

Chapter 3

Returned Migrant Workers in Cambodia: Motivations for Moving and Economic Reintegration

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Introduction

In recent years, migrant workers in member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have often been economic migrants who intend to return home after a certain length of time. The migration pattern in the Mekong Subregion is similar to that of other ASEAN countries. Most migrants from Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar flowing into Thailand intend to return home after a certain period, unless they are refugees. There is a huge number of Cambodian workers in Thailand, and some have stayed in the country for more than 20 years. However, more people migrate temporarily, either alone or with their partner, to earn money, leaving their children at home, and then return home after working for some years. Some people repeat this process several times until they get older, and some stop when they become reintegrated to the community after returning.

Returned migrants offer many potential benefits for development. These include direct and indirect benefits from remittances, intellectual gains in terms of skills development, and newly introduced ideas from the migrants' experience. They revitalise the sending country's economy and society, reduce poverty, and improve the standard of living (De Haas, 2010; SMERU, 2015; Wahba, 2015). Return migration must be understood in the context of the final phase of the migration cycle or flow. To enjoy these benefits, it should end with the successful reintegration of the returning migrants into the community (Battistella, 2004; IOM, 2015).

Reintegration is an essential part of the return migration process because it generally contributes to the sustainability of the benefits of migration after the migrant's return. Reintegration has various related dimensions, including social reintegration, economic

reintegration, and psychological integration (IOM, 2015).¹ This paper focuses more on the economic dimension of the reintegration of unskilled or lower-skilled migrant workers from Cambodia, because most Cambodians migrate for economic purposes.

Indonesia and the Philippines, which are larger-scale migrant exporting countries among the ASEAN countries, have been the subjects of numerous studies on returning migrants. However, economic reintegration in the context of skills gained in the host countries is discussed more often regarding skilled or semi-skilled workers, such as nurses from the Philippines. For unskilled workers returning to Indonesia, the social adjustment aspects are emphasised, but economic reintegration, including the skills development of unskilled or low-skilled workers, has received less attention (SMERU, 2015).

Although returned migrant workers are not a new phenomenon in Cambodia, the topic has not been discussed much, because emigration raises more urgent human rights problems. More attention has been paid to the current migrants and their integration into the destination country (Chaisuparakul, 2015). Discussion of immigration policy for migrant workers in Thailand focuses on how to control the inflow, even though the memorandums of understanding with neighbouring countries also cover the way in which migrants return. In Cambodia's labour migration policy, return migration is mentioned as part of the productive migration cycle. However, it aims to collect accurate data first,² and this has not yet been achieved.

This paper aims to examine the situation of Cambodia's returning migrant workers; how and why they return; and their economic reintegration, focusing on job opportunities after returning. The main discussion points are (i) the motivation or reasons for returning, and how they choose their work location; (ii) how they apply their migration experience upon returning; and (iii) the role of public institutions. The analysis draws on limited data from a survey questionnaire, general statistical data, and in-depth interviewee information.

The first section provides an overview of migration from Cambodia and the employment opportunities in Cambodia. The second section is based on the returning migrant workers'

¹ In 2015, the SMERU Research Institute proposed a comprehensive framework on how to support migrants' reintegration into the community after their return.

² Goal 13 of the Labour Migration Policy and Action Plan for Cambodia 2015–2018 is as follows: 'The productive return and reintegration of men and women migrant workers will increase through data collection and policy formulation, and strengthened service provision including skills recognition, job matching, investment programmes, insurance schemes and support services for social and financial reintegration for both regular and irregular migrant workers.'

survey conducted in October–December 2015. It examines workers’ motivation for migrating and returning, and their economic opportunities in Cambodia from the view point of the economic reintegration. The third section is a case study of workers in the city of Poi Pet, based on interviews in December 2015.

