



# Life after Return: Understanding Reintegration Success and Pathways of Cambodia's Return Migrants

Roth Vathana, So Hengvotey, and Sim Sokcheng

Research Report  
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CDRI – Cambodia Development Resource Institute

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## **Author(s) and affiliation(s):**

**Roth Vathana**

Research consultant

**So Hengvotey**

Programme manager

Cambodia Development Resource Institute

**Sim Sokcheng**

Senior research fellow and director, Centre for Policy Research in Agriculture and Rural Development, Cambodia Development Resource Institute

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## **CDRI**

📍 56 Street 315, Tuol Kork, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

☎ +855 23 881 701/881 916/883 603

✉ [cdri@cdri.org.kh](mailto:cdri@cdri.org.kh)

🌐 [www.cdri.org.kh](http://www.cdri.org.kh)

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## List of acronyms and abbreviations

|         |   |
|---------|---|
| Central | Center for Alliance of Labor and Human Rights   |
| DMT     | Data Management Team  |
| GIZ     | Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit/<br>German Agency for International Cooperation |
| HRW     | Human Rights Watch  |
| IDPoor  | Identification of Poor Households Programme   |
| IOM     | International Organization for Migration  |
| NBC     | National Bank of Cambodia   |
| RI      | Reintegration Index   |
| MLVT    | Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training  |
| MOI     | Ministry of Interior  |
| NBC     | National Bank of Cambodia   |
| NSSF    | National Social Security Fund   |
| PCA     | Principal Component Analysis  |
| PSU     | Primary Sampling Unit   |
| SSU     | Secondary Sampling Unit   |
| TAF     | The Asia Foundation   |
| TSU     | Tertiary Sampling Unit  |
| USD     | US dollar   |

## Executive summary

**This research on reintegrating Cambodia’s return migrants due to the Cambodian-Thai border conflict aims to assess the economic and social impacts resulting from the mass return of Cambodian migrant workers from Thailand.** Specifically, it seeks to examine how the sudden influx of returnees, estimated at more than half a million, affects local labour markets, household incomes and livelihoods, and social cohesion. The research also examines the extent to which returnees have successfully reintegrated into society and explores the coping strategies adopted by returnees and their households to manage the economic and social impacts of return.

**The research analyses survey data collected from 852 returnees in Banteay Meanchey, Battambang, Pursat, Siem Reap, Takeo, and Oddar Meanchey—provinces with some of the largest number of returnees.** The sampling approach was a stratified three-stage sampling design in which villages were primary sampling units (PSUs), households were secondary sampling units (SSUs), and returnees were tertiary sampling units (TSUs). Within each selected PSU, a complete listing of households with returnees was compiled and used as the sampling frame for household selection. Each returnee was then randomly selected per sampled household. The target population were all individuals who had returned to Cambodia from Thailand from May 2025, but before December 2025, and who were resident in Cambodia at the time of the survey. Key subgroups of interest were gender (female vs male), age (youth vs adult), employment status (employed or otherwise), and household livelihood (poor vs non-poor). Data collection was conducted between 7 December 2025 and 14 January 2026. Interviews were conducted both in person and by phone.

**To examine the level of reintegration success, the research team constructed a Reintegration Index (RI), calculated as a weighted average of four dimensions: economic, social, psychological, and institutional reintegration.** These dimensions were selected to capture the multidimensional nature of reintegration, recognising that successful reintegration extends beyond employment and income to include social inclusion, psychological well-being, and access to services and institutional support. Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was used to derive dimension weights from the underlying correlation structure of the indicators. For each dimension, a sub-index was first created by averaging standardised indicators, where all variables were normalised to a 0–1 scale to ensure comparability. In other words, equal weights were given to each indicator. Reintegration outcomes were grouped according to predefined index thresholds: Poor (0.00–0.39), Vulnerable (0.40–0.59), Moderate (0.60–0.79), and Successful (0.80–1.00).

## Key findings

**The level of reintegration was moderate, with an average RI score of 0.639.** While most returnees have re-established themselves within their communities, important vulnerabilities persist, particularly in economic stability and institutional access. Male returnees experienced slightly more successful reintegration outcomes than their female counterparts. Similarly, younger returnees tended to adapt and reintegrate more effectively than older individuals. The analysis found no significant differences in reintegration outcomes between returnees from households with and without an Equity Card, nor between those from households with and without members with disabilities.

**Of the four dimensions of the reintegration outcomes, surveyed returnees were most successful in social reintegration, with an average score of 0.910.** This high score suggests

that returnees generally experienced positive acceptance within their communities and were able to re-establish social ties and a sense of belonging after returning. The findings indicate that most returnees did not face discrimination or social exclusion as a result of their migration experience.

**Experiences of economic reintegration were moderate, with an average score of 0.609.**

The findings suggest that, on balance, returnees were able to re-establish livelihoods and regain a sense of economic stability to a reasonable extent, though important gaps remain. Moderate economic reintegration among returnees was largely attributable to several challenges they reported encountering after return.

- **The first challenge is securing stable and decent employment.** Despite about half of the surveyed returnees being engaged in wage employment at the time of the survey, only 40 percent reported earning at least the monthly minimum wage of USD210. This gap suggests that access to employment alone does not necessarily guarantee adequate or stable income. Many returnees may be concentrated in informal, temporary, or low-productivity sectors where wages are lower, and labour protections are weaker. Specifically, most employed returnees reported being engaged in the manufacturing and construction sectors, accounting for 40 percent and 38 percent, respectively. As a result, even those who are employed may continue to face financial insecurity and difficulties in meeting their household needs. In addition, both employed and unemployed returnees at the time of the survey reported facing difficulties in seeking employment. The three most cited constraints were the lack of information about available job opportunities, insufficient skills or qualifications required for existing positions, and the limited availability of stable and secure jobs. Employment-related fraud and exploitation was also cited.
- **The second challenge is that employment opportunities are particularly limited in returnees' home provinces.** As a result, many returnees are compelled to migrate internally to larger cities and more economically dynamic provinces (e.g., Phnom Penh, Kampong Speu, Preah Sihanouk) in search of better job prospects. This internal migration often involves additional financial and social costs, including relocation expenses, separation from family members, and the need to establish new social and professional networks. For some returnees, this also represents a difficult adjustment after having returned with the expectation of reintegrating into their home communities. The survey results further indicate geographic differences in reintegration outcomes. For instance, Takeo recorded the highest RI score of 0.756 among the surveyed provinces. This relatively strong performance was largely driven by higher levels of economic reintegration, particularly in terms of employment. As one of the more economically active provinces, Takeo offers greater access to job opportunities, especially in manufacturing and garment factories, which likely facilitated returnees' ability to re-enter the labour market and stabilise their livelihoods.
- **The third challenge is the repayment of household debts.** Seventy percent of returnees reported having household debts. Following their return, reduced or unstable income has made it difficult for households to meet their regular repayment obligations. Average income earnings dropped by 37 percent to USD270 after returning. In addition, the loss or decline of remittance income, combined with limited access to stable and adequately paid employment, has further constrained their repayment capacity. As a result, some households may face increased financial stress and risk of default. Approximately 83 percent of returnees reported that their households found it either "very difficult" or "difficult" to meet loan repayment schedules.

**The level of psychological reintegration was also moderate, with an average index score of 0.653.** A key factor contributing to this moderate score is the perception of livelihood outcomes following return. Only 50 percent of returnees reported that their current livelihood was either “unchanged” or “better” compared to their situation while working in Thailand. This means that half of the surveyed returnees perceived a deterioration in their economic conditions, which can significantly influence confidence, life satisfaction, and outlook. When asked how hopeful they were in the future, 79 percent said they were either “somewhat” or “very” hopeful.

**Experiences with institutional reintegration was the least successful, with an average score of 0.381.** The low level was largely attributable to low access to training programmes, low access to education among school-age children, and low access to social protection. Only 33 percent of the surveyed returnees reported being covered by any form of social protection, such as the Equity Card, the National Social Security Fund (NSSF), or private insurance. In addition, a similarly low proportion, around 30 percent of returnees with school-age children, reported that their school-age children were currently enrolled in school. Only 5 percent of returnees reported participating in training courses to upgrade their skills since returning. When asked about their intention to participate in future training courses, 65 percent of surveyed returnees expressed interest. In contrast, 23 percent reported that they were not interested in attending training, while 12 percent were uncertain. Among those who indicated interests, vocational training courses in agriculture and animal husbandry and vehicle and mechanical repairs were the most frequently reported. It should also be noted that the types of training courses differ significantly between male and female returnees. That is, female returnees were more interested in training courses in agriculture and animal husbandry, beauty and personal care, business, trade and sales, and food and beverage services, whereas male returnees indicated interests in vehicle and mechanical repairs, agriculture and animal husbandry, and construction and engineering.

**Despite high levels of awareness about existing government support measures for returnees, utilisation of the support remained relatively limited and uneven across measures.** The job-matching and placement call centre (1297) by the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training (MLVT) and the on-demand issuance of key administrative and legal documents by the Ministry of Interior (MOI) were the most frequently accessed services relative to loan restructuring and special conditions on new loans by commercial banks and financial institutions.

**Regarding returnees’ future career plans, the survey results indicate that the majority intend to remain in Cambodia.** Specifically, 32 percent of surveyed returnees reported plans to work in their home province, while 33 percent expressed intentions to start their own businesses. Only a small proportion indicated plans to migrate again. Approximately 3.2 percent reported that they would return to Thailand for work, while 3.4 percent expressed intentions to migrate to other destinations, particularly Japan and South Korea, which are often perceived as offering better employment prospects and formal migration pathways. The most frequently cited reason for intending to remain in Cambodia was the desire to stay close to family and home, reported by 80 percent of returnees who planned to stay. In contrast, among those considering returning to Thailand, the primary motivations were economic in nature, particularly the opportunity to earn higher incomes and secure more stable employment.

**Regarding returnees’ needs for policy and programme support from the government and development partners to facilitate reintegration, the most frequently expressed demand was for access to short-term vocational training programmes.** Returnees particularly highlighted their interest in practical, skills-based courses in areas such as agriculture, agro-processing, electrical and electronic trades, and food and hospitality services, combined with a one-time cash grant of KHR400,000 to KHR500,000 (USD100–125). These sectors might be viewed as offering viable pathways to employment or self-employment within their local communities. In addition, a temporary pause on debt repayments was mentioned as a form of support.

**The survey results indicate that the level of reintegration among returnees from vulnerable households, defined as those from households holding an Equity Card or households with at least one member with disabilities, was moderate, with an average index score of 0.642.** Social reintegration was the most successful, whereas institutional reintegration was the least successful. Economic and psychological reintegration was moderate. Returnees from these vulnerable groups tended to face challenges similar to those observed among the broader sample of returnees. Although more than half were engaged in wage employment or self-employment at the time of the survey, overall employment levels declined following return. This was accompanied by a substantial reduction in earnings, with average wages falling by approximately 37 percent compared to pre-return levels. At the same time, financial pressures remained significant. Around 70 percent of returnees from these groups reported that their households had outstanding loans, and among them, 87 percent indicated that repayment would be “difficult” or “very difficult.”

## Recommendations

### Short term

It is necessary to prevent employment-related fraud and exploitation, particularly in construction. This includes strengthening oversight and enforcement mechanisms to protect workers from deceptive recruitment practices, false job promises, excessive recruitment fees, unpleasant working conditions and environment, and other forms of labour exploitation. Preventive measures should include stricter regulation and monitoring of recruitment agencies, clear and accessible information for job seekers on their rights and legitimate employment channels, and effective grievance and reporting mechanisms. Raising awareness among workers—particularly returnees and vulnerable job seekers—about common forms of employment scams and available support services is also essential to reduce their risk of exploitation and promote safe, fair, and transparent employment practices.

- It is also crucial to expand and strengthen job-matching and placement services—such as the existing call centre (1297) initiative by the MLVT—to better connect returnees with available employment opportunities. The lack of information about job vacancies was identified as one of the most common challenges in the job search process, indicating significant gaps in labour market information flows. The job placement campaign should be expanded by strengthening the engagement of local authorities to ensure a more effective outreach approach, rather than relying primarily on social media postings. Clearly identifying the roles and responsibilities of local authorities is essential for improving social accountability and ensuring social capacity.

- Expanding access to relevant skills development is critical to improving returnees' employment prospects and supporting sustainable reintegration. Re-skilling and up-skilling programmes should therefore be continued and expanded through accessible, short-term vocational training courses. Priority training areas might include agriculture and animal husbandry, beauty and personal care, business, trade and sales, food and beverage services, vehicle maintenance and mechanical repairs, and construction and engineering.
- The high levels of household debts highlight the ongoing financial vulnerability of returnees and their households. This debt burden places significant pressure on household finances and may constrain their ability to meet essential needs, invest in productive activities, or rebuild their livelihoods. Thus, it is important to consider targeted support measures, such as debt restructuring or debt relief initiatives, to help ease immediate financial pressures. Given that the government has introduced and implemented loan restructuring initiatives, but awareness and utilisation of these services remain limited, there is a need to strengthen communication and outreach efforts. Expanding the dissemination of information could help ensure that returnees and their households are fully informed about available support.

### **Medium to long terms**

- Given that most surveyed returnees relocated internally to larger and more economically dynamic cities and provinces in search of better employment opportunities and considering the suggestive evidence that reintegration outcomes vary significantly across geographic locations, these patterns point to persistent regional disparities in access to jobs and livelihood opportunities. These findings underscore the importance of promoting more balanced local economic development and expanding decent job opportunities, particularly in provinces with limited economic activity and fewer employment prospects. It is also aligned with the findings suggesting that most returnees are oriented towards long-term reintegration within Cambodia rather than pursuing further migration. Thus, strengthening domestic employment opportunities, supporting micro and small business development, and expanding access to finance and skills training—particularly in crop cultivation, animal raising, and entrepreneurship skills—are crucial to help returnees achieve sustainable livelihoods and reduce the need for future migration.
- Given the high levels of household debts and the low levels of savings observed among returnees, strengthening financial literacy support can be an important complementary intervention. Providing targeted training on debt management, budgeting, and savings strategies could help returnees better manage their financial obligations and rebuild their economic resilience after return.
- Increase targeted support for female returnees, particularly in the areas of job matching and placement, as they are more likely than male returnees to be unemployed or outside the labour force. In addition, providing access to finance and targeted skills training can support female returnees in pursuing self-employment opportunities. Priority areas may include food and beverages, crop cultivation, and animal raising. Promoting entrepreneurship and flexible work arrangements is essential, as these options better accommodate women's caregiving responsibilities.



# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Context and rationale

The large-scale return of Cambodian migrant workers from Thailand following the 2025 Cambodian-Thai border conflict represents one of the most significant episodes of sudden return migration in recent Cambodian history. More than 910,000 Cambodian migrants, about 9 percent of the total labour force, in Thailand returned within a short period, placing immediate pressure on local labour markets, household livelihoods, and public services (MLVT 2025).

For many households, migration to Thailand had long served as a key livelihood strategy, providing wage income and remittances that supported daily consumption, debt repayment, education, and housing. The abrupt disruption of this migration corridor, therefore, raised urgent concerns regarding income loss, rising indebtedness, unemployment, and the broader social and economic stability of affected households and communities. For instance, HRW (2025) highlighted that interviewed returnees faced joblessness, indebtedness, or even hunger.

Return migration, particularly when involuntary or crisis-induced, presents complex reintegration challenges. Reintegration is not limited to securing employment; it also encompasses social acceptance, psychological well-being, access to public services, and institutional support. While returnees may benefit from renewed proximity to family and community networks, they may simultaneously face declining earnings, limited local job opportunities, and accumulated household debt.

Despite the magnitude of the return, systematic empirical evidence on the reintegration experiences of Cambodian returnees remains limited. Only a few studies—IOM (2025), HRW (2025), and Central (2026)—have provided assessments of the phenomenon using quantitative survey data. While these studies offer valuable early insights, their scope is often constrained. In addition, MLVT (2025) provides administrative evidence, particularly on the employment status of returnees. Together, these studies offer an important but still partial understanding, underscoring the need for more comprehensive research to capture the full range of impacts.

Therefore, this research addresses this gap by examining the economic, social, psychosocial, and institutional dimensions of reintegration among returnees across selected high-return provinces. Understanding the multidimensional nature of reintegration is essential to inform targeted, evidence-based policy interventions that can promote sustainable livelihoods. Moreover, by constructing a multidimensional Reintegration Index and analysing variations across demographic and socioeconomic groups, the study aims to provide an investigation of reintegration outcomes and the factors shaping them.

## 1.2. Research questions and objectives

The research is guided by the following main research questions:

1. To what extent have returnees successfully reintegrated following their return?
2. How has the mass return affected household income, employment, debt burdens, and livelihood stability?
3. Are there significant differences in reintegration outcomes across demographic and socioeconomic groups, including gender, age, and household vulnerability status?

In line with these research questions, the study aims:

- To measure and analyse the multidimensional reintegration outcomes of returnees using a composite Reintegration Index;
- To assess the economic consequences of return on employment, income changes, debt burdens, financial vulnerability, and skills development and training;
- To examine social cohesion, psychological well-being, and access to institutional support among returnees;
- To identify differences in reintegration experiences across key subgroups; and
- To identify evidence-based recommendations to strengthen policy and programme support.

### **1.3. Limitations**

There are several limitations. First, the survey sample includes only returnees aged 18 or older; therefore, the findings do not capture the experiences of those below this age group. Second, the sampling design may not be fully representative of the entire population of returnees, particularly those who were harder to reach or less likely to participate in the survey. Finally, the survey covers returnees who returned between May 2025 and the period immediately preceding the second border clash on 7 December 2025. Of the 8,673 returnees listed, 276 returnees—about 3 percent—returned in December 2025 or later. As a result, the findings may not fully reflect the experiences and reintegration outcomes of individuals who returned after this event, whose circumstances may differ due to changes in border conditions, labour markets, mobility patterns, and reintegration experiences.

### **1.4. Organisation of the report**

Section 2 describes the methodology employed in the study, including the survey design, data collection procedures, and analytical approach. Section 3 presents the demographic characteristics of the surveyed returnees and further summarises their socioeconomic conditions while residing and working in Thailand. Section 4 reports the results for indicators of the economic reintegration dimensions, whereas Section 5 presents the results for indicators of the social and psychological reintegration dimensions. Section 6 reports the results for indicators for the institutional dimension, respectively. Section 7 assesses overall reintegration success by aggregating reintegration scores across all pillars. Section 8 concludes and provides recommendations.

