**New programme:** COVID-19 Emergency response on Socio-economic recovery in Cambodia is being prepared. The project primarily aims to strengthen the capacity of selected partners to promote socio-economic recovery and, in particular, to support laid off and underemployed employees of the tourism and garment sector in Cambodia as well as returned migrant workers. The programme will particularly focus on gender and inclusiveness dimensions and therefore should directly benefit a large number of women and other vulnerable groups. The project will both look at i) upskilling underemployed employees of affected sectors through online training; ii) provide workers online RPL assessments and certificates iii) support the National Employment Policy (NEP) Committee to prepare a COVID-19 NEP policy and to implement it at the national and sub-national level; iv) support NEA to strengthen its employment services to affected workers.

**For Garment Factory Workers:** ILO, with support from WHO, is working with various stakeholders in the garment sector, including the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training (MoLVT), National Employment Agency (NEA under the MOLVT), Better Factories Cambodia (BFC), Garment Manufacturers’ Association of Cambodia (GMAC), trade unions and international buyer partners, to raise awareness about the COVID-19 in the garment industry. The work includes raising awareness among the MoLVT’s Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) and labour inspectors at factories, coaching on Covid-19 prevention to worker and management representatives, disseminating information and educational posters to garment workers, producing educational materials for awareness raising activities.

**Some actions taken:**

1) Reprogramme and refocus packages on emergency response for coronavirus pandemic including awareness raising precautions, risk communication awareness, to prevent individual and community spread/infection and transmission, crisis respond on providing food, drinking water, shelters for self-quarantine, hand sanitizer, facial mask, soap for cleaning and hygiene. Coordination with health department for mental and physical support for return migrants, including protection, and recovery.

2) Data collection rolling out after Khmer New Year through MRCs to better understand a whole picture of migrant returnee experience, facing, and need to be focus.

3) Post-recover period programme: reskilling programme, job/employment, enterprenship, financial education, start-up small business at household level, targeting to vulnerable population.