1. Overview of Migration from Cambodia

1.1 Flow of migration from Cambodia

Cambodia has sent migrant workers to other countries since the mid- to late 1990s because of the lower wages and lack of job opportunities within the country. The main destinations are Thailand, Malaysia, and the Republic of Korea (henceforth Korea).³ In 2015, almost 0.8 million Cambodians were working in Thailand, equivalent to almost 10% of Cambodia’s total labour force. In recent years, Cambodia has also started to send workers to Singapore and trainees to Japan, where the workers can earn – and are required to have – higher skill levels.⁴

In 2014, the main labour-sending provinces were Battambang, Banteay Meanchey, Siem Reap, Prey Veng, and Takeo (Table 3.1). Battambang, Banteay Meanchey, and Siem Reap provinces are located closer to Thailand, which is the biggest destination for Cambodian workers. The other provinces, such as Prey Veng and Takeo, have larger populations and less agricultural land, and are closer to Viet Nam. However, people rarely migrate to work in Viet Nam,⁵ as the wage level is not high enough, and Viet Nam has a huge native population and unemployment is lower than in Thailand, which is troubled by a chronic labour shortage.

³ Most migrants to Malaysia worked as housemaids and factory workers until the government banned sending housemaids to Malaysia in 2010. In Korea, small and medium-sized enterprises, agriculture, and construction are the main sectors for Cambodian workers. Korea accepts Cambodian workers through the government agency (Chan, 2009; Hing et al., 2011; Hatsukano and Chalermopol, 2015).

⁴ “Migrant workers send home \$1 billion a year,” *The Phnom Penh Post*, 18 February 2016.

⁵ It is said that some Cambodian people in these areas go to Ho Chi Minh City as beggars (*The Phnom Penh Post*, 23 December 2009).

Table 3.1: Main Source of Migrants from Cambodia by Province, 2014

Province	Number of persons
Banteay Meanchey	127,346
Battambang	84,393
Siem Reap	53,225
Prey Veng	49,648
Takeo	31,418
Other	193,907
Total	539,937

Notes: The numbers include internal and international migrants.

Source: Government of Cambodia.

Most Cambodian workers going abroad are unskilled or lower-skilled workers from rural areas. In Thailand, most Cambodian migrants work as construction labourers, food processing factory workers, and agriculture labourers at close to the minimum wage (Hatsukano and Chalernpol, 2015). Experienced workers have started to appear. For example, there are cases of migrants who worked as housemaids in Malaysia moving to work in Singapore, utilising their previous experience,⁶ although such cases are still quite limited.

1.2 Employment opportunities in Cambodia

In Cambodia, 45% of the labour force work in the agricultural sector and 24% in the manufacturing and mining sectors (ILO and ADB, 2015). The garment industry is the largest manufacturing sector, providing about 700,000 jobs, but the country's growing younger population exceeds the number of available jobs,⁷ and these are concentrated in the urban areas. According to the Inter-Censal Population Survey 2013, there are 754,000 paid employees in urban areas and 571,000 paid employees in rural areas (NIS, 2013).

The main Cambodian cities in which more manufacturing jobs are being created are (i) Phnom Penh, the capital city, which has the most factories; (ii) border cities, such as Bavet, Poi Pet, and Koh Kong, where the special economic zones (SEZs) are located; and (iii) Sihanoukville, the international port city (Hatsukano, Tsubota, and Kuroiwa, 2011). Moreover, Siem Reap is a

⁶ This information is from an interview in December 2015 with an agency in Phnom Penh that sends housekeepers and company cleaning staff to Malaysia and Singapore. Experience includes housekeeping skills and proficiency in English, Chinese, and other languages.

⁷ However, the unemployment rate in Cambodia is less than 1% because people who work for extremely low wages are counted as employed.

world-famous tourist site that offers employment opportunities in the service sector. Furthermore, Thailand is an important option for Cambodian workers. Therefore, their main options for work are in (i) the original village working as farmers or small business owners; (ii) Phnom Penh; (iii) the border SEZs, such as in Bavet and Poi Pet; (iv) Siem Reap in the tourism sector; (v) other rural areas in Cambodia;⁸ and (vi) Thailand.

1.3 Data on migrant workers returning to Cambodia

Statistical data on returning migrants in Cambodia are not available. Although the migrant worker policy states the importance of collecting accurate data, and the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training of Cambodia is trying to structure the system with outside donors' support, many workers migrate to Thailand unofficially, or enter officially but return without reporting to the official agents, making it difficult for the government to gather accurate data.