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1. Survey design**

The sampling approach was a stratified three-stage sampling design where villages were primary sampling units (PSUs), households were secondary sampling units (SSUs), and returnees were tertiary sampling units (TSUs). Each returnee was randomly selected per sampled household. PSUs from selected provinces were chosen with probability proportional to size (PPS)—size being the number of households with return migrants. It should be noted that provinces were selected based on the concentration of returnees and their levels of socio-economic development. Within each selected PSU, a complete listing of households with returnees was compiled and used as the sampling frame for household selection. The survey got 8,673 household listing

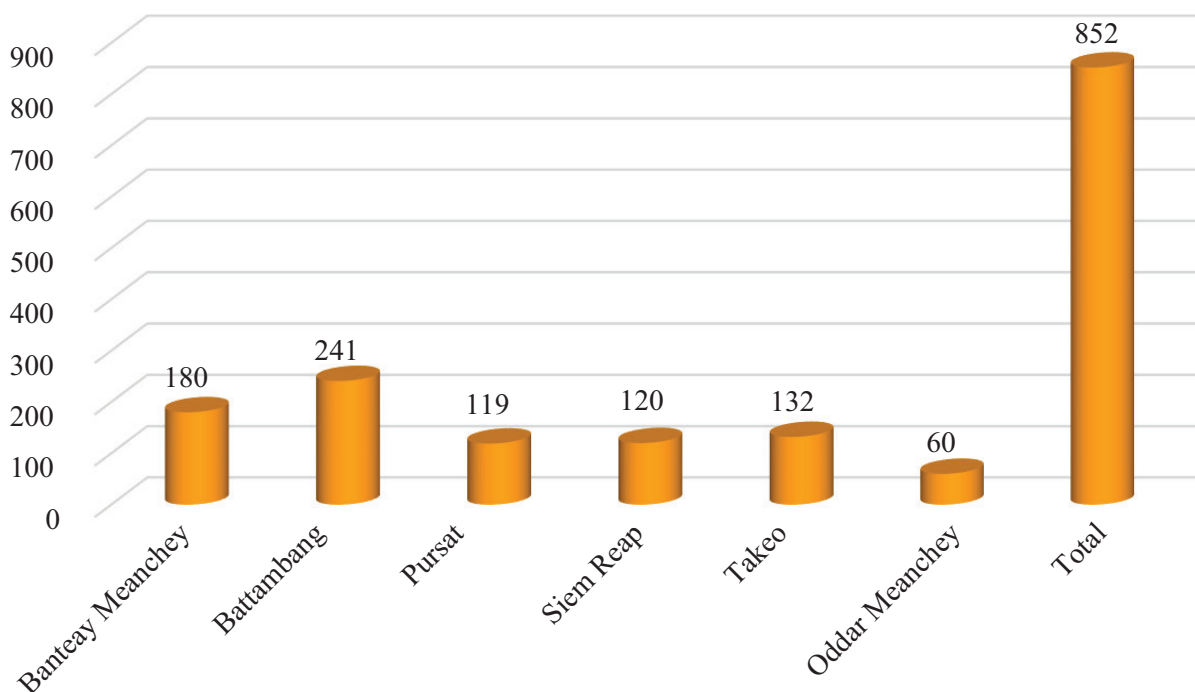
from the target villages. At the final stage, one returnee was randomly selected from each selected household for an interview.

The target population was individuals who had returned to Cambodia from Thailand between May and November 2025 and who were 18 years or older and were resident in Cambodia at the time of the survey. Key subgroups of interest were gender (female vs male), age (youth vs adult), employment status (employed or otherwise), household livelihood (poor vs non-poor), and households with members with a disability. Youth is defined as individuals who are between 18 and 25 years of age. Poor households were those possessing equity cards (e.g., IDPoor).<sup>1</sup> The primary unit of analysis is the individual returnee. However, household-level information was also collected to provide a broader understanding of the returnee’s living conditions, family composition, and socio-economic context.

A household is defined as all persons who usually live together in the same dwelling and share meals and resources. Household members include those who are currently present and those who are temporarily absent but maintain close economic and social ties with the household, such as migrants working elsewhere or returnees recently reintegrated. A return migrant is an individual who had been working or residing in Thailand and returned to Cambodia in or after May 2025 due to the Cambodian-Thai border conflict, and aged 18 years or older at the time of the survey. The main reason for migrating to Thailand was to work or to look for work.

The survey collected information from 852 returnees across major provinces with some of the largest number of returnees (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Sample size, total and by province

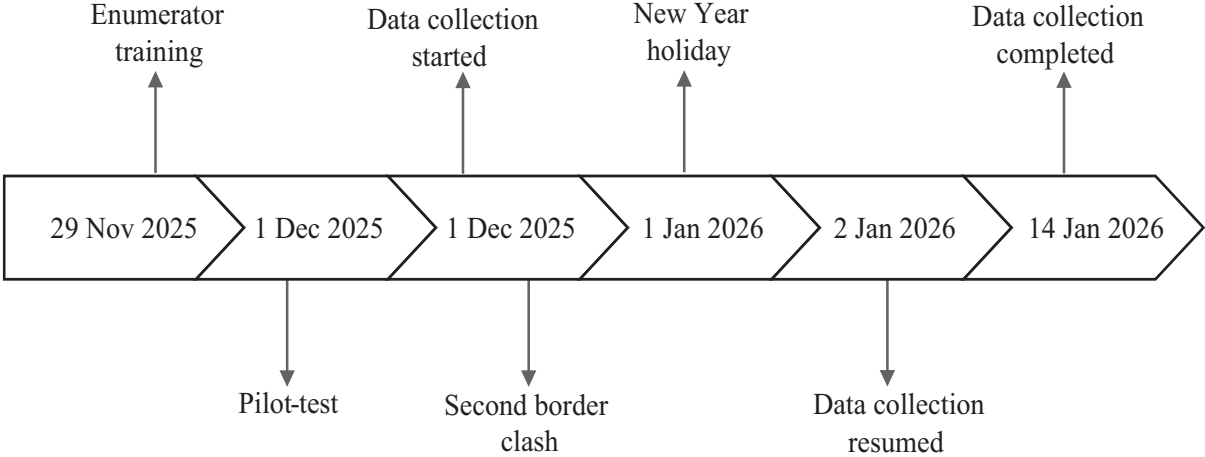


1 The IDPoor is regularly used by the government and development partners to target social assistance (GIZ 2022). For instance, the IDPoor database was used to target poor and vulnerable households for COVID-19 cash transfers in 2020 (World Bank 2023). Despite not official, the IDPoor can sometimes be used a proxy measure of poverty. Nonetheless, a limitation of using the IDPoor as a poverty measure is that it may suffer from inclusion and exclusion errors, where some poor households are not identified while some non-poor households are included.

**2.2. Data collection**

Enumerator training took place on 29 November 2025, followed by a pilot test on 1 December 2025 (Figure 2). Data collection commenced on 7 December 2025, coinciding with the onset of the second border clash between Cambodia and Thailand—a development that may have influenced answers on certain questions. Data collection concluded on 14 January 2026.

Figure 2: Survey timeline



The data management team (DMT) was responsible for selecting respondents and identifying replacements in cases of non-response. The sample list was provided to the enumerators prior to fieldwork. Enumerators were responsible for verifying the availability of selected respondents or households based on the list. If any sampled cases were found to be unavailable, ineligible, or unreachable after reasonable attempts, the enumerators can notify the DMT to request approval for replacements, following the established substitution protocol. Overall, the non-response rate was about 19 percent.

The DMT was fully responsible for overseeing and ensuring the quality of all data collected. This included conducting daily reviews of submitted questionnaires to verify data completeness, consistency across variables, and logical accuracy of responses. The DMT identified and flagged any errors, missing information, or inconsistencies for prompt clarification with the field coordinator. Regular feedback was provided to the field team to maintain data integrity throughout the data collection period.

Respondents were fully informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to decline or withdraw at any time. Informed consent was obtained prior to each interview. No personally identifiable information was disclosed, and all data were anonymised and stored securely, accessible only to the research team. Enumerators were trained to conduct interviews respectfully and sensitively, ensuring confidentiality and minimising any potential risk or discomfort.

**2.3. Data analysis**

The research team constructed a Reintegration Index (RI) to measure the multidimensional reintegration outcomes of returnees. It is based on four dimensions: economic, social, psychological, and institutional reintegration. For each dimension, a sub-index was first created by aggregating standardised indicators, where all variables were normalised to a 0–1 scale to ensure comparability. The dimension-specific sub-index was calculated as the arithmetic mean

of its constituent indicators. The overall RI was then computed as a weighted average of the four sub-indices. The weighted RI is defined as:

$$RI_i = w_E E_i + w_S S_i + w_P P_i + w_I I_i$$

where  $RI_i$  is the reintegration index of returnee  $i$ , calculated as the weighted average of four sub-indices: economic ( $E_i$ ), social ( $S_i$ ), psychological ( $P_i$ ), and institutional ( $I_i$ ).  $w_E$ ,  $w_S$ ,  $w_P$ , and  $w_I$  are weights such that:

$$w_E + w_S + w_P + w_I = 1$$

For each dimension, the corresponding sub-index is computed as the average of indicators:

$$SRI_d = \frac{1}{n_d} \sum_{j=1}^{n_d} I_{jd}$$

where  $SRI_d$  represents the sub-index of dimension  $d$ ;  $n_d$  is the number of indicators under each dimension;  $I_{jd}$  denotes indicator  $i$  under dimension  $d$ . See Annex 1 for a detailed description of the indicators and variables used under each dimension.

Dimension weights can be determined using several approaches, including expert judgment, policy or programmatic priorities, statistical techniques such as principal component analysis (PCA), or a combination of these methods. Expert-based and policy-driven weighting schemes allow alignment with normative priorities but may introduce subjectivity and inconsistency across experts and contexts. In contrast, PCA provides a data-driven approach that derives weights from the underlying correlation structure of the indicators, thus minimising arbitrariness and enhancing objectivity. In this study, we adopt a PCA-based weighting scheme to construct the composite reintegration index. PCA assigns higher weights to indicators that explain greater variation in the data, reflecting their relative importance in capturing differences across observations.

Reintegration outcomes are grouped according to predefined index thresholds (Table 1). These thresholds provide a structured framework for categorising returnees into different levels of reintegration success, allowing for clearer interpretation and comparison across groups.

Table 1: Classification of reintegration outcomes

| Index value | Classification |
|-------------|----------------|
| 0.00–0.39   | Poor           |
| 0.40–0.59   | Vulnerable     |
| 0.60–0.79   | Moderate       |
| 0.80–1.00   | Successful     |

Three clarifications should be noted when interpreting the findings. First, the reported results are based on sample estimates and should not be interpreted as representative of the entire population of returnees. While the findings provide useful insights into the characteristics and experiences of surveyed returnees, they may not be fully generalisable beyond the study sample. Second, for multiple-response questions, percentage shares are calculated as the proportion of total sample returnees, rather than the proportion of total responses. As a result, the percentages may sum to more than 100 percent, since respondents were allowed to select more than one answer option. Third, results from group comparisons are reported only when the differences are statistically significant at the 5 percent level or below. In other words, only differences with

a p-value of 0.05 or less are presented, indicating that the observed variation is unlikely to have occurred by chance.

### 3. Profile of returnees

#### 3.1. Demographic characteristics

Table 2 summarises the demographic characteristics of the surveyed returnees. Among the 852 returnees interviewed, 58 percent were male. The majority were married (approximately 80 percent), while 14 percent reported being single, with the remainder comprising other marital statuses. Overall, educational attainment among returnees was low. Most had completed lower secondary education or below (95 percent), and only 5 percent had attained upper secondary education. There are no differences in educational attainment between male and female returnees, nor between returnees from households with at least one member with a disability or those from households holding equity cards. This distribution highlights the generally limited formal education among returnees.

Table 2: Demographic characteristics of the returnees

|   |  | n   | %   | 95% Confidence Interval (%) |       |
|---|--|-----|-----|-----------------------------|-------|
|   |  |     |     | Lower                       | Upper |
| Gender                                    | Male   | 496 | 58  | 55                          | 62    |
|   | Female   | 356 | 42  | 38                          | 45    |
| Marital status                            | Single   | 117 | 14  | 12                          | 16    |
|   | Married  | 678 | 80  | 77                          | 82    |
|   | Living together  | 2   | 0.2 | 0.03                        | 0.8   |
|   | Divorced or separated                                  | 39  | 5   | 3                           | 6     |
|   | Widow/widower  | 16  | 2   | 1                           | 3     |
|   | None   | 77  | 9   | 7                           | 11    |
| Education                                 | Primary  | 491 | 58  | 54                          | 61    |
|   | Lower secondary  | 238 | 28  | 25                          | 31    |
|   | Upper secondary  | 44  | 5   | 4                           | 7     |
|   | Bachelor   | 2   | 0.2 | 0.03                        | 1     |
| Age (years)                               | 18–25  | 165 | 19  | 17                          | 22    |
|   | 26–33  | 256 | 30  | 27                          | 33    |
|   | 34–41  | 269 | 32  | 29                          | 35    |
|   | 40+  | 162 | 19  | 16                          | 22    |
| Household with a member with disabilities | Yes  | 90  | 11  | 9                           | 13    |
|   | No   | 762 | 89  | 87                          | 91    |
| Households with equity cards              | Yes  | 182 | 21  | 19                          | 24    |
|   | No   | 670 | 79  | 76                          | 81    |
| Interview mode                            | Face-to-face   | 452 | 53  | 50                          | 56    |
|   | Phone/virtual  | 400 | 47  | 44                          | 50    |
| Interview timing                          | Before the start of the second clash (7 December 2025) | 168 | 20  | 17                          | 23    |
|   | After the second clash                                 | 684 | 80  | 77                          | 83    |

Eleven percent of the surveyed returnees came from households that included at least one member with a disability, while 21 percent were from households holding equity cards, such

as IDPoor or other vulnerability cards. Interviews were conducted through both in-person, phone, or virtual calls, with in-person interviews accounting for 53 percent of the total. Phone or virtual interviews were primarily conducted with returnees who were residing or working in cities or provinces other than their hometowns, where in-person interviews were not feasible. This approach helped ensure broader geographic coverage and inclusion of returnees with higher mobility. Eight in ten interviews were conducted after the start of the second border clash between Cambodia and Thailand on 7 December 2025. This timing may have influenced responses to certain questions, particularly those related to perceptions of remigration.

### 3.2. Migration history in Thailand

Most returnees had stayed in Thailand for an extended period, suggesting relatively deep economic and social integration before their return. Approximately 60 percent of returnees had lived and worked in Thailand for six years or more, and there was no significant difference in the length of stay between male and female returnees.

Almost all returnees were economically active prior to their return. An overwhelming 97 percent were employed as wage workers, while the remaining 3 percent were self-employed. This distribution indicates that migration to Thailand was predominantly driven by access to wage employment opportunities rather than entrepreneurial activities. Male and female returnees were equally active. Returnees were primarily employed in construction (41 percent of surveyed returnees) and manufacturing (33 percent), making these two sectors the dominant sources of employment. Smaller shares worked in agriculture (14 percent) and services (10 percent).

On average, returnees earned approximately USD424 per month while in Thailand.<sup>2</sup> Male returnees earned about USD81 more per month than their female counterparts at USD496, highlighting a gender gap in earnings. The earnings also varied by sector of employment. Returnees working in manufacturing earned the highest average monthly income, at USD459, followed by those employed in services, who earned around USD442 per month.<sup>3</sup> Despite being the most common sector of employment, construction offered a comparatively lower average monthly income of USD407. This suggests that while construction absorbed a large share of migrant workers, it did not necessarily provide the highest financial returns relative to other sectors.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to their monthly wages, returnees were entitled to a range of employment benefits. The three most frequently cited benefits were overtime pay (reported by 63 percent of returnees), housing allowances (58 percent), and allowances for electricity and water (43 percent) (Figure 3). Furthermore, about 42 percent of returnees reported receiving health insurance coverage. There were no significant differences in the receipt of employment benefits between male and

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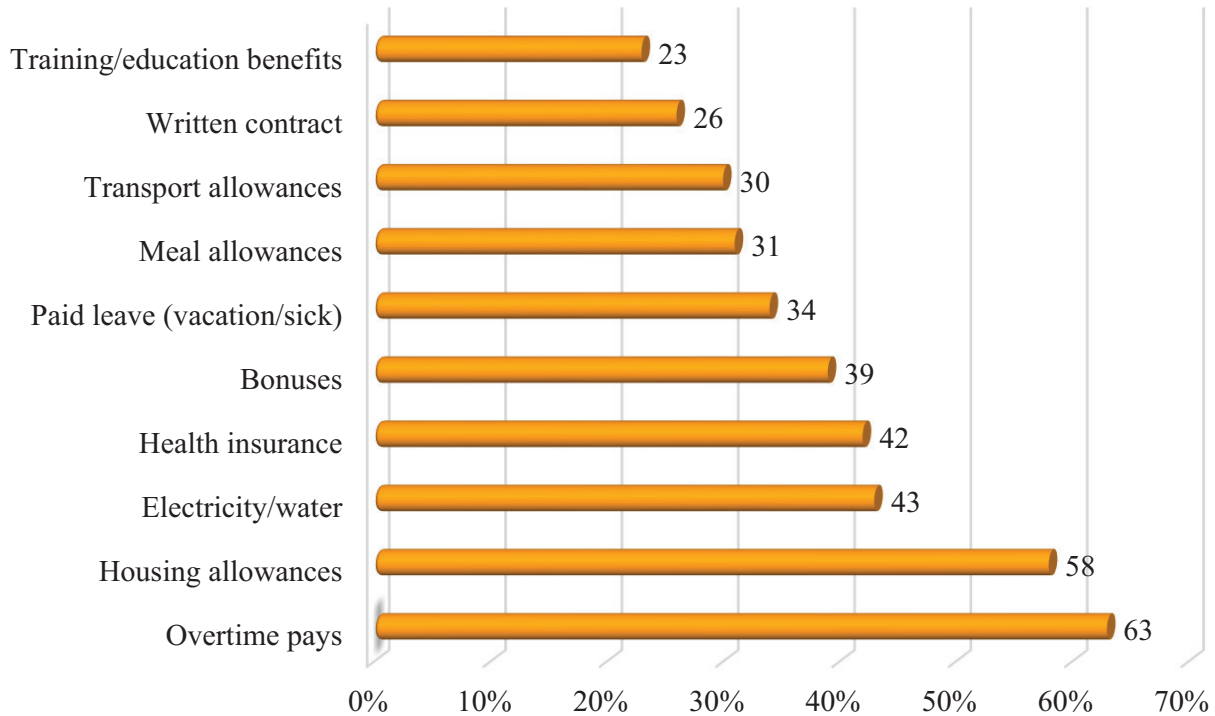
2 Income data are often difficult to collect and can be subject to measurement error. In this study, the research team took several steps to enhance reliability, including clearly defined reference periods and clear guidance to the enumerators. Income questions were also cross-checked with types of economic activities to improve consistency. In addition, collected income data were reviewed daily for completeness, consistency, and to identify and address outliers.

3 A reasonable benchmark for the average monthly wage in Cambodia is about USD200–300, with variation depending on job type, skills, sector, and location (NIS 2019, 2024). In 2026, for instance, workers in the garment, footwear, and travel goods sector earned an average monthly salary of USD238, of which USD210 was the statutory minimum wage (MLVT 2025).

4 One returnee reported earning USD1,000 per month while working in the fisheries sector. Although this may accurately reflect that individual's income, it was excluded from sector-level comparisons due to the insufficient sample size for fisheries employment.

female returnees, suggesting broadly similar access to non-wage compensation across genders. It should be noted that only about 26 percent of returnees reported having a written employment contract while working in Thailand.

Figure 3: Employment benefits while working in Thailand



## 4. Economic reintegration

### 4.1. Employment status

#### *Wage employment*

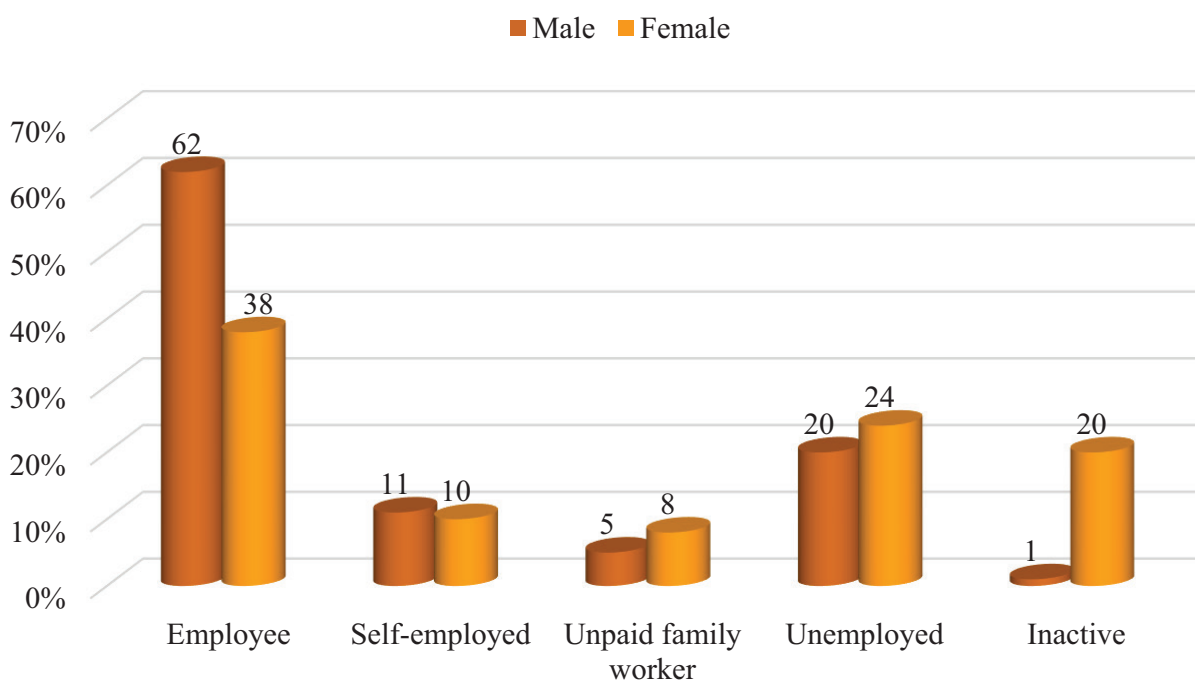
Among surveyed returnees, 52 percent were engaged in wage employment at the time of the survey, making it the most common form of economic activity.<sup>5</sup> A further 10 percent were self-employed, indicating a smaller but notable share involved in entrepreneurial or own-account work. In addition, 7 percent were working as unpaid family workers, contributing to household enterprises without direct monetary compensation. Approximately 22 percent of returnees were unemployed but actively seeking work, whereas 9 percent were inactive (neither employed nor looking for work).

Employment among returned migrants showed a gender disparity (Figure 4). At the time of the survey, 62 percent of male returnees reported being employed, significantly higher than the 38 percent of female returnees who were employed. Rates of self-employment were comparable between the two groups, with 11 percent of male returnees and 10 percent of female returnees running their own businesses. Unemployment was slightly higher among female returnees (24 percent) compared to 20 percent of male returnees. Notably, a substantial proportion of

<sup>5</sup> MLVT (2025) reported that approximately 620,000 (64 percent) of the 910,000 returnees from Thailand had been employed. Of those who were employed, roughly half worked in formal enterprises, while the remainder were engaged in informal micro, small, and medium enterprises. This employment rate is comparable to that observed in our survey, where 62 percent of the surveyed returnees reported being engaged in either wage employment (52 percent) or self-employment (10 percent).

female returnees became economically inactive after returning, with 20 percent reporting no participation in the labour force, while only 1 percent of male returnees were inactive. These differences suggest that female returnees face greater barriers to reintegration into the labour market, due mainly to caregiving responsibilities and limited access to job opportunities.

Figure 4: Employment status after returning by gender



Employment levels declined after return. Compared to their employment rate while working in Thailand, overall employment fell by 38 percent upon return (Figure 5). A substantial share of returnees experienced downward labour market transitions: approximately 21 percent moved from employment in Thailand to unemployment after returning, while a further 8 percent became economically inactive. At the same time, some returnees shifted into more precarious or alternative forms of work. Around 10 percent transitioned into self-employment, and 6 percent became unpaid family workers. While these categories reflect continued economic participation, they may also signal reduced job stability, lower earnings, or limited access to formal employment opportunities compared to their previous work in Thailand.

Most returnees reported being employed in the manufacturing and construction sectors, accounting for 40 percent and 38 percent of respondents, respectively. Together, these two sectors absorbed nearly four out of every five returnees, underscoring their central role in shaping migrants' employment trajectories upon return. There are also gender disparities in sectoral employment among returnees (Figure 6). Forty percent of male returnees reported being employed in the construction sector compared to 31 percent of female returnees, indicating the physically intensive and male-dominated nature of this type of work. Female returnees were more likely to be employed in manufacturing and service-related activities. The higher participation of women in manufacturing may be linked to their concentration in labour-intensive industries such as garments and light assembly, where female workers are often preferred for routine production tasks. Similarly, women's greater representation in services—such as retail, hospitality, and domestic work—reflects prevailing gender norms and occupational segregation in the labour market.

Figure 5: Changes in employment status after returning

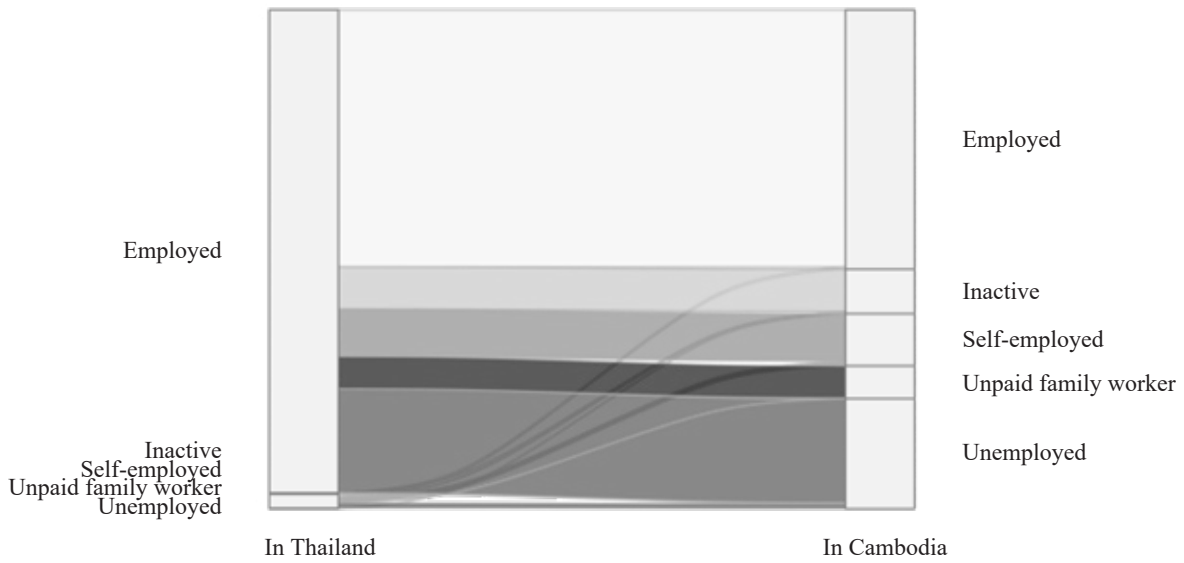
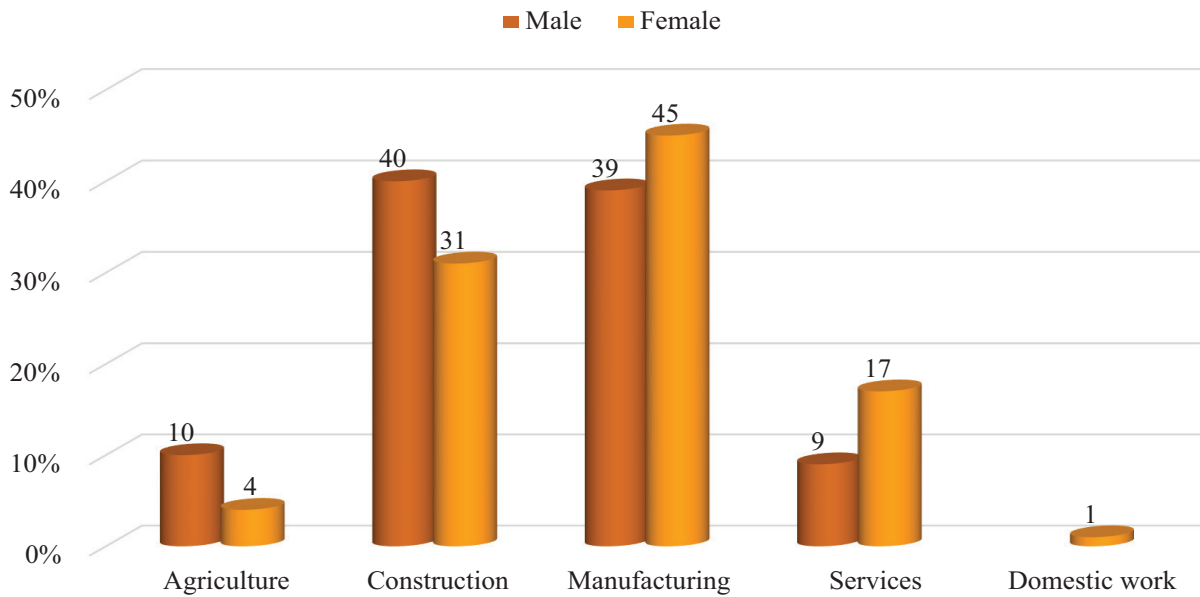


Figure 6: Sectoral employment upon return, by gender



In addition, most returnees tended to remain in the same sector of employment while abroad and after returning, indicating limited sectoral mobility. Those who worked in manufacturing overseas, for example, were more likely to seek or continue employment in manufacturing upon return, while former construction workers similarly moved to construction-related activities. This pattern might suggest that returnees rely on the skills and experience they developed while in Thailand. Sector-specific human capital—particularly in technical or manual occupations—appears to shape post-return job choices and opportunities. However, it may also reflect structural constraints, such as limited access to retraining, certification recognition, or information about alternative employment pathways. The tendency to remain within the same sector highlights both continuity and constraint in the reintegration process. While prior experience can facilitate quicker re-entry into the labour market, low sectoral diversification may limit upward mobility and reduce resilience to sector-specific shocks.

The majority of surveyed returnees reported seeking employment outside their hometowns, indicating a strong tendency towards internal labour mobility after return. Most were drawn to major economic hubs, particularly Phnom Penh, as well as rapidly growing provinces such as Kampong Speu, Preah Sihanouk, and Banteay Meanchey. Specifically, 33 percent of surveyed returnees who were not in their home provinces were in Phnom Penh, followed by Kampong Speu (14 percent), Preah Sihanouk (12 percent), and Banteay Meanchey (8 percent). This pattern suggests that local labour markets in returnees' home areas may offer limited employment opportunities, especially in terms of wage employment and higher-paying jobs. The concentration of job search efforts in these areas highlights the continued pull of established economic corridors and underscores the importance of spatial disparities in shaping reintegration outcomes.

### *Self-employment*

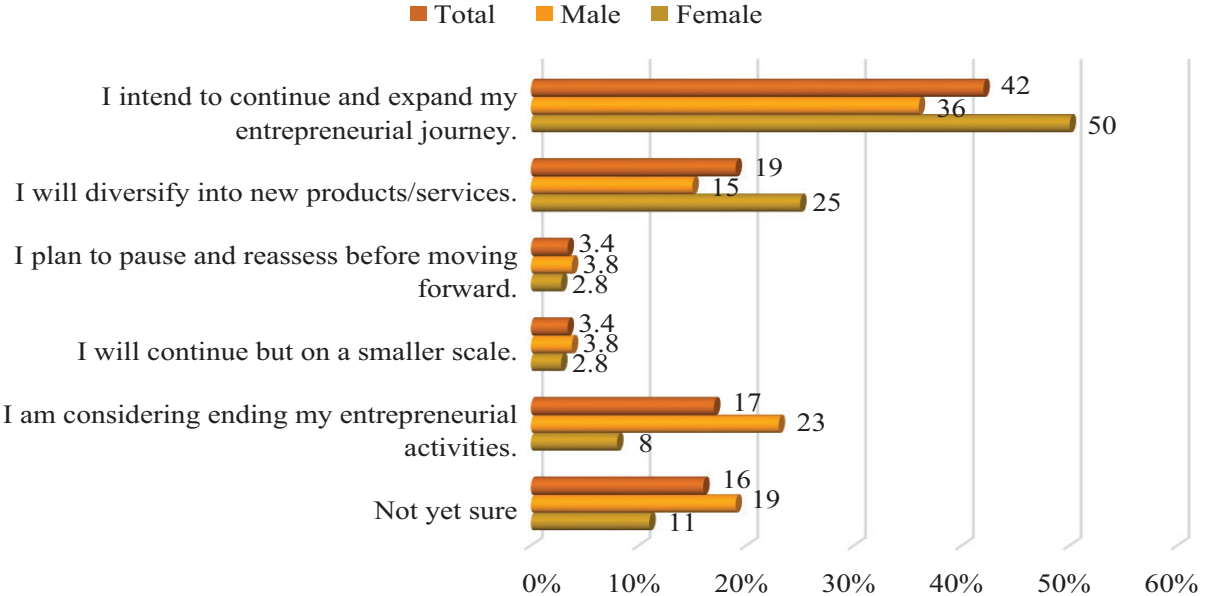
Self-employment activities were predominantly micro and operated by women, typically involving only the returnees themselves or a very small number of workers. In other words, most operated as solo entrepreneurs (36 percent) or with fewer than three employees (58 percent). These self-employment activities were concentrated primarily in agriculture (40 percent), manufacturing (31 percent), and services and retail trade (21 percent). Agricultural activities included crop cultivation, livestock raising, and fisheries. Manufacturing activities often involved small-scale production, such as food processing or handicrafts, typically carried out with basic equipment and limited capital. Retail trade mainly consisted of operating small shops, mobile vending, selling food, household goods, or other daily necessities. The concentration in these sectors reflects relatively low barriers to entry and minimal start-up costs. The survey data shows that start-up capital was generally modest, with most returnees investing less than USD500 (64 percent) or between USD500 and USD1,000 (15 percent) to establish their businesses. The sources of capital investment were mainly from savings, while in Thailand (56 percent), borrowings from relatives and friends (21 percent), and loans from moneylenders (14 percent).

When asked about their reasons for starting self-employment, 52 percent of returnees reported that they were unable to find wage employment. Other commonly cited motivations included support from family members (36 percent), which may have provided access to labour, business knowledge, or informal financing; the desire for greater independence and flexibility (28 percent); and the availability of personal capital that enabled them to start a business (20 percent). Returnees also reported facing multiple constraints in operating their self-employment activities, reflecting both demand- and cost-related pressures. The most frequently cited challenge was low sales, reported by 37 percent of respondents. High input costs were the second most common challenge, affecting 25 percent of returnees. In addition, 21 percent identified strong competition from other businesses as a major constraint, particularly in saturated sectors such as retail trade and small-scale manufacturing, where many enterprises offer similar products and services.

When asked about their plans, 42 percent of self-employed returnees expressed their intention to continue and expand their current business activities, indicating a degree of optimism and commitment to self-employment as a livelihood strategy as an alternative employment opportunity (Figure 7). Another 25 percent reported plans to diversify into new products or services, suggesting efforts to adapt to market conditions and increase income opportunities. However, there were gender differences in business outlook. Self-employed male returnees were more likely to consider ending their business, with 23 percent indicating plans to do so,

compared to only 8 percent of female returnees. This may reflect differences in alternative employment opportunities or risk tolerance between men and women. Female returnees may be more inclined to maintain their businesses due to the greater flexibility offered by self-employment, given their unpaid caregiving responsibilities. Twenty-eight percent of female returnees reported that a desire for independence motivated them to start their own businesses.<sup>6</sup> In addition, about 11 percent of self-employed returnees reported uncertainty regarding their plans, highlighting the unstable and unpredictable nature of small-scale self-employment.

Figure 7: Plans for the business, overall and by gender



4.2. Income earnings

4.2.1. Wage employment

Among returnees who were employed at the time of the survey, average monthly wage earnings declined by 37 percent after return to USD270 (Figure 8).<sup>7</sup> This represents a contraction in income relative to earnings while in Thailand and signals economic adjustment challenges during the reintegration process. The decline in earnings was broad-based and consistent across demographic and socioeconomic groups. Both male and female returnees experienced

6 In Cambodia, women constitute the majority of owners of micro and small enterprises, with their representation particularly high among micro firms (NIS 2023; TAF, 2025).

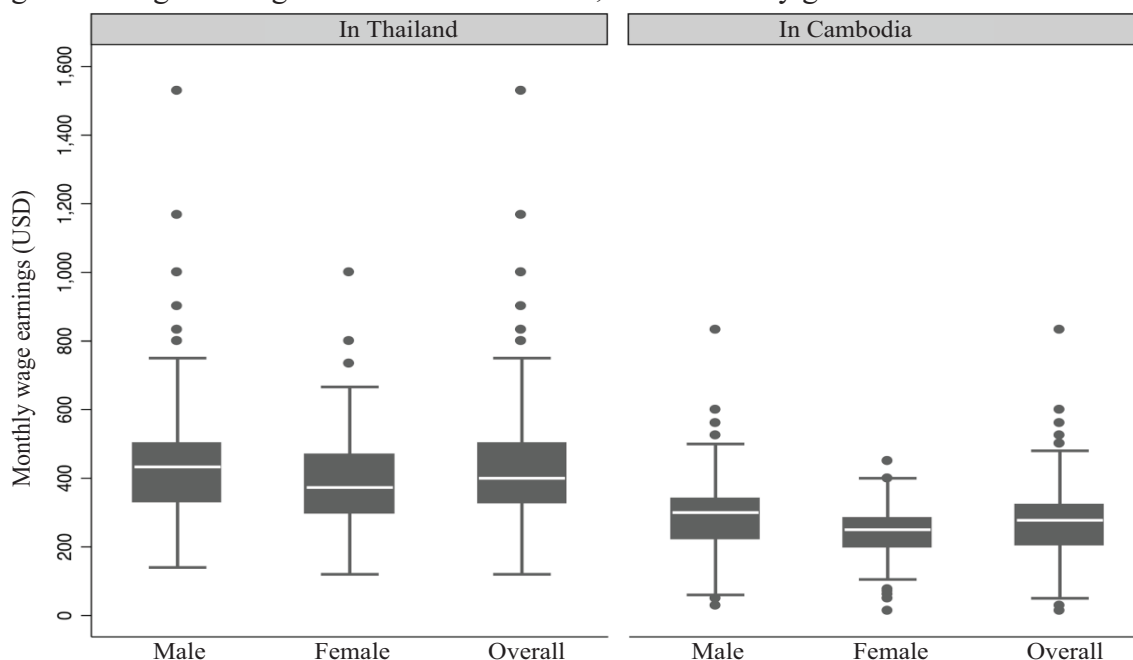
7 Given the interviews were conducted both in person and by phone and the sensitivity of questions regarding income, the mode of interview can influence responses. Thus, the researchers tested potential mode effects on reported wage earnings while working in Thailand and in Cambodia at the time of the survey. The results indicate that interview mode did not produce statistically significant differences in reported wage earnings while respondents were working in Thailand. However, a statistically significant difference emerges for wage earnings reported in Cambodia. Specifically, returnees interviewed by phone reported a higher average monthly wage (USD276) compared to those interviewed in person (USD237). The observed difference in reported wage earnings, however, is unlikely to be attributable to the interview mode per se. Rather, it appears to reflect underlying differences in respondent characteristics and employment location across the two interview groups. For instance, male returnees reported higher average monthly earnings than female returnees, and younger returnees tended to earn more than their older counterparts. Geographic mobility also played an important role. Returnees who moved from their home provinces to seek employment in Phnom Penh, Kampong Speu, and Preah Sihanouk reported higher wages than those who remained in their home provinces or relocated to other areas. A large proportion of returnees working in these higher-paying locations were interviewed by phone.

reductions in wages, indicating that the income shock was not confined to a specific gender. Similarly, wage declines were observed across all age groups, suggesting that neither younger nor older workers were immune to the post-return income losses. The pattern also held across livelihood status, affecting returnees from both poor and non-poor households.

This reduction is consistent with returnees’ self-reported wage earnings before and after return. Among those who were employed at the time of the survey, 51 percent reported that their wage income was either “much lower” or “slightly lower” compared to their earnings prior to return. This indicates that a majority of employed returnees experienced a decline in income, even when they were able to re-enter the labour market.