The number of deportees via the Poi Pet checkpoint is one available statistic to give an idea of the number of migrants returning from Thailand, but this is only a small part of the overall picture. Normally, several thousand workers per month are deported from Thailand because their documents are invalid. In 2012, 102,022 workers were deported; in 2013, 61,161 were deported; and in 2014, 281,218 were deported.⁹ In June 2014, returnees and deportations spiked because of a rumour of a mass crackdown. Most migrant workers rushed to claim the authority to return home, and thus, the number of deportees was considerably higher than usual.

Besides deportees, some people return in an official way with a passport, some return through brokers, and some return by themselves without documents. This chapter examines the situation of Cambodian migrant workers returning to their original community from Thailand based on a questionnaire survey conducted in October–December 2015.

⁸ There are more rural–rural migrants within Cambodia than rural–urban migrants. They often seek opportunities in the agricultural sector because they cannot obtain enough land in their home villages (NIS, 2008, 2013; Maltoni, 2007).

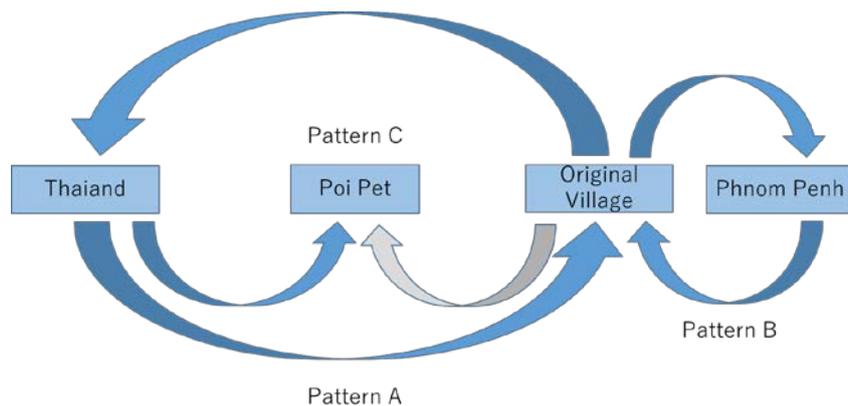
⁹ These numbers include 206 victims of human trafficking in 2013, and 114 in 2014.

Survey on Returned Migrants in Prey Veng and Battambang Provinces

2.1 Overview of the survey

Target villages were selected in Battambang and Prey Veng provinces, which send more workers to Thailand than other provinces in Cambodia. We collected answers from 129 migrants returning from Thailand, 139 migrants returning from other countries, and 69 internal migrants.¹⁰ The following analysis focuses on the 129 migrants returning from Thailand, because they represent the most typical case in Cambodia (pattern A). For comparison, internal migration to Phnom Penh was studied in the same area (pattern B); and, as one of the emerging workplace options, in-depth interviews with workers and employers in Poi Pet (pattern C) were undertaken to help understand the overall picture of the employment opportunities available to Cambodian workers (Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1: Pattern of Migration



Pattern A: Original Village → Thailand → Original Village

Pattern B: Original Village → Phnom Penh → Original Village

Pattern C: Original Village → Thailand → Poi Pet

Source: Author

¹⁰ The survey was conducted together with the household survey to study the impact of the remittances for Chapter 2 by Luch and Kuoch. The sampling method is explained to detail in Chapter 2.

2.2 Reasons for migration

Most economic migrants decide to migrate internally or externally to seek a higher income. Debt often motivates them to find better income opportunities. If they cannot find job opportunities locally or near their hometown, the next option is to migrate (Table 3.2).

Table 3.2: Reasons for Migration (number of persons)

Reason	Migration within Cambodia	Migration to Thailand	Total
Search for better jobs and earn higher income	68	97	165
No employment opportunity locally	16	73	89
Lack of information regarding vacancies in Cambodia	2	4	6
In debt	14	29	43
Loss of land	3	6	9
Conflict within the household	0	3	3
Loss of livestock	2	2	4
Household's collective decision	37	38	75
By broker	1	1	2
Rumour in the village	0	3	3
Forced to go	0	1	1
Other	7	2	9

Note: Respondents can give multiple answers.

Source: Returned Migrants' Survey in Cambodia, 2015.