It should be noted that wage income was the primary source of household livelihood after return, cited by 54 percent of returnees. This was followed by remittances from family members (26 percent) and income from self-employment (8 percent).

Figure 8: Wage earnings before and after return, overall and by gender



Note: Two observations with reported wage earnings of zero were excluded from the calculation to avoid downward bias in the estimated average wage. These zero values reflect cases where respondents were employed in Cambodia but had not yet received wage payments at the time of the survey. The enumerator did not ask the two respondents to estimate their average monthly wages.

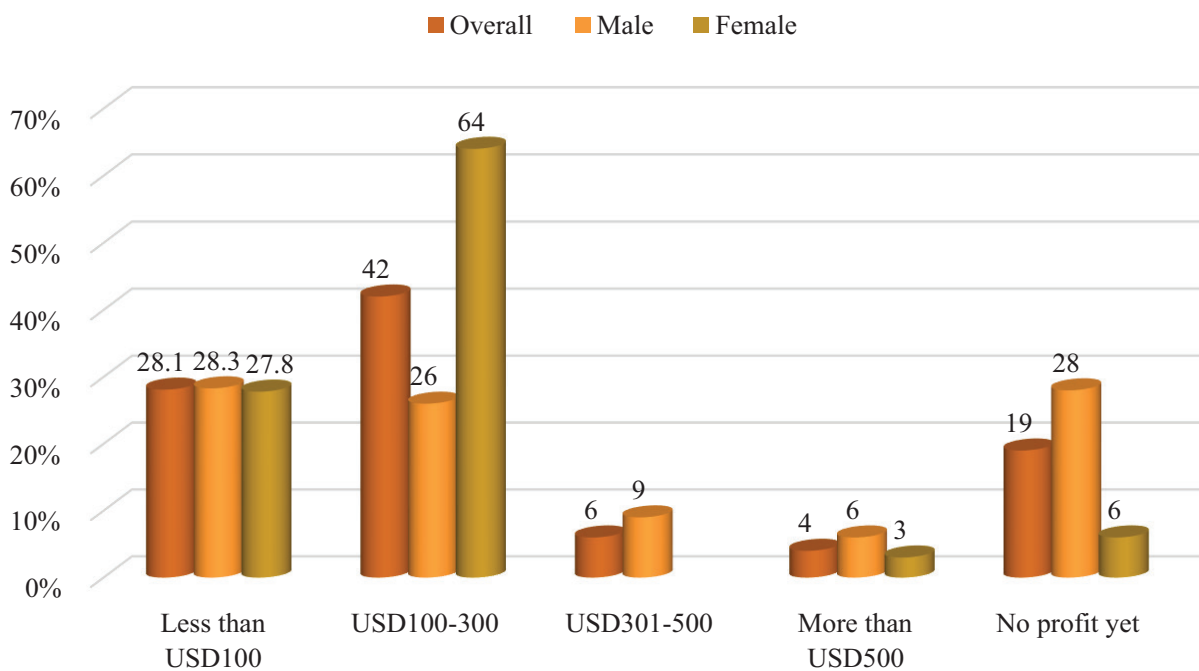
A gender gap in earnings persisted after return. On average, male returnees earned approximately USD282 per month (median wage of USD300)—about USD46 more than female returnees. This indicates that income disparities observed in overseas employment continued to shape labour market outcomes upon reintegration.

The post-return wage differential suggests that male and female returnees are reintegrating into different segments of the domestic labour market, potentially reflecting occupational segregation, differences in working hours, or variation in access to higher-paying sectors. Men’s greater concentration in construction and other physically intensive sectors—where wages may be comparatively higher—could partly explain the observed earnings advantage. In contrast, women’s higher representation in manufacturing and service occupations, which often offer lower wages and less stable contracts, may contribute to their comparatively lower earnings.

### 4.2.2. Self-employment

Among returnees who were self-employed, average monthly profits were generally low, indicating limited financial returns from these activities (Figure 9). About 70 percent reported earning average monthly profits of USD300 or less, suggesting that most self-employed returnees were engaged in small-scale or low-margin enterprises. Only a small minority were able to generate higher returns, with few (4 percent) reporting monthly profits of USD500 or more. Notably, 19 percent indicated that they had not made any profit since starting their self-employment activities, highlighting the financial vulnerability and uncertainty associated with these livelihood strategies.

Figure 9: Average monthly profits from self-employment, overall and by gender



### 4.3. Remittance income

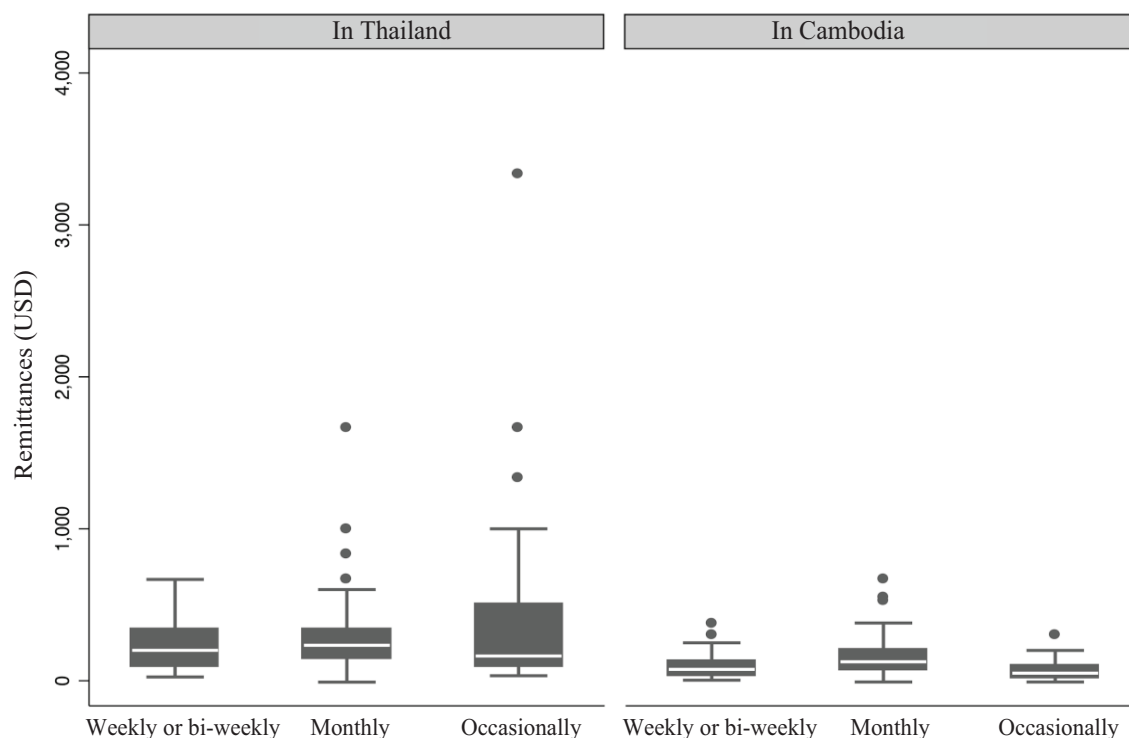
Approximately 94 percent of returnees reported sending remittances to their households while working in Thailand, highlighting the central role of migration in supporting household income. In contrast, only 44 percent continued to provide remittances after returning, representing a substantial decline. This sharp reduction reflects the loss of stable earnings associated with overseas employment and suggests that many returnees were no longer in a financial position to support their households to the same extent.

On average, the amount remitted declined by 55 percent after return, falling to USD127 per transfer in Cambodia compared to USD282 per transfer while working in Thailand (Figure 10).<sup>8</sup> This substantial reduction reflects the loss of higher and more stable earnings previously available through migrant employment. The proportional decrease in remitted amounts was broadly consistent across different remittance frequencies, indicating that both frequent and less frequent senders reduced the size of their transfers by similar margins. Moreover, the decline in remittance amounts did not differ significantly by gender of returnees, age group,

<sup>8</sup> The results of the statistical tests indicate that interview mode did not generate statistically significant differences in the reported amounts of remittances, either before return or after return, suggesting that remittance data were broadly consistent across phone and in-person interviews, and that the mode of data collection did not systematically influence respondents' reporting of remittance transfers.

or household livelihood status (i.e., poor vs non-poor). This suggests that the reduction in remittance capacity was widespread and affected returnees across demographic and socio-economic groups, rather than being concentrated among specific populations. Remittances play an important role in Cambodia's economy and household welfare. In 2025, for instance, remittances amounted to about USD2 billion (MLVT 2025). At the household level, evidence shows that remittances are used mainly for household consumption and debt repayment, followed by housing, education, and limited savings and investment (Marchetta and Sim 2021; OECD 2017; Roth and Luca 2017).

Figure 10: Remittances before and after return



Note: The number of eligible observations is 343, indicating returnees who had remitted before and after returning. Returnees who reported sending remittances while working in Thailand but did not remit after returning were excluded from the calculation. This restriction ensures that the comparison reflects changes in remittance amounts among returnees who continued to remit in both periods, allowing for a more consistent assessment of the change in transfer values.

#### 4.4. Barriers to employment

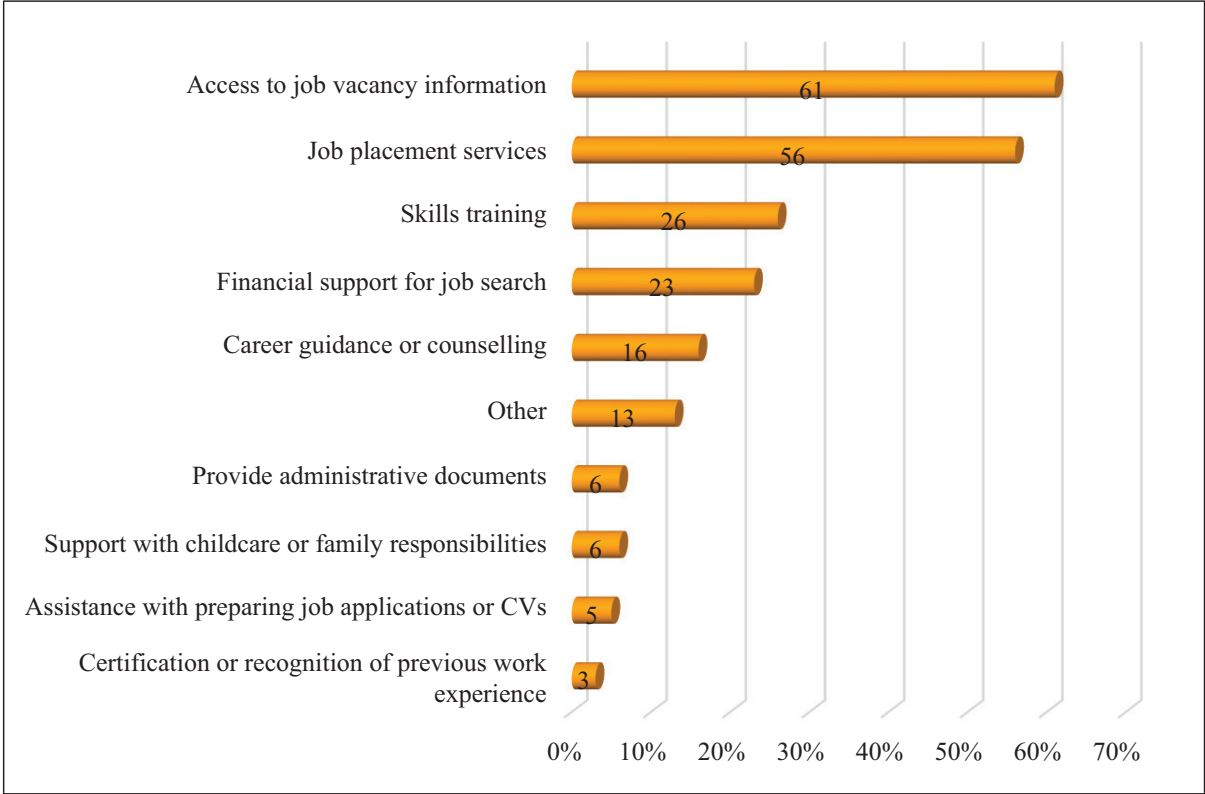
As previously noted, 22 percent of returnees were unemployed at the time of the survey, meaning they did not have a job but were actively seeking employment. Among those who experienced unemployment after returning, 51 percent reported being without work for three months or shorter, whereas the remaining spent more than three months. The longest unemployment spell was 7 months. This suggests that unemployment among returnees is not only prevalent but also persistent for a substantial share of individuals. Prolonged joblessness may reflect challenges in reintegrating into the domestic labour market, including limited availability of suitable jobs, skills mismatches, or barriers in transitioning from overseas employment to local opportunities.

When asked about the challenges they faced in securing employment after returning, the most reported barrier was a lack of information about available job opportunities, cited by 40 percent of returnees. This was followed by insufficient skills required for available positions, reported by 29 percent, indicating a potential mismatch between returnees' qualifications and the demands of the domestic labour market. In addition, 26 percent of returnees identified the

limited availability of stable or secure jobs as a key constraint. The reported challenges did not differ significantly between unemployed male and female returnees, nor between younger and older returnees. This suggests that barriers to securing employment were broadly similar across gender and age groups, indicating that the constraints faced by returnees are widespread rather than concentrated among specific demographic subgroups.

When asked about the types of assistance they would need to secure employment, access to information on job vacancies was the most frequently cited, reported by 61 percent of unemployed returnees (Figure 11). This highlights the importance of improving access to timely and reliable labour market information to help returnees identify suitable job opportunities. IOM (2025) found that most surveyed returnees were unaware of how to access support services, underscoring the need for stronger information dissemination and outreach efforts. The second most reported need was job placement services, cited by 56 percent, underscoring the value of employment support mechanisms that can connect returnees with potential employers. This was followed by demand for skills training (26 percent).

Figure 11: Assistance needed by unemployed returnees



It should be noted that the level of confidence among unemployed returnees in their ability to secure future employment was mixed. About 35 percent reported that they were either “not at all confident” or “not confident” that they would find a job, indicating a significant degree of uncertainty and discouragement among a share of unemployed returnees. At the same time, 45 percent of unemployed returnees reported that they were “confident” or “very confident” in their ability to secure employment, suggesting that a comparable proportion remain optimistic about their labour market prospects. The remaining returnees expressed neutral views, reflecting uncertainty about their future employment prospects.

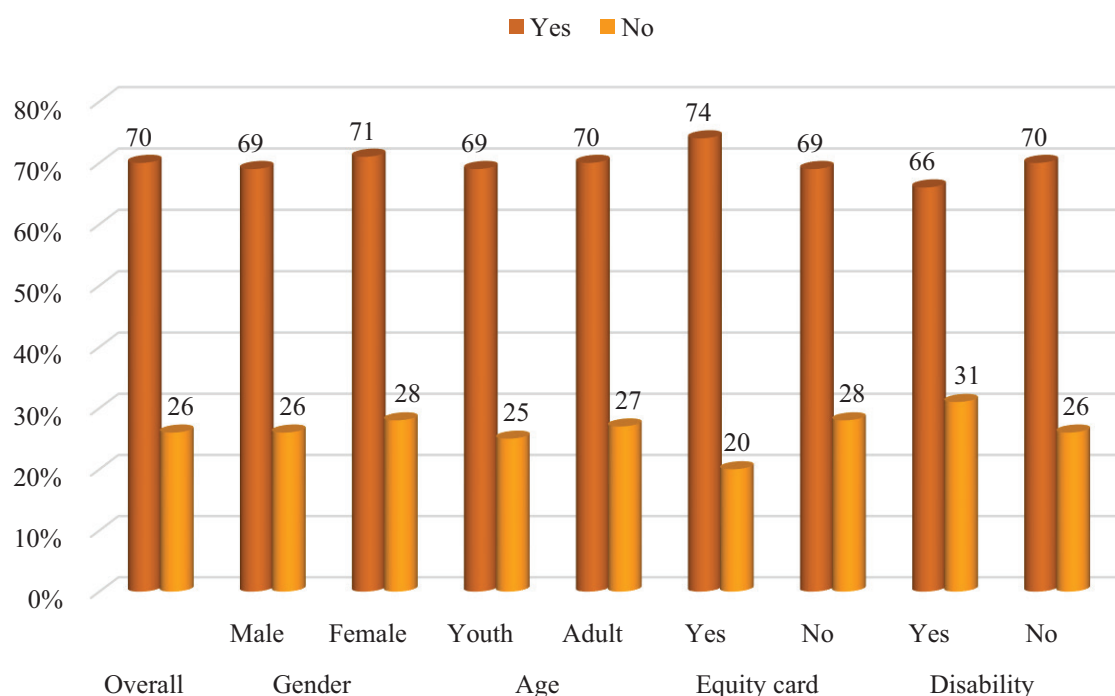
It is important to note that even returnees who were employed at the time of the survey reported experiencing difficulties in securing employment after their return. This suggests that securing

employment was neither immediate nor straightforward for many returnees, and that their current employment may have been preceded by periods of job searching and uncertainty. When asked about the challenges they faced searching for employment, 57 percent reported experiencing difficulties in securing employment since their return. The most reported challenges include a lack of information about job opportunities (49 percent of the sample returnees), insufficient skills required for available jobs (39 percent), and limited stable jobs (24 percent).

#### 4.5. Household debts

Seventy percent of returnees reported that their households had outstanding debts at the time of the survey, indicating that debt repayment remained a significant financial obligation for the majority (Figure 12). This high prevalence of indebtedness underscores the financial pressures faced by returnees and their households.

Figure 12: The incidence of household debts



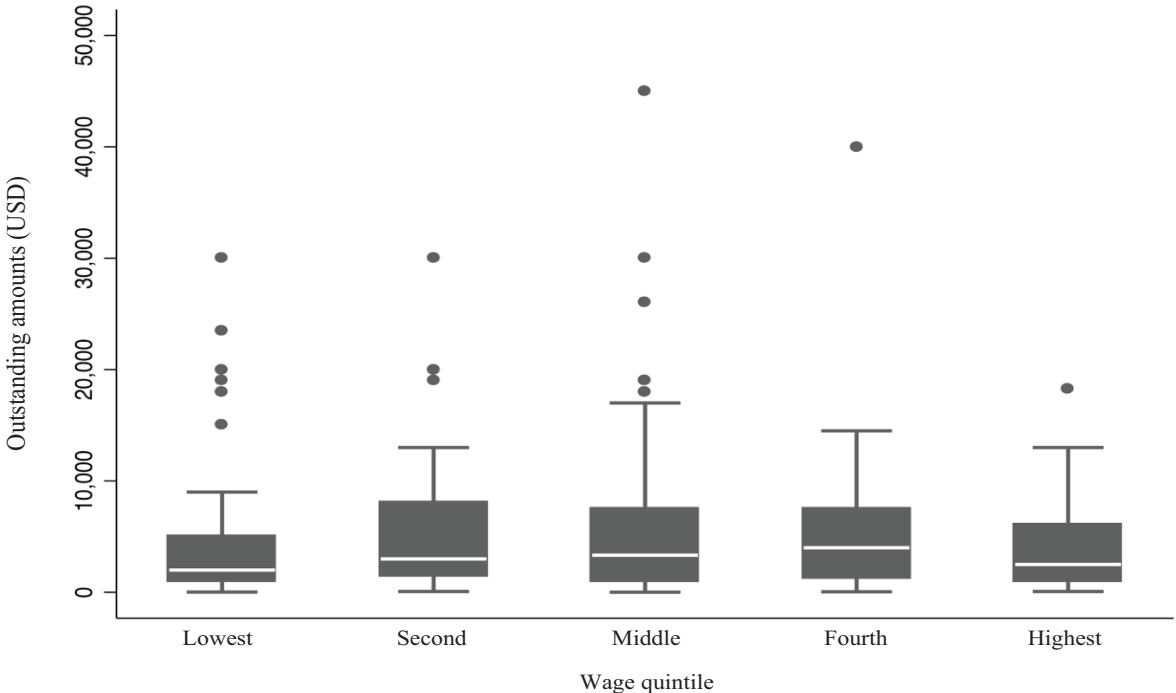
Note: The percentages do not add up to 100 percent because the share of respondents who answered “Don’t know” is not shown. On average, these responses accounted for approximately 4 percent of all answers.

Notably, the incidence of household debt did not vary significantly by the gender of the respondent, suggesting that both male and female returnees faced similar levels of financial burden. Likewise, there were no differences between returnees from households holding an equity card and those without one, indicating that debt was common across different socio-economic groups. Similarly, the presence of a household member with a disability did not appear to be associated with a higher or lower likelihood of household debt. These findings suggest that indebtedness was a common challenge among returnees, cutting across demographic and vulnerability characteristics rather than being concentrated in specific subgroups. Borrowings were mainly from commercial banks (46 percent of returnees reporting household debts), microfinance institutions (30 percent), and moneylenders (24 percent). These sources typically involve interest-bearing loans, with borrowing costs that can be particularly high when obtained from informal lenders.

This relatively high level of indebtedness aligns with the substantial difficulties reported by returnees in managing their debt obligations. Approximately 83 percent of returnees reported that their households found it either “very difficult” or “difficult” to meet loan repayment schedules. In contrast, only about 12 percent described repayment as manageable, suggesting that relatively few households were able to cope without significant hardship. Just 5 percent reported that repayment was easy. It is noteworthy that there were no significant differences in the reported level of repayment difficulty across returnees’ demographic characteristics or socio-economic status, suggesting that challenges in meeting debt obligations were broad-based and affected returnees broadly, regardless of their individual backgrounds or economic standing. The absence of significant differences across demographic and socio-economic groups likely reflects the systemic nature of the shock faced by returnees. The sudden return disrupted income sources broadly, leaving many households with limited earning opportunities and similar constraints in the domestic labour market.

The average outstanding debt was approximately USD5,175.<sup>9</sup> However, there was variation in outstanding debt across loan quintiles. Returnees in the lowest 20 percent of the loan distribution owed an average of about USD619, whereas those in the highest 20 percent had an average outstanding amount of USD14,831, indicating a wide disparity in borrowing levels. The median outstanding debt was USD3,168, suggesting that while a smaller group of borrowers held very large debts, most returnees owed more moderate amounts.

Figure 13: Outstanding debts among wage earners, by quintiles



Note: The number of eligible observations is 301, indicating returnees who were engaged in wage employment and reported that the household had outstanding loans. Also, two observations with reported wage earnings of zero were excluded.

9 The results of the statistical tests indicate that interview mode did not produce statistically significant differences in the reported outstanding loan amounts, suggesting that household debt data were broadly consistent across phone and in-person interviews.

It is noteworthy that the average outstanding debt did not vary across income quintiles, indicating that households, regardless of their income level, carried similar debt burdens. This situation could be particularly concerning for low-income households, as they may struggle to meet repayment obligations while also covering essential living expenses such as food, housing, healthcare, and education. Persistent debt under these circumstances could exacerbate financial vulnerability and limit their ability to save or invest in future needs. As shown in Figure 13, there are no differences in the average outstanding loan amounts across wage groups. Returnees in the lowest 20 percent of the wage distribution owed (USD4,499) as much as those in the highest 20 percent (USD3,897). This suggests that debt burdens are not proportionate to income and may place a disproportionate strain on lower-wage households. Returnees positioned in the middle of the wage distribution reported an average outstanding loan amount of approximately USD5,896, suggesting that even those with moderate earnings carry substantial debt burdens, highlighting the financial pressures faced by returnees across different income levels.

#### **4.6. Assets ownership**

Table 3 presents the levels of assets ownership among returnees and their households. Overall, assets ownership was concentrated in basic productive assets and essential consumer goods. For example, 60 percent of returnees reported that their household owned agricultural land. There were no significant differences in agricultural land ownership between male and female returnees, younger and older returnees, or between returnees from households with and without members with disabilities. This suggests that access to agricultural land is relatively evenly distributed across these demographic groups. However, agricultural land ownership differed significantly by household socioeconomic status, particularly between returnees from households holding an equity card and those without one, indicating disparities in productive asset ownership between poorer and relatively better-off households.

Among returnees whose households owned agricultural land, landholding sizes varied. About 15 percent owned less than 0.5 hectares, while 33 percent owned between 0.5 and 1 hectare. The largest share, approximately 40 percent, owned between 1 and 3 hectares, and about 10 percent owned 3 hectares or more. This distribution suggests that while land ownership is relatively common, most households operate on small plots.

Ownership of transportation and communication assets was more common. About 80 percent of returnees reported owning a motorbike, reflecting its importance for mobility, commuting, and accessing employment opportunities and services. Around half of returnees owned a bicycle, which may serve as an alternative means of transportation, particularly in rural areas. Smartphone ownership was nearly universal among returnees, with almost all reporting access to one. Moreover, there were no significant differences in smartphone ownership across demographic and socioeconomic groups, indicating very high penetration and suggesting strong potential for digital communication, access to information, and participation in online economic activities.

In contrast, relatively few returnees reported owning livestock or agricultural tools and equipment, such as fishing boats, tractors, or hand tractors. This limited ownership of productive assets may constrain households' ability to engage in higher-value agricultural activities or diversify their livelihoods. Overall, the findings suggest that while returnee households generally possess basic assets necessary for daily living and connectivity, ownership of productive assets that could support sustainable income generation remains more limited.

Table 3: Incidence of assets ownership

|                          | Total      | Gender     |            | Age        |            | Equity Card |            | Disability |           |
|--------------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|-------------|------------|------------|-----------|
|                          |            | Male       | Female     | Adults     | Youth      | No          | Yes        | No         | Yes       |
| Agricultural land        | 0.60       | 0.58       | 0.62       | 0.59       | 0.64       | 0.64        | 0.44       | 0.60       | 0.61      |
| House                    | 0.82       | 0.81       | 0.83       | 0.82       | 0.82       | 0.83        | 0.79       | 0.82       | 0.80      |
| Car                      | 0.02       | 0.01       | 0.02       | 0.02       | 0.02       | 0.02        | 0.00       | 0.02       | 0.01      |
| Motorbike                | 0.80       | 0.81       | 0.78       | 0.79       | 0.82       | 0.81        | 0.76       | 0.80       | 0.78      |
| Bicycle                  | 0.51       | 0.50       | 0.52       | 0.51       | 0.49       | 0.52        | 0.47       | 0.51       | 0.51      |
| Smart phone              | 0.98       | 0.99       | 0.98       | 0.98       | 1.00       | 0.98        | 0.99       | 0.99       | 0.98      |
| Cell phone               | 0.05       | 0.05       | 0.05       | 0.04       | 0.08       | 0.04        | 0.07       | 0.04       | 0.07      |
| Livestock                | 0.24       | 0.24       | 0.24       | 0.22       | 0.32       | 0.25        | 0.20       | 0.24       | 0.20      |
| Fishing boat             | 0.09       | 0.08       | 0.10       | 0.08       | 0.10       | 0.09        | 0.08       | 0.09       | 0.10      |
| Farm tools and equipment | 0.25       | 0.24       | 0.27       | 0.23       | 0.33       | 0.27        | 0.16       | 0.25       | 0.21      |
| Tractor                  | 0.00       | 0.01       | 0.00       | 0.01       | 0.00       | 0.00        | 0.01       | 0.01       | 0.00      |
| Hand tractor             | 0.20       | 0.20       | 0.20       | 0.17       | 0.32       | 0.22        | 0.12       | 0.21       | 0.13      |
| <b>Observations</b>      | <b>852</b> | <b>496</b> | <b>356</b> | <b>681</b> | <b>171</b> | <b>670</b>  | <b>182</b> | <b>762</b> | <b>90</b> |

Note: All asset ownership variables are coded as binary indicators, where a value of 1 denotes ownership of the asset, and 0 indicates non-ownership. As a result, the reported values represent the mean of these binary variables, which can be interpreted as the proportion of returnees who own each asset. These proportions can be converted into percentages by multiplying the values by 100, thereby expressing asset ownership rates in percentage terms. About 2 percent of returnees who reported owning agricultural land did not know the size.

## 5. Social and psychological reintegration

### 5.1. Household and community acceptance

The survey findings suggest that returnees did not experience significant discrimination upon returning to their communities and, overall, perceived a supportive social environment. Most respondents expressed positive views about community attitudes towards them: 60 percent reported being either “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with how their community treated them, while 70 percent described their community as “somewhat” or “very supportive.”

These results point to a relatively strong degree of social acceptance and cohesion despite the large-scale and sudden nature of return. Importantly, perceptions of community attitudes were consistent across key demographic and socioeconomic groups. There were no statistically significant differences in satisfaction levels between female and male returnees, younger and older individuals, or between returnees from households with and without an Equity Card, as well as those with or without members with disabilities.

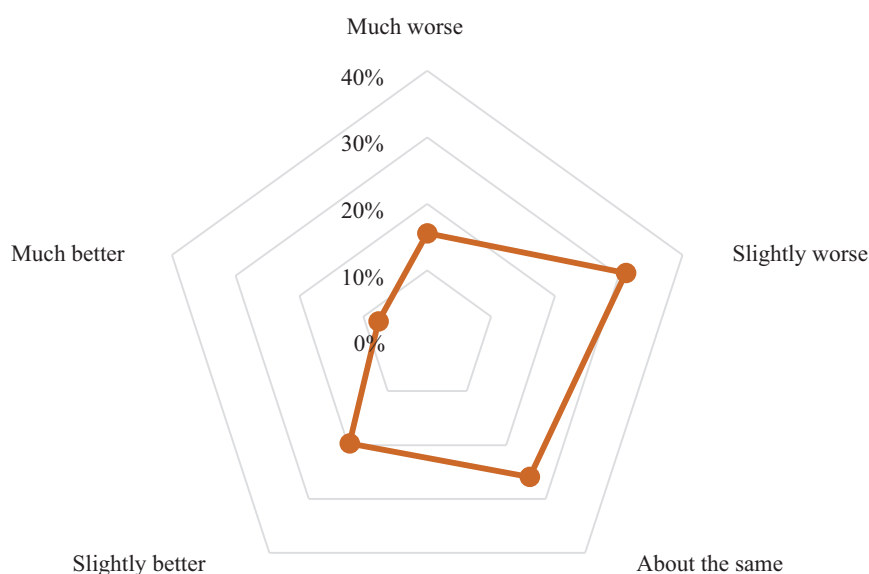
### 5.2. Psychological well-being and stress factors

When asked to compare their current life situation with their circumstances while working in Thailand, nearly half of returnees (47 percent) reported that their situation had become either “much worse” or “slightly worse.” In contrast, 26 percent indicated that their livelihood conditions remained unchanged following their return. Notably, a smaller but meaningful share reported improvements: 20 percent stated that their situation was “slightly better,” while 7 percent considered it “much better” than before (Panel a, Figure 14).

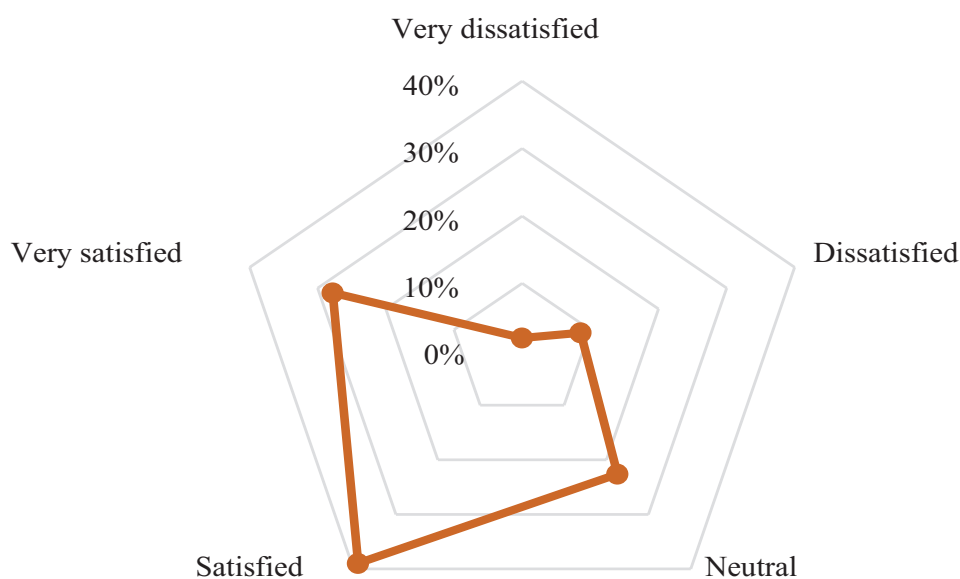
Despite the reported decline in livelihood conditions following return, most returnees expressed relatively high levels of life satisfaction and maintained an optimistic outlook about their future. Specifically, 67 percent reported that they were either “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with their lives since returning to Cambodia (Panel b, Figure 14). In addition, 79 percent indicated that they felt either “somewhat hopeful” or “very hopeful” about their future in the country (Panel c, Figure 14).

Figure 14: Perceived life satisfaction and outlook

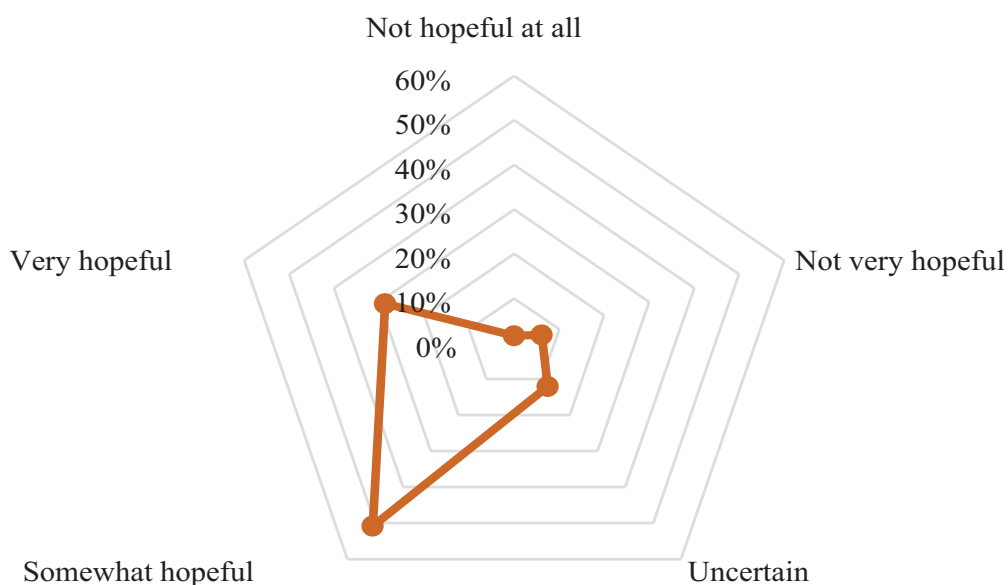
(a) Compared to your life before returning, how would you say your current life situation?



(b) How satisfied are you with your life since returning?



(c) How hopeful do you feel about your future in Cambodia?



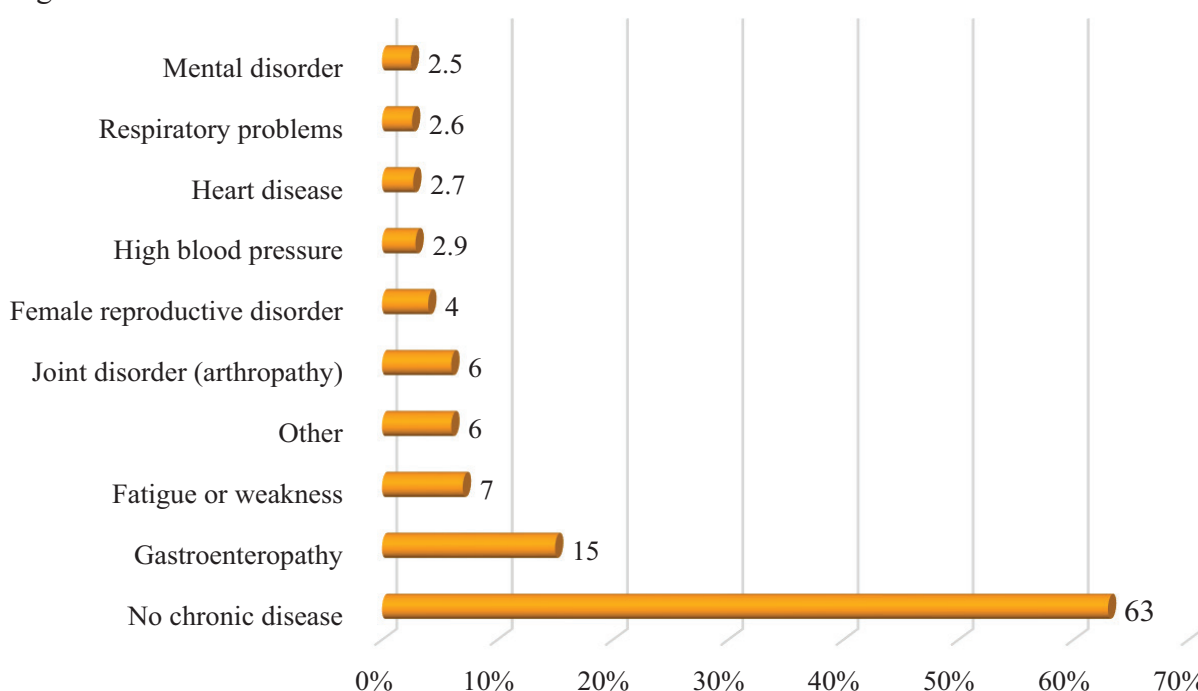
### 5.3. Health conditions

Approximately 62 percent of returnees reported that they did not suffer from any chronic disease at the time of the survey (Figure 15). Nevertheless, a notable minority indicated the presence of ongoing health conditions. Among those who reported having a chronic illness, the most frequently cited condition was gastroenteropathy (15 percent), followed by fatigue or general weakness (7 percent), joint disorders (6 percent), and female reproductive disorders (4 percent). Although the overall prevalence of chronic disease appears relatively limited, these conditions may still affect individuals' productivity, ability to engage in physically demanding work, and overall well-being.

Medical expenditures related to chronic diseases varied considerably, depending on the severity of the condition and the economic circumstances of the affected returnees. Reported expenses over the past 12 months ranged from zero—often because individuals chose not to seek treatment or were unable to afford care—to as high as USD10,000 in more severe cases requiring prolonged or specialised medical attention.

The primary source of financing for medical costs was respondents’ own income, cited by 67 percent of those who incurred expenses. This was followed by financial support from family members or relatives (25 percent) and the use of personal savings (21 percent). Notably, a proportion of returnees resorted to more distress-based coping strategies: 14 percent reported taking out loans to pay for medical treatment, while 2.5 percent indicated that they had sold assets.

Figure 15: Incidence of chronic diseases



## 6. Institutional reintegration

Since the first border clash in May 2025, the government has announced and implemented several support measures to assist returnees in addressing their immediate needs and facilitating their reintegration. These measures have focused on providing humanitarian assistance, facilitating safe return and transit, and supporting access to basic services and livelihood opportunities. In addition to short-term relief, the government has also introduced programmes aimed at promoting longer-term reintegration, including job placement assistance, skills training, and coordination with local authorities to support returnees’ resettlement in their communities.

The Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training (MLVT) has introduced a dedicated call centre (No. 1297) to support returnees in accessing employment opportunities and facilitate their reintegration into the domestic labour market. This call centre serves as a centralised platform to connect returnees with available job vacancies across different sectors and locations, helping to address information gaps that often hinder effective job matching. Through this service, returnees can obtain information on current job openings, receive guidance on application

procedures, and access referrals to potential employers. In addition to job matching, the call centre also plays an important role in linking returnees to other employment-related services provided by MLVT, such as vocational training programmes, skills development opportunities, and career counselling.