2.2 Reasons for returning

There are roughly four types of returning migrant worker in the ASEAN countries: (i) those who voluntarily return when they achieve their money-earning goal; (ii) those who change their motivation because of intolerable working conditions, family issues, and other reasons; (iii) those whose contract ends; and (iv) those who experience a crisis, such as repatriation, or unforeseeable circumstances, such as a war (SMERU, 2015).

The most frequent reason Cambodian workers return home is a change in motivation, such as feeling homesick, family illness, and difficult working conditions.¹¹ Almost half of the returning migrants said that feeling homesick was the main reason to return home. Family illness is the second most frequently stated reason. Those achieving their original purpose, such as earning

¹¹ This can include human trafficking. Although such cases should be categorised as an external crisis rather than as a matter of personal motivation.

enough money, or a pre-departure contract, were in the minority. Seventeen migrants returned due to accidental events, such as deportation by the Thai authorities, or being laid off by their employer (Table 3.3).

Table 3.3: Reasons for Returning to Cambodia

Types	Reasons	Number of Persons
Type 1	Earned enough money to start up a business in Cambodia	8
	Home sickness	59
	Family members' illness	28
Type 2	Illness	22
	Want to find a job in Cambodia	21
	Pregnant, or need to take care of a baby	8
	Bad working conditions	12
Type 3	Pre-departure agreed contract	6
Type 4	Laid off	8
	Deported by the Government of Thailand	9

Note: Respondents could give up to three reasons.

Source: Returned Migrants' Survey in Cambodia, 2015.

2.3 Pathway for migration

2.3.1 Institutional pathway

Most Cambodian migrant workers in Thailand do not have a passport. Among those that were unskilled, about 115,000 workers migrated with a passport, according to the Government of Thailand's statistics. This means only 12%–13% of Cambodian workers in Thailand hold a passport, and the rest receive a pink card providing temporary registration after entering Thailand illegally. In the survey, 30% of the returning migrants stated that they held a passport for purposes of migration (Table 3.4).

Table 3.4: Documents Held by Returning Migrants When They Entered Thailand

Document	Number
Passport	39
Border pass	29
Other	62
Total	129

Note: 'Other' includes migrants who travelled without documents.

Source: Return Migrants' Survey in Cambodia, 2015.

2.3.2 Geographical pathway

The main and official gateway used by Cambodian workers migrating to Thailand is the Poi Pet checkpoint in Banteay Meanchey Province. People who are officially deported by the Government of Thailand also use this checkpoint. O'smach, Ban Leam, and Koh Kong are also international checkpoints connecting Thailand and Cambodia. Some migrants also use the Doung checkpoint, which is another international checkpoint in Battambang Province, about 100 kilometres from the Poi Pet checkpoint. This gateway offers shorter access to the eastern Thai provinces, such as Rayong and Chon Buri, where most Cambodian migrants work. Other gateways, including smaller border checkpoints for local people's daily use, are used by border pass holders who are residents of the border provinces and work as labourers in the plantations in neighbouring provinces, or those who migrate to Thailand via brokers or family networks.

In the survey, 57% of people entered Thailand via Poi Pet, whereas 31% used the Ban Leam checkpoint. When returning, 50% used Poi Pet and 42% the Ban Leam checkpoint (Table 3.5).

Table 3.5: Border Checkpoints Used by Migrants

Checkpoint	Exit		Return	
	Number	%	Number	%
Poi Pet	74	57	64	50
O'smach	1	1	0	0
Ban Leam	40	31	54	42
Koh Kong	3	2	3	2
Phnom Penh	0	0	3	2
Other	9	7	3	2
No answer	2	2	2	2
Total	129	100	129	100

Source: Returned Migrants' Survey in Cambodia, 2015.

2.4 Cost of returning home

Generally, the cost of returning home is less than the cost of entering Thailand.¹² If entering officially, migrant workers only have to pay for transportation. If entering unofficially, they may have to pay a fine, or they pay the brokers or authorities to avoid being arrested. Among the 129 migrants returning from Thailand, 9 admitted paying B300–B3,000 to the Thai authorities, and 2 reported that they paid \$2.80–\$5.60 to the Cambodian authorities, in addition to the transport fee.