Loan restructuring is another initiative introduced by the National Bank of Cambodia (NBC) to help returnees ease their debt burdens and restore financial stability. Under this initiative, financial institutions—commercial banks and microfinance institutions—are encouraged to offer more flexible repayment arrangements to affected borrowers. These measures may include extending loan repayment periods, suspending principal or interest payments or reducing repayment amounts to better align with borrowers’ current financial capacity.

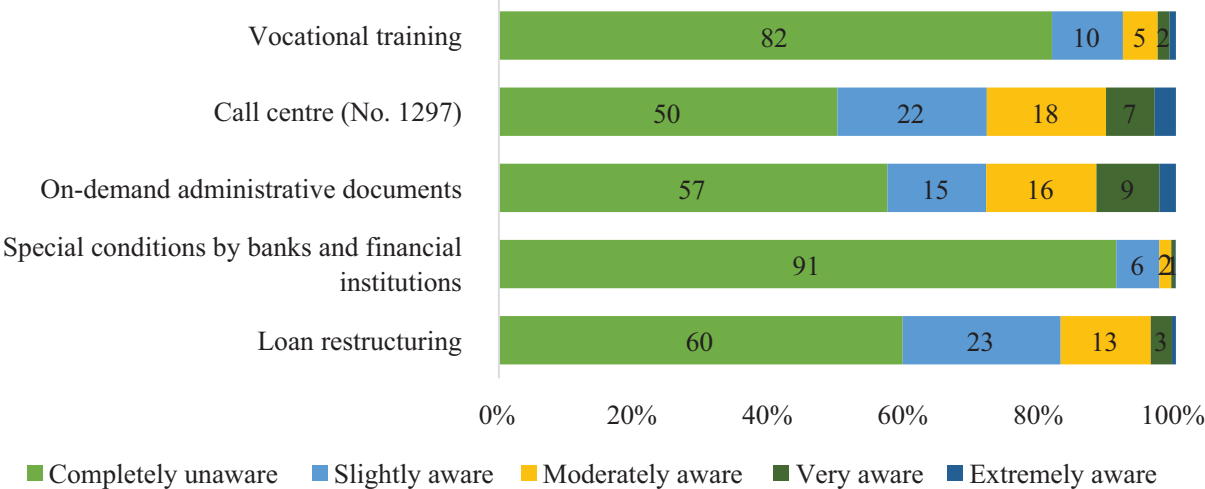
This section highlights returnees’ engagement with the dedicated measures, examining their levels of awareness, use, and overall satisfaction. It highlights how familiar returnees are with these interventions, the extent to which they actively utilise them, and their perceptions of the quality of the support received.

**6.1. Awareness and uptake of reintegration programmes**

Despite the range of support measures introduced by the government, overall awareness and utilisation among returnees remained limited (Figure 16). Approximately 60 percent of returnees reported that they were unaware of the loan restructuring programme introduced by the NBC, indicating that a substantial proportion of eligible individuals may not have been able to benefit from debt relief mechanisms intended to ease their financial burdens. Similarly, awareness of skills development opportunities was particularly low: about 82 percent of returnees were not aware of vocational training programmes offered by the MLVT.

Awareness of the job-matching call centre (No. 1297) operated by the MLVT was relatively higher compared to other support measures. Approximately half of the returnees reported being aware of the call centre and its services. Nevertheless, the fact that only about 50 percent of returnees were aware of this service indicates that a substantial proportion of potential beneficiaries remained uninformed about an important mechanism designed to connect them with employment opportunities. Strengthening outreach efforts and ensuring that information about the call centre reaches returnees promptly could further enhance its effectiveness in facilitating labour market reintegration.

Figure 16: Awareness of government support measures



Awareness alone does not necessarily translate into actual utilisation of the measures. While being informed about available programmes is a critical first step, it does not guarantee that returnees will access or benefit from them. Despite more than half of the returnees were aware of the loan restructuring measure, only 10 percent had utilised the programme (Figure 17). Similarly, utilisation rates remained relatively low for employment-related support services, including the job-matching call centre and vocational training programmes. In contrast, administrative services related to civil documentation—such as the issuance or replacement of national identification cards and updates to resident or family books—recorded the highest utilisation rates. Among returnees who were aware of these services, approximately half had accessed them. The relatively higher uptake likely reflects the immediate necessity of these documents for accessing public services, securing employment, and completing administrative procedures.

Figure 17: Utilisation of government support measures

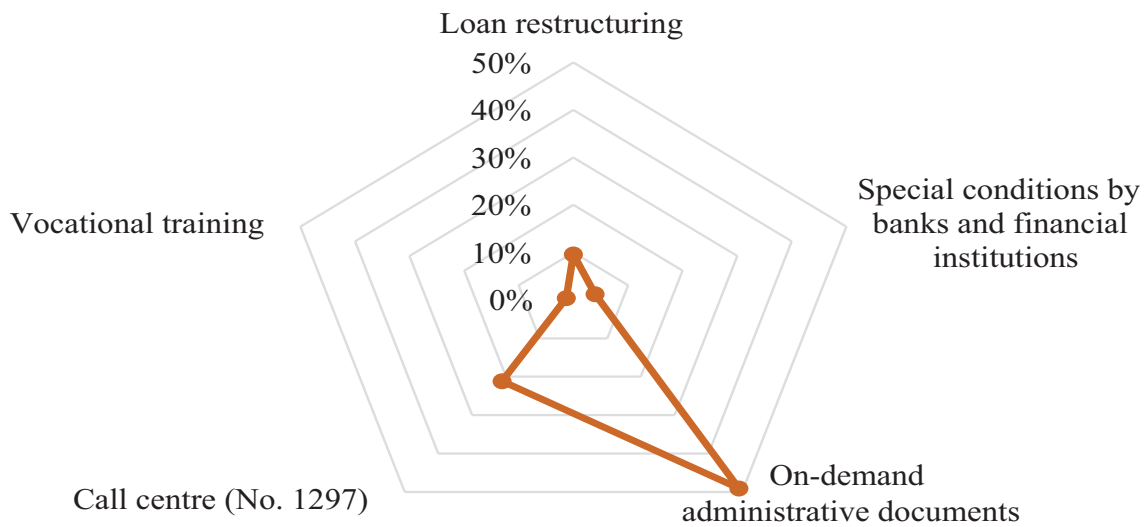
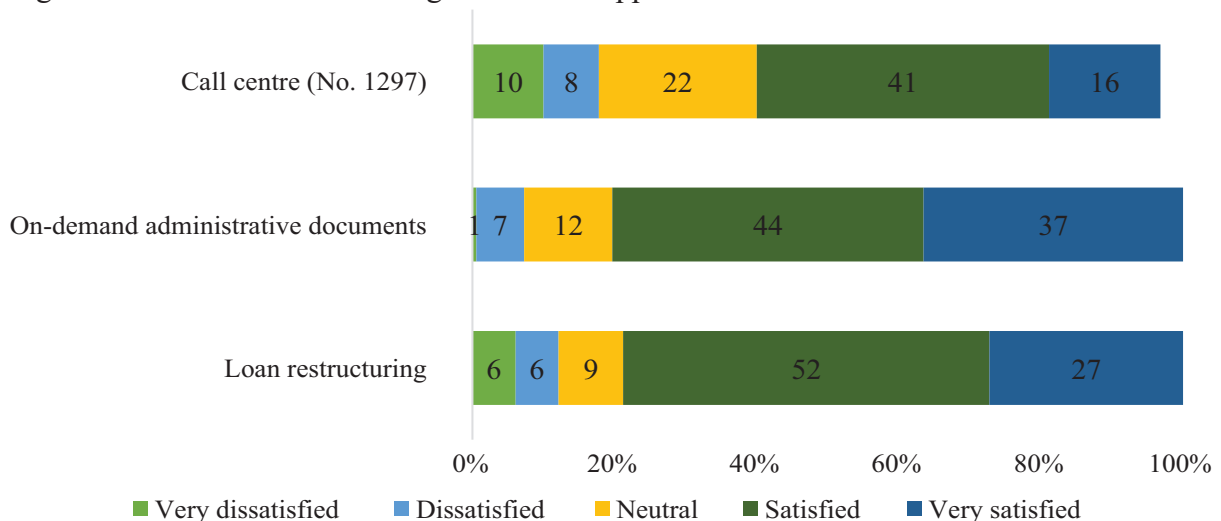


Figure 18: Satisfaction levels of government support measures



Note: Satisfaction levels for vocational training programmes and special support conditions provided by banks and financial institutions were not reported because few respondents used these services. Specifically, the sample size for these measures was fewer than 10.

Among returnees who utilised the programmes, more than half reported being either “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the support received, indicating generally positive perceptions of

the quality and relevance of the services provided (Figure 18). Further analysis shows no significant differences in satisfaction levels across key demographic and socioeconomic groups. Satisfaction rates were comparable between male and female returnees, between younger and older returnees, and between those from households with and without an Equity Card.

## 6.2. Access to training before and after return

Only 5 percent of returnees reported participating in training courses to upgrade their skills after returning, compared to 37 percent who had attended training while working in Thailand. The decline suggests that access to, or participation in, skills development opportunities became significantly more limited following their return.

The primary reason for not attending any training or skills upgrading courses was a lack of awareness of available opportunities, reported by 70 percent of returnees who did not participate in training. In addition to limited awareness, competing responsibilities also constrained participation. Approximately 27 percent cited family obligations, while another 27 percent pointed to work responsibilities as reasons for not attending training. Furthermore, 23 percent reported being too busy searching for employment, suggesting that the urgency of securing income often takes precedence over longer-term skills investment.

When asked about their intention to participate in future training courses, 65 percent of surveyed returnees expressed interest, indicating a demand for skills development opportunities. In contrast, 23 percent reported that they were not interested in attending training, while a further 12 percent were uncertain. These findings might suggest that although a clear majority are open to upgrading their skills, a notable share of returnees may require additional information, incentives, or confidence in the relevance of training programmes before committing to participation.

Among those who indicated interest, approximately 30 percent expressed a desire for training related to agriculture and animal husbandry, reflecting the continued importance of rural livelihoods and the need to improve productivity and income in this sector. A similarly high proportion (29 percent) preferred courses in vehicle and mechanical repair, suggesting demand for technical skills that may offer income-generating opportunities in both rural and urban labour markets (Figure 19).

In addition, training preferences differed significantly between male and female returnees (Figure 20). Female returnees showed greater interest in training related to agriculture and animal husbandry, beauty and personal care, business, trade and sales, and food and beverage services. These areas are often associated with self-employment or small-scale enterprise opportunities that can be pursued within or near their communities and may also offer greater flexibility to balance income-generating activities with household responsibilities. Notably, almost no female returnees expressed interest in construction and engineering, suggesting potential barriers related to gender norms or working conditions.

In contrast, male returnees demonstrated stronger interest in training related to vehicle and mechanical repairs, agriculture and animal husbandry, and construction and engineering. These sectors are traditionally male-dominated and may be perceived as offering more stable or higher-paying employment opportunities. Very few male returnees indicated interest in food and beverage services or beauty and personal care, which are often viewed as female-oriented occupations.<sup>10</sup> See Annex 2 for the specific types of training courses that returnees expressed interest in.

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10 In 2023, 30 percent of women aged 15–64 were employed in service and sales occupations compared to 15 percent of men (NIS 2023).

Figure 19: Types of training

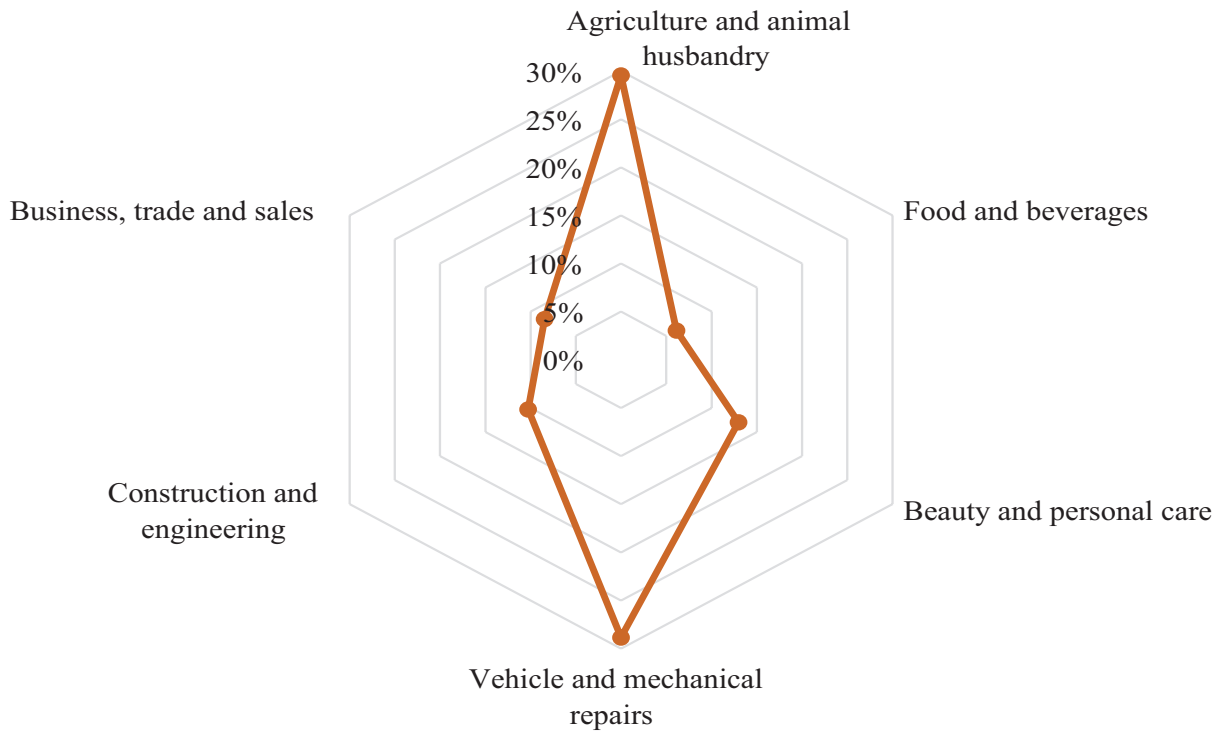
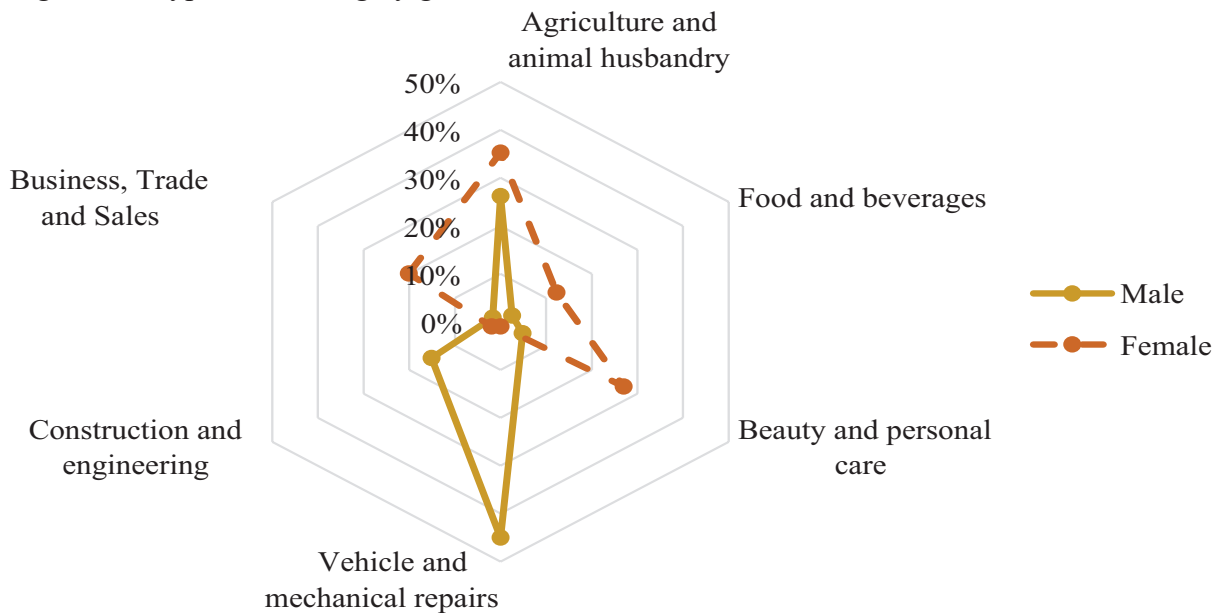


Figure 20: Types of training by gender



## 7. Reintegration outcomes

### 7.1. Levels of reintegration

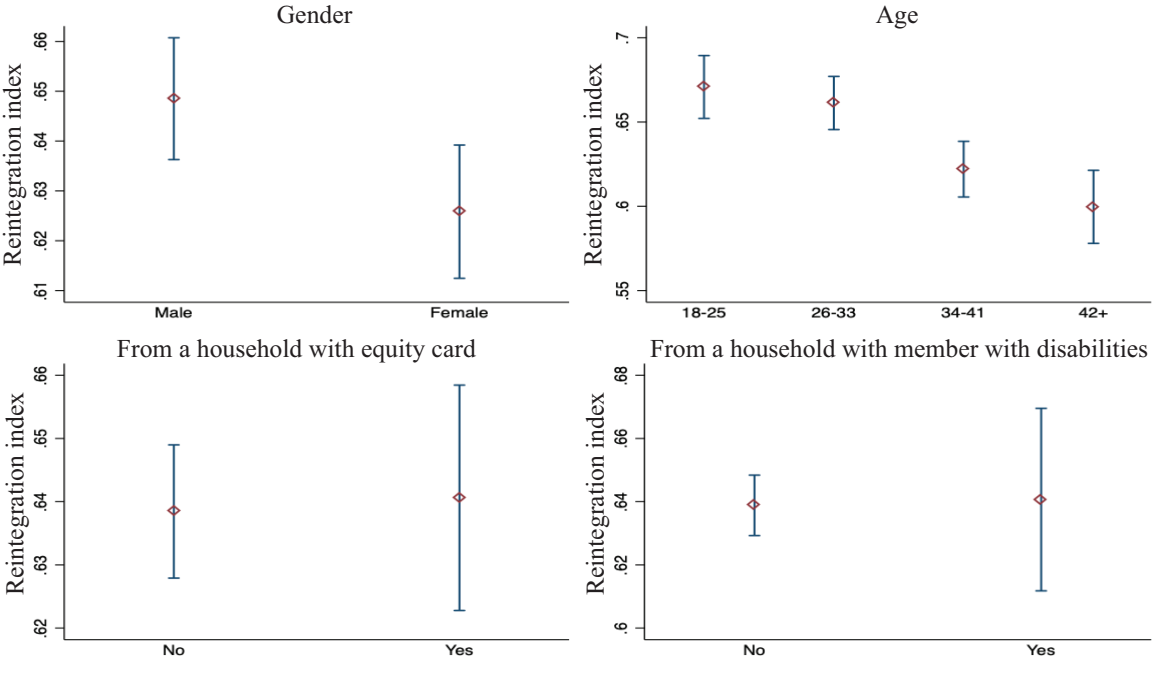
The survey results indicate that the overall level of reintegration among returnees was moderate, with an average reintegration index score of 0.639. This suggests that, on average, returnees have achieved partial progress in rebuilding their livelihoods and re-establishing their economic and social stability after returning.

The results further indicate that reintegration outcomes varied significantly across certain demographic groups, particularly by gender and age. Male returnees had a higher average

reintegration index score of 0.649, compared to 0.626 among female returnees, suggesting that men, on average, were able to reintegrate more successfully (Figure 21). Similarly, younger returnees tended to achieve higher reintegration index scores than older returnees, indicating more favourable reintegration outcomes among younger individuals.

However, the analysis found no significant differences in reintegration outcomes between returnees from households with and without an Equity Card, nor between those from households with and without members with disabilities. This suggests that these household characteristics did not appear to be strongly associated with differences in overall reintegration outcomes.

Figure 21: Average reintegration index scores disaggregated by demographic and socio-economic characteristics

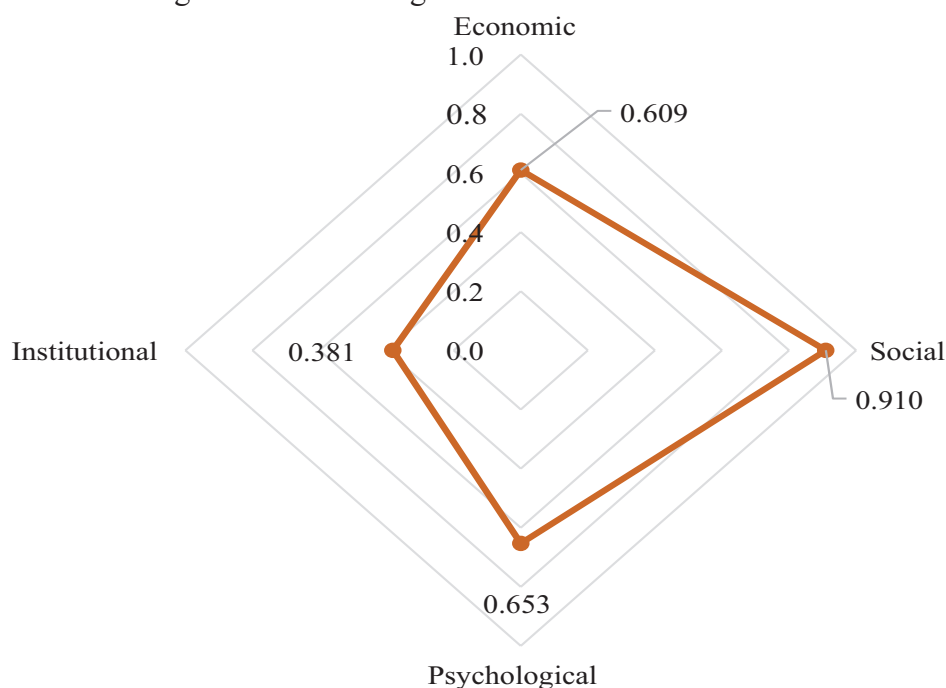


The surveyed returnees were most successful in the dimension of social reintegration, with an average reintegration index score of 0.910 (Figure 22). This high score suggests that returnees generally experienced positive acceptance within their communities and were able to re-establish social ties and a sense of belonging after returning. The findings indicate that most returnees did not face discrimination or social exclusion as a result of their migration experience. Instead, they reported feeling supported and satisfied with their community’s attitudes towards them (See Annex 3). Strong family networks, community solidarity, and established local relationships may have facilitated this positive social reintegration.

The level of psychological reintegration was moderate, with an average index score of 0.653. This suggests that while many returnees have adjusted to life after return, a substantial proportion continue to face emotional, psychological, and livelihood-related challenges that affect their overall sense of well-being and stability. A key factor contributing to this moderate score is the perception of livelihood outcomes following return. Only 50 percent of returnees reported that their current livelihood was either “unchanged” or “better” compared to their situation while working in Thailand. This means that half of the surveyed returnees perceived a deterioration in their economic conditions, which can significantly influence confidence, life

satisfaction, and outlook. When asked how hopeful they were in the future, 79 percent said they were either “somewhat” or “very” hopeful.

Figure 22: Average values of reintegration dimensions



The level of economic reintegration among returnees was also moderate, with an average index score of 0.609. This indicates that many returnees have faced difficulties in fully restoring their economic stability and achieving financial security after returning. While some were able to secure employment or resume income-generating activities, their overall economic situation remained constrained. Several key factors contributed to this moderate level of economic reintegration. First, income levels were relatively low, with many returnees employed in low-paying jobs that might not provide sufficient or stable earnings. As highlighted in Section 4.1, although 52 percent were engaged in wage employment at the time of the survey, only 40 percent could earn a monthly minimum wage of USD210. Approximately four in ten returnees were engaged in construction activities, jobs that are typically project-based, temporary in nature, and sensitive to fluctuations in economic conditions and investment cycles. Among returnees with self-employment, 70 percent earned USD300 or less per month. Second, a significant proportion of returnees continued to carry household debts. The median outstanding debt was USD3,168, and there were no significant differences across income quintiles. Eight in ten returnees reported that their households found it either “very difficult” or “difficult” to meet repayment schedules (see Section 4.6), suggesting that the burden of loan repayments placed additional pressure on already limited financial resources. Third, savings levels were generally low, reflecting both the depletion of savings during periods of unemployment or transition and limited capacity to accumulate new savings due to insufficient income.

The survey returnees were least successful in the dimension of institutional reintegration, with an average index score of 0.381. Key contributing factors were low access to training programmes, low access to education among school-age children of returnees, and low access to social protection. Only 33 percent of the surveyed returnees reported being covered by any form of social protection, such as the Equity Card, the National Social Security Fund (NSSF), or private insurance. This low level of coverage suggests that a large proportion of returnees

remain vulnerable to economic and health-related shocks, with limited access to formal safety nets that could help mitigate financial risks. In addition, a similarly low proportion—around 30 percent—reported that their school-age children were currently enrolled in school. This raises concerns about potential disruptions to children’s education following return, which may be linked to financial constraints, relocation challenges, or difficulties in reintegrating into the local education system.

It should be noted that the utilisation of government support measures had the highest indicator score of all institutional indicators, particularly for the job-matching and placement call centre and the on-demand issuance of key administrative and legal documents. These services appear to have been more accessible and directly relevant to returnees’ immediate reintegration needs, particularly in facilitating access to employment opportunities and enabling the completion of essential administrative procedures. The relatively higher uptake of these measures may reflect their practical importance in supporting returnees’ transition back into the domestic labour market and public service systems. For example, access to updated identification documents, family books, or residency records is often a prerequisite for securing employment, enrolling in social protection programmes, or accessing other government services. Similarly, job-matching and placement support can help address information gaps and connect returnees with available employment opportunities.

The levels of reintegration success were broadly similar across returnees’ demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, indicating that most groups experienced comparable overall reintegration outcomes (Table 4). The main exception was observed in the dimension of economic reintegration, where significant differences emerged between male and female returnees, particularly in relation to employment outcomes. Male returnees were more likely to be engaged in paid employment and tended to have greater access to income-generating opportunities, which contributed to relatively stronger economic reintegration. In contrast, female returnees may have faced additional barriers, including more limited access to formal employment or greater household and caregiving responsibilities that constrained their participation in the labour market.

Table 4: Average values of reintegration dimensions disaggregated by returnees’ demographic and socio-economic characteristics

|                     | Gender     |            | Age        |            | Equity Card |            | Disability |           |
|---------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|-------------|------------|------------|-----------|
|                     | Male       | Female     | Adult      | Youth      | No          | Yes        | No         | Yes       |
| Economic            | 0.637      | 0.571      | 0.606      | 0.624      | 0.619       | 0.573      | 0.609      | 0.615     |
| Social              | 0.902      | 0.920      | 0.909      | 0.912      | 0.913       | 0.896      | 0.909      | 0.911     |
| Psychological       | 0.664      | 0.639      | 0.638      | 0.713      | 0.655       | 0.648      | 0.656      | 0.636     |
| Institutional       | 0.383      | 0.380      | 0.373      | 0.417      | 0.362       | 0.453      | 0.379      | 0.403     |
| <b>Observations</b> | <b>496</b> | <b>356</b> | <b>681</b> | <b>171</b> | <b>670</b>  | <b>182</b> | <b>762</b> | <b>90</b> |

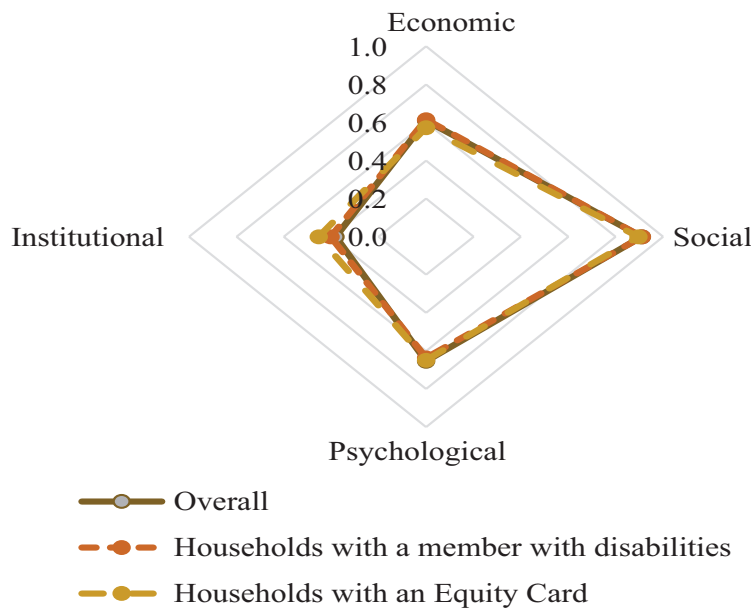
## 7.2. Reintegration among vulnerable groups

The level of reintegration among returnees from vulnerable households—defined as those holding an Equity Card or having a household member with disabilities—was moderate and broadly comparable to the overall level observed in the full sample.<sup>11</sup> A similar pattern is

11 The survey did not capture information on the types or severity of disabilities. This represents a limitation, as it constrains the analysis of how varying forms and degrees of disability may influence reintegration outcomes.

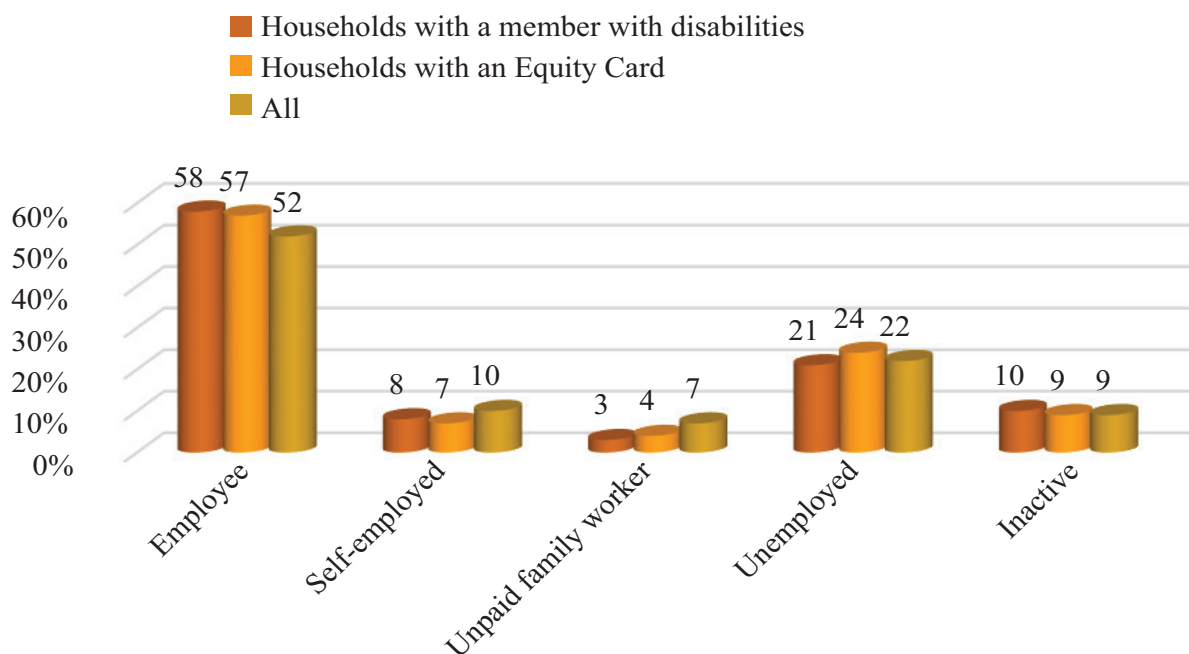
evident across different dimensions of reintegration (Figure 23). Social reintegration appeared to be the strongest dimension, reflecting relatively successful community acceptance and social connectedness, while institutional reintegration remained the weakest.

Figure 23: Average values of reintegration dimensions among returnees from vulnerable households



The level of economic reintegration among these groups was also moderate. Approximately 58 percent of returnees from households with at least one member with disabilities reported being employed at the time of the survey, compared to 57 percent of those from households holding an Equity Card. The unemployment rates stood at 21 percent and 24 percent, respectively (Figure 24).

Figure 24: Employment status among vulnerable groups



Their employment levels also declined after returning, similar to the level for all surveyed returnees. Before returning, nearly all returnees from these groups were engaged in wage employment. However, after returning, only about half remained employed. Average monthly wage earnings among returnees from households holding an Equity Card declined 37 percent before and after return to USD267, compared to 34 percent among those from households with at least a member with disabilities to USD276.

Similarly high levels of indebtedness were observed among returnees from these groups. Specifically, 74 percent of returnees from households holding an Equity Card reported having outstanding loans, compared to 66 percent of those from households with at least one member with disabilities. The average loan size among returnees from these groups was approximately USD4,000, with a median of USD2,500. These figures indicate a concerning level of debt, with a subset facing significantly higher financial obligations, which may increase their vulnerability to repayment difficulties. This is consistent with the finding that 86 percent of returnees from households with a member with disabilities said their household would find it “very difficult” or “difficult” to repay the loans on time, compared to 87 percent among those from households holding an Equity Card.

Only about 4 percent of returnees from both vulnerable groups reported having attended any skills training since returning, indicating low participation in post-return capacity-building programmes. The main reasons cited for not attending included a lack of awareness of available training opportunities, competing family responsibilities, and a prioritisation of immediate job search and income-generating activities. When asked about their intention to attend future training, 67 percent of returnees from households with an Equity Card expressed interest, compared to 70 percent among those from households with a member with disabilities. Training in agriculture and animal husbandry, vehicle and mechanical repair, and construction and engineering were the most frequently cited areas of interest.

The level of psychological reintegration among these vulnerable groups was moderate, with an average index score of 0.648 among returnees from households holding an Equity Card and 0.636 among those from households with a member with disabilities. At the indicator level, nearly half of returnees from both groups (about 47 percent) reported that their lives had become “much worse” or “slightly worse” since returning, pointing to persistent challenges in adjusting to post-return conditions.

Despite these difficulties, a notable degree of optimism was reported. Approximately seven in ten returnees reported feeling “somewhat” or “very hopeful” about their future in Cambodia, suggesting a generally positive outlook even in the face of hardship. In terms of health status, 65 percent of returnees from households with an Equity Card reported having no chronic diseases at the time of the survey, compared to 63 percent among those from households with a member with disabilities, indicating relatively similar health profiles across the two groups. Furthermore, more than half of returnees from both groups reported being “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the public services they had received.

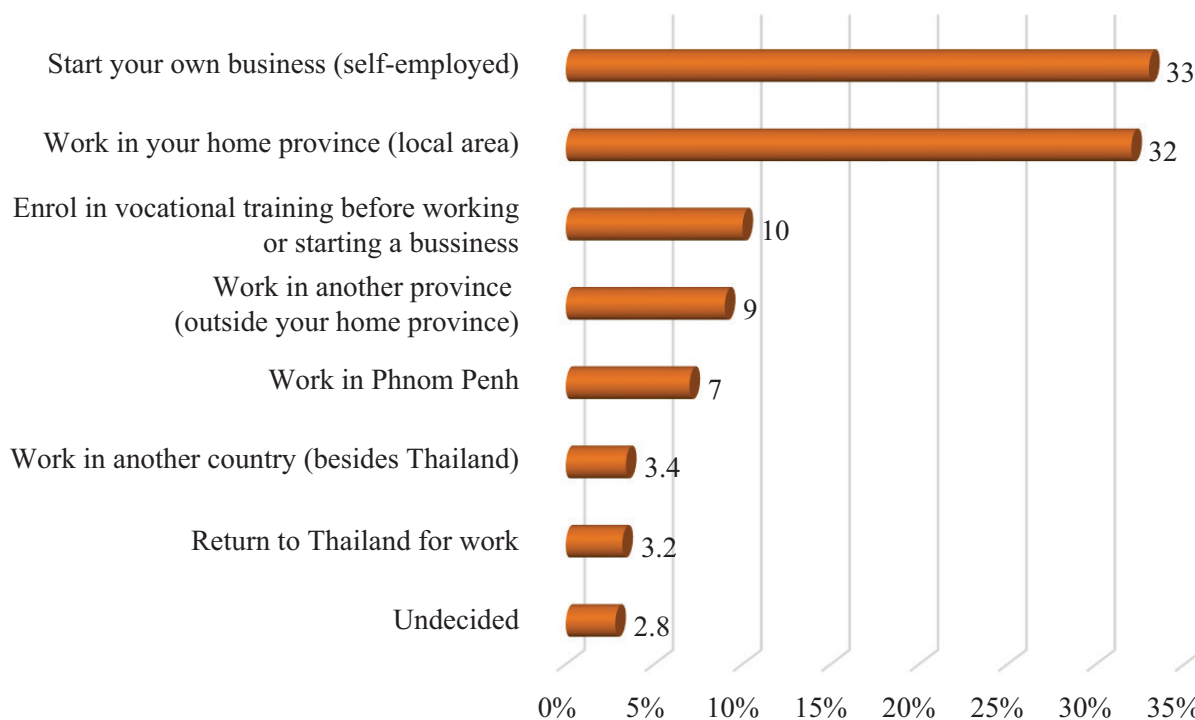
### **7.3. Migration intentions**

The survey results indicate that only a small proportion of returnees expressed an intention to migrate again in the future (Figure 25). Specifically, 3.2 percent reported that they planned to return to Thailand, while 3.4 percent indicated an intention to migrate to other countries (South Korea and Japan were the most common destinations besides Thailand). These low

percentages suggest that most returnees did not view remigration as their preferred option at the time of the survey.

Instead, the majority expressed a preference to remain in Cambodia and rebuild their livelihoods domestically. About 32 percent reported that they intended to continue working in their home provinces, reflecting a desire to reintegrate into local labour markets and remain close to their families and communities. A slightly higher proportion (33 percent) indicated plans to start their own businesses, highlighting interests in self-employment and entrepreneurship as a pathway to economic stability.

Figure 25: Future career plans and migration intentions



Further analysis indicates that future livelihood plans and intentions to migrate again did not differ significantly across returnees' demographic and socioeconomic characteristics. Specifically, there were no statistically significant differences between male and female returnees, younger and older returnees, or between those from households with and without an Equity Card, as well as those with and without a member with disabilities.

As approximately 80 percent of the surveyed returnees were interviewed after the second Cambodian–Thai border clash and given that such an incident could potentially influence perceptions of safety, job security, and cross-border mobility, the research team examined whether the timing of the interview affected respondents' future plans and intentions to remigrate. It was plausible that heightened uncertainty or political tensions might discourage returnees from considering migration to Thailand or other destinations. To assess this, the research team conducted statistical tests comparing respondents interviewed before and after the second clash. The results indicate no statistically significant differences in reported future career plans or intentions to migrate again between the two groups. This suggests that the border incident did not materially alter returnees' stated aspirations or mobility intentions at the time of the survey.