2.5 Migrants' occupations before migrating

Most migrants were originally farmers. However, some had experience of employment or running their own business before migrating. About 20% of the internal migrants had paid jobs before migrating, whereas 37% of international migrants had job experience before migrating. Among the former internal migrants, only 1 in 16 had worked in a factory before migrating. By contrast, among the 51 migrant workers returning from foreign countries, 13 had worked in a garment factory and 3 had worked in manufacturing.

Jobs in Thailand are different from those in Cambodia, and many migrant workers must start new types of job after migrating. Among 10 migrant workers who worked in the construction sector in Thailand, 3 were from the agriculture sector, 2 from the construction sector, and 2 had been drivers in Cambodia. Of six workers in the fishery sector, none had fisheries experience before migrating (Table 3.6).

¹² This information was from interviews to village chief and returned migrant workers in Battambang and Prey Veng provinces (December 2015).

Table 3.6: Occupation before Migration and in Thailand (number of persons)

Jobs before Migration	Jobs in Thailand
Construction (2)	Construction (10)
Agriculture (3)	
Driver (2)	
Seller (2)	
Other (1)	
Agriculture (2)	Fishery (6)
Factory (1)	
Seller (2)	
Other (1)	
Garment (1)	Rubber Plantation/Rubber Factory (4)
Seller (2)	
Agriculture (1)	
Seller (1)	Others (3)
Agriculture (1)	
Garment (1)	

Note: 'Others' includes unspecified paid jobs.

Source: Returned Migrants' Survey in Cambodia, 2015.

2.6 Occupations in Thailand and after returning

Economic reintegration forms the basis for self-sufficiency, which is one of the crucial aspects of returning migrants' integration (IOM, 2015). Returning migrants can reintegrate economically by participating in economic activities, such as working at a factory or starting a small business, or returning to agricultural work. Through these economic activities, the returning migrants can contribute to their original country's development by using the skills gained during migration as human capital (SMERU, 2015).

Only 50 of the 129 returning migrants stated clearly their present occupation. The others may support their families' agricultural work, but they may also have reported having no occupation because their earnings are quite low or because they did not take up a paying job after returning.

When comparing the occupations of the Cambodian migrants in Thailand and after returning to Cambodia, only construction workers tend to continue in the same type of job. This is probably because of the increasing demand for construction workers in Cambodia, including in the provincial areas. Other people choose to work in different sectors, and it was difficult to find people using the skills they gained from their migration experience in Thailand. Overall, as with

the comparison between the occupation before migrating and the occupation in Thailand, there is no continuity.

Among returned migrants, grocery store owners and factory workers succeeded in reintegrating economically into their original community. Grocery store owners include those who achieved their goal to earn a certain amount of money from migration and started new shops of their own. Factory workers returning to Cambodia look for job opportunities close to their hometown. Recently, garment factories have begun to appear in the suburbs of Phnom Penh and in provincial areas. Four garment and shoe factories were established in Prey Veng Province during 2010–2014. However, most provinces have few factories, but people nevertheless choose to work close to their home town after they return from Thailand.

Twelve migrants who gained construction experience in Thailand continue to work in the same sector in Cambodia. Details of their wages in Thailand were not available to make a clear comparison, but in Cambodia they earn \$50–\$280 per month – less than the wages Cambodian workers earn in Thailand.

Table 3.7: Occupations of Migrant Workers in Thailand and after Returning
(number of persons)

Jobs in Thailand	Jobs after Returning
Construction (12)	Construction (18)
Factory (3)	
Fishery (2)	
Seller (1)	
Fishery (1)	Grocery Store Owner (4)
Rubber (2)	
Other (1)	
Construction (1)	Sales (7)
Fishery (2)	
Factory (1)	
Other (5)	
Construction (1)	Factory Worker (7)
Rubber (1)	(Garment 2, Unknown 5)
Factory (1)	
Other (1)	
Construction (1)	Fishery (3)
Fishery (1)	
Construction (1)	Agriculture (2)
Seller (1)	

Source: Returned Migrants' Survey in Cambodia, 2015.

2.7 Skills support needed for economic reintegration

Cambodian migrants