#### 7.4. Reasons for returning to Thailand or staying in Cambodia

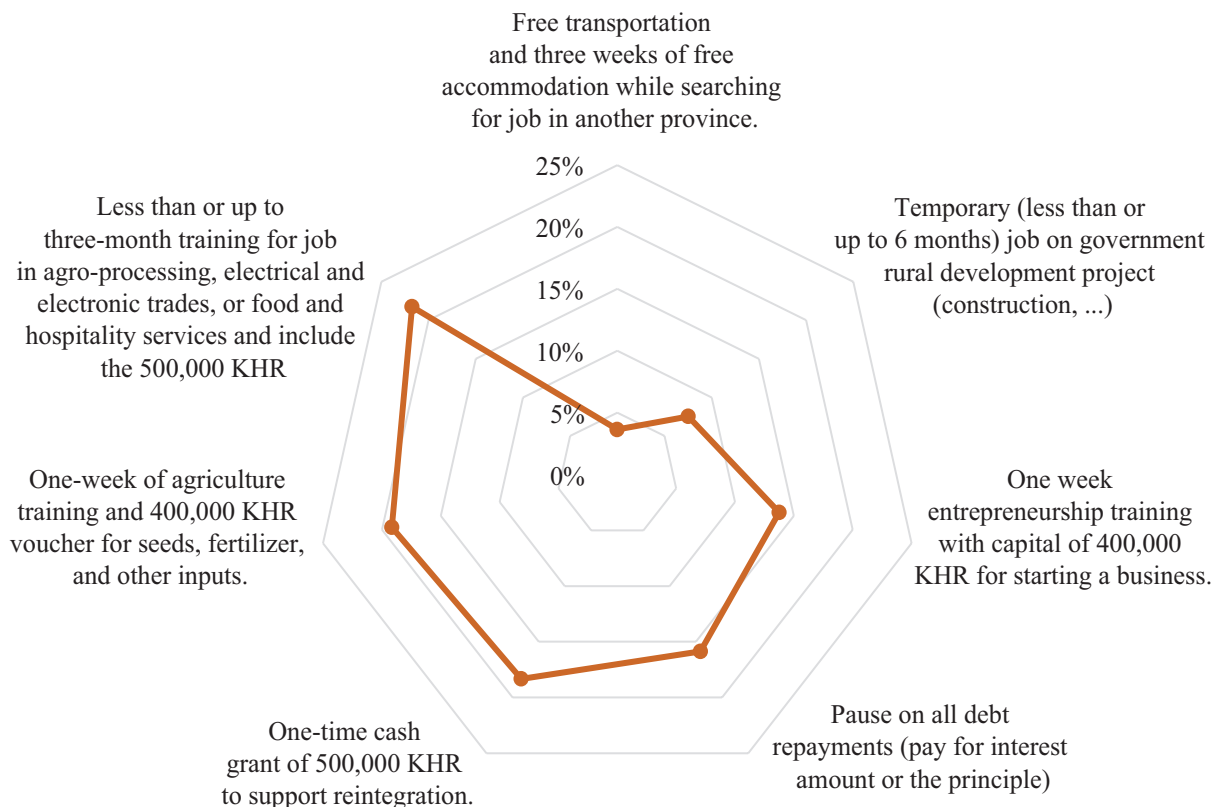
Among surveyed returnees who indicated that they might return to Thailand, the most frequently cited reason was the opportunity to earn higher income, reported by 81 percent of respondents. This reflects wage differentials between Thailand and Cambodia, which continue to serve as a strong economic incentive for remigration. In addition, 59 percent of returnees highlighted the prospect of securing more stable employment, suggesting that jobs in Thailand are perceived to offer greater continuity and reliability compared to those available domestically. As shown in Section 3.2, returnees could earn on average USD424 per month in Thailand compared to USD270 after return. More than half of respondents (52 percent) also pointed to the difficulty of finding suitable employment in Cambodia, underscoring the limited availability of job opportunities and the challenges returnees might face in reintegrating into the local labour market.

In contrast, among returnees who reported that they were likely to remain in Cambodia, the most cited reason was the desire to stay close to their family and home, mentioned by 80 percent of respondents. This highlights the importance of family ties and social support networks in shaping returnees’ decisions to remain in their country of origin. Proximity to family may also provide emotional support and reduce living expenses, all of which can contribute to a stronger sense of stability and well-being despite potentially lower income prospects.

#### 7.5. Types of programme support

Surveyed returnees were asked to identify the types of policy or programme support they would need from the government or development partners that might facilitate their reintegration. To ensure consistency in responses and minimise bias, enumerators randomly presented seven specific policy and programme options to each respondent. The respondent was then asked to select the one form of support they considered important for assisting their reintegration.

Figure 26: Returnees’ perceived types of support from the government or development partners



As shown in Figure 26, several types of policy and programme support were commonly cited by returnees as important for facilitating their reintegration. The most frequently selected option was participation in a short-term vocational training course of three months or less, combined with a one-time cash grant of KHR500,000 (USD125). This option was chosen by 23 percent of surveyed returnees, making it the most preferred form of support. The training programmes covered practical and market-relevant skills in sectors such as agro-processing, electrical and electronic trades, and food and hospitality services. The strong preference for this support reflects returnees' interest in acquiring technical skills that can enhance their employability or enable them to pursue self-employment opportunities. The inclusion of a modest cash handout likely further increased its appeal, as it could help offset immediate financial constraints, cover training-related expenses, or provide initial capital for small income-generating activities.

The second most frequently cited form of support was a short-term vocational training course in agriculture, combined with a one-time cash grant of KHR400,000 (USD100). This option was selected by about 20 percent of surveyed returnees, making it the second most preferred reintegration support measure. This was followed by a preference for a one-time unconditional cash grant of KHR500,000 (approximately USD125), which was also commonly cited by returnees. In addition, about 10 percent of returnees chose a pause on all debt repayments.

It is important to note that the selection of preferred policy and programme support did not differ significantly across returnees' demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, including gender, age group, or household livelihood status. In other words, male and female returnees, younger and older individuals, or those from households with or without an Equity Card expressed broadly similar priorities regarding the types of support they considered most important for their reintegration.

## 8. Conclusions and recommendations

**This study examined the economic and social consequences of the large-scale return of Cambodian migrant workers following the Cambodian-Thai border conflict in 2025, focusing on reintegration outcomes of returnees.** Drawing on survey data from 852 returnees in Banteay Meanchey, Battambang, Pursat, Siem Reap, Takeo, and Oddar Meanchey and applying a multidimensional Reintegration Index (RI), the findings provide an integrated assessment of economic, social, psychological, and institutional reintegration. Data collection was conducted between 7 December 2025 and 14 January 2026. Interviews were conducted both in person and by phone.

**Overall, reintegration outcomes were moderate, with an average RI score of 0.639.** While most returnees have re-established themselves within their communities, important vulnerabilities persist, particularly in economic stability and institutional access. Reintegration outcomes varied modestly across demographic groups, with male and younger returnees achieving slightly stronger results. However, no statistically significant differences were observed across household poverty status, as proxied by Equity Card ownership, or the presence of household members with disabilities.

**Social reintegration emerged as the strongest dimension, indicating that returnees were largely welcomed back into their communities and experienced minimal discrimination.** This suggests that social cohesion at the community level remains resilient despite the scale and suddenness of return. By contrast, economic reintegration was only moderate. Although approximately half of returnees were employed at the time of the survey, income security

remains fragile. Only 40 percent earned at least the statutory minimum wage of USD210, and many were concentrated in low-paying employment in manufacturing and construction. The decline in average monthly income (37 percent after return), combined with the loss of remittances, has placed considerable strain on household livelihoods.

**Debt burdens further compound this vulnerability. With 70 percent of returnees reporting outstanding household loans and 83 percent describing repayment as “difficult” or “very difficult,” financial stress represents a major barrier to sustainable reintegration.** While loan restructuring initiatives have been introduced, utilisation remains limited, highlighting implementation and outreach gaps.

**Psychological reintegration was moderate. Although half of returnees perceived their livelihoods to be worse than when working in Thailand, a relatively high share expressed hope for the future.** This combination of perceived economic decline and forward-looking optimism suggests resilience but also underscores the importance of tangible livelihood improvements to sustain positive outlooks.

**Institutional reintegration was the weakest dimension. Access to social protection, training opportunities, and education for school-age children was limited. Participation in post-return skills training was particularly low (5 percent), despite strong interest in vocational programmes.** Awareness of government support measures was relatively high, yet service uptake—aside from job-matching through the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training (MLVT) call centre (1297) and administrative support from the Ministry of Interior—remained uneven. This suggests that awareness alone is insufficient; accessibility, relevance, and delivery mechanisms also matter.

**Encouragingly, most returnees expressed intentions to remain in Cambodia, with many considering self-employment or work within their home provinces.** Only a small proportion indicated plans to remigrate to Thailand or to alternative destinations, such as Japan or South Korea. This indicates a strong orientation towards domestic reintegration, provided that viable livelihood opportunities can be secured.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed to support the sustainable reintegration of returnees:

|  |
|--|
| <b>Recommendation 1: Strengthen employment protection and information systems</b>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enhance oversight of recruitment practices to prevent employment-related fraud, deceptive job offers, and labour exploitation.</li> <li>• Improve access to clear and reliable labour market information by expanding and strengthening job-matching and placement services, including the MLVT call centre (1297), to better connect returnees with available vacancies.</li> </ul>                |
| <b>Recommendation 2: Address household debt and financial vulnerability</b>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strengthen communication and outreach regarding existing loans restructuring programmes and special conditions for new loans for returnees.</li> <li>• Explore targeted debt relief or temporary repayment pauses for highly vulnerable households.</li> <li>• Provide financial literacy training on budgeting, savings, and debt management to improve household financial resilience.</li> </ul> |
| <b>Recommendation 3: Expand access to skills development and promote self-employment</b>   |

- Scale up short-term, practical vocational training programmes and tailor training courses to reflect gender-differentiated interests and employment pathways. Female returnees tend to express stronger interest in training programmes related to agriculture and animal husbandry, beauty and personal care, business, trade and sales, and food and beverage services. In contrast, male returnees are more likely to prefer courses in vehicle and mechanical repairs, agriculture and animal husbandry, and construction.
- Consider pairing skills training with modest start-up grants between KHR400,000 and KHR500,000 (USD100–125) to facilitate participation.
- Provide access to finance and targeted skills training to female returnees in pursuing self-employment opportunities. Priority areas may include food and beverages, crop cultivation, and animal raising. Promoting entrepreneurship and flexible work arrangements is essential, as these options better accommodate women’s caregiving responsibilities.

**Recommendation 4: Promote balanced local economic development**

- Invest in job creation and private sector development in provinces with limited economic activity to reduce the need for internal migration.

While this study provides important baseline evidence on post-return reintegration, there are areas for further investigation:

- Given that the cross-sectional design limits the ability to track changes over time and that reintegration is an evolving process rather than a one-time outcome, panel data tracking returnees over multiple years would help determine whether moderate reintegration outcomes improve or deteriorate over time, particularly in relation to employment stability, debt repayment, and psychological well-being. Although this undertaking may require substantial resources, it merits serious consideration given its potential long-term benefits.
- Given the high prevalence of indebtedness, further analysis of debt structures, borrowing sources, and repayment strategies would be valuable. Research on financial literacy interventions and their effectiveness in strengthening household resilience would also inform medium- to long-term policy responses.
- Further research is needed to examine the absorptive capacity of local labour markets, especially in provinces with weaker economic performance. Comparative provincial studies could explore why areas such as Takeo perform relatively better and whether specific economic structures or industrial bases facilitate stronger reintegration outcomes.
- Rigorous impact evaluations of existing programmes, such as job-matching services, vocational training initiatives, and loan restructuring schemes, would provide evidence on which interventions generate meaningful improvements in employment, income, and financial resilience. Although this undertaking may require substantial resources, it merits serious consideration, given its potential long-term benefits.

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## Annexes

Annex 1: Indicators, variables, and corresponding questions used under each dimension of the reintegration index

| Dimensions    | Indicators                        | Variables  | Corresponding questions | Notes   |
|---------------|-----------------------------------|--|-------------------------|---|
| Economic      | Employment status                 | Employed or unemployed   | q3b_1                   |   |
|               | Income                            | Monthly income/profits $\geq$ monthly minimum wage of USD210   | q3b_5<br>q4_7           |   |
|               | Skill confidence                  | Confidence in using skills acquired while working in Thailand: neutral or confidence   | q7b_4                   | “Don’t know” responses coded 0  |
|               | Access to agricultural land       | Has agricultural land  | q5_8                    |   |
|               | Access to residential land        | Owned residential land or got permission from parents/relatives to stay  | q5_11                   |   |
|               | Debt burden                       | Not having loans or not having loans from private moneylenders, commercial banks, and MFIs   | q2_19<br>q2_20          | “Don’t know” responses coded 0  |
|               | Household savings                 | Whether the household has savings  | q2_22                   | “Don’t know” and “Refused” responses coded 0  |
|               | Financial prospect                | Unchanged or improved  | q6_7                    | “Don’t know” responses coded 0  |
| Social        | Perceived discrimination          | Community attitude towards returnees: normal or satisfied  | q8c_1                   | “Don’t know” responses coded 0  |
|               | Community acceptance              | Community support towards return migrants: normal or supportive  | q8c_2                   | “Don’t know” responses coded 0  |
| Psychological | Life satisfaction                 | Life satisfaction since returning: unchanged or satisfied  | q9_2                    |   |
|               | Hope about the future             | Somewhat hopeful or very hopeful   | q9_3                    | “Don’t know” responses coded 0  |
|               | Health condition                  | Having no chronic health problems  | q8a_10                  |   |
|               | Satisfaction with public services | Satisfied or very satisfied  | q9_4                    | “Don’t know” responses coded 0  |
| Institutional | Access to training                | Attended training or upskilling programmes   | q7a_1                   |   |
|               | Access to education               | School enrolment of school-age children is 80 percent or higher.<br><br>School enrolment rate =<br>Number of school-age children currently attending school /<br>Number of school-age children | q8a_1_1 q8a_2_1         | School enrolment rate of returnees with no children or no school-age children is coded 1. |
|               | Access to social protection       | Health coverage  | q8a_6                   |   |
|               | Use of support programmes         | Use of government support, such as loan restructuring or call centre   | q8b_2                   |   |

Annex 2: Specific types of training courses, overall and disaggregated by the gender of returnees

| <b>Training type</b>     | <b>Total</b> | <b>Male</b> | <b>Female</b> |
|--------------------------|--------------|-------------|---------------|
| Livestock                | 20.5         | 16.8        | 27.0          |
| Motor repairs            | 10.6         | 10.5        | 0.5           |
| Car repairs              | 6.7          | 5.7         | -             |
| Crop cultivation         | 5.9          | 5.1         | 7.4           |
| Sales skills             | 5.8          | 0.9         | 14.2          |
| Salon                    | 5.6          | 1.7         | 14.7          |
| Sewing                   | 5.6          | 16.5        | 12.3          |
| Other mechanical repairs | 4.5          | 1.7         | -             |
| Other construction work  | 4.3          | 0.9         | 0.5           |
| Electrical system        | 3.6          | 1.1         | -             |
| Metal work               | 3.6          | 0.3         | -             |
| Cooking                  | 3.4          | 2.0         | 5.9           |
| Entrepreneur skills      | 2.7          | 0.6         | 5.9           |
| Tiling work              | 2.2          | 6.6         | 1.5           |
| Other agriculture        | 2.0          | 2.8         | 0.5           |
| Hair dressing            | 1.8          | 0.3         | -             |
| Baking                   | 1.6          | 2.8         | 3.4           |
| Farming                  | 1.1          | 1.4         | 0.5           |
| Coffee making            | 1.1          | 0.6         | 2.9           |
| Air-conditioner repairs  | 1.1          | 0.9         | -             |
| Truck driving            | 1.1          | 5.7         | -             |
| Furniture work           | 1.1          | 0.6         | 0.5           |
| Phone repairs            | 0.7          | 1.7         | -             |
| Electronic repairs       | 0.7          | 7.1         | 0.5           |
| Hospitality              | 0.5          | 1.4         | 1.0           |
| Foreign languages        | 0.5          | 0.6         | 0.5           |
| Arts and music           | 0.4          | 0.3         | -             |
| IT                       | 0.4          | 0.3         | -             |
| Plumbing                 | 0.2          | 2.6         | -             |
| <b>Observations</b>      | <b>555</b>   | <b>351</b>  | <b>204</b>    |

Annex 3: Average values of key reintegration indicators, overall and disaggregated by returnees' demographic and socioeconomic characteristics

|                                      | Overall    | Gender     |            | Age        |            | Equity Card |            | Disability |           |
|--------------------------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|-------------|------------|------------|-----------|
|                                      |            | Male       | Female     | Adult      | Youth      | No          | Yes        | No         | Yes       |
| Employment                           | 0.624      | 0.730      | 0.478      | 0.620      | 0.643      | 0.622       | 0.632      | 0.621      | 0.656     |
| Income                               | 0.434      | 0.528      | 0.303      | 0.417      | 0.503      | 0.439       | 0.418      | 0.432      | 0.456     |
| Skills confidence                    | 0.910      | 0.923      | 0.890      | 0.924      | 0.854      | 0.910       | 0.907      | 0.912      | 0.889     |
| Access to agricultural land          | 0.599      | 0.581      | 0.624      | 0.587      | 0.643      | 0.642       | 0.440      | 0.597      | 0.611     |
| Access to residential land           | 0.994      | 0.994      | 0.994      | 0.993      | 1.000      | 0.997       | 0.984      | 0.995      | 0.989     |
| Debt burden                          | 0.419      | 0.413      | 0.427      | 0.424      | 0.398      | 0.439       | 0.346      | 0.413      | 0.467     |
| Household savings                    | 0.211      | 0.226      | 0.191      | 0.210      | 0.216      | 0.230       | 0.143      | 0.211      | 0.211     |
| Financial prospect                   | 0.684      | 0.704      | 0.657      | 0.671      | 0.737      | 0.676       | 0.714      | 0.689      | 0.644     |
| Perceived discrimination             | 0.966      | 0.964      | 0.969      | 0.962      | 0.982      | 0.970       | 0.951      | 0.965      | 0.978     |
| Community acceptance                 | 0.853      | 0.841      | 0.871      | 0.856      | 0.842      | 0.857       | 0.841      | 0.854      | 0.844     |
| Life satisfaction                    | 0.533      | 0.544      | 0.517      | 0.508      | 0.632      | 0.539       | 0.511      | 0.530      | 0.556     |
| Hope about the future                | 0.795      | 0.792      | 0.798      | 0.781      | 0.848      | 0.816       | 0.714      | 0.798      | 0.767     |
| Health condition                     | 0.629      | 0.679      | 0.559      | 0.606      | 0.719      | 0.621       | 0.659      | 0.634      | 0.589     |
| Satisfaction with public services    | 0.657      | 0.639      | 0.683      | 0.658      | 0.655      | 0.643       | 0.709      | 0.660      | 0.633     |
| Access to training                   | 0.050      | 0.056      | 0.042      | 0.043      | 0.082      | 0.055       | 0.033      | 0.050      | 0.056     |
| Access to education                  | 0.329      | 0.347      | 0.303      | 0.310      | 0.404      | 0.236       | 0.670      | 0.325      | 0.356     |
| Access to social protection          | 0.298      | 0.272      | 0.334      | 0.323      | 0.199      | 0.303       | 0.280      | 0.295      | 0.322     |
| Use of government support programmes | 0.849      | 0.855      | 0.840      | 0.815      | 0.982      | 0.854       | 0.830      | 0.845      | 0.878     |
| <b>Observations</b>                  | <b>852</b> | <b>496</b> | <b>356</b> | <b>681</b> | <b>171</b> | <b>670</b>  | <b>182</b> | <b>762</b> | <b>90</b> |

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## **Cambodia Development Resource Institute**

📍 56 Street 315, Tuol Kork, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

☎ +855 23 881 701/881 916/883 603

✉ [cdri@cdri.org.kh](mailto:cdri@cdri.org.kh)

🌐 [www.cdri.org.kh](http://www.cdri.org.kh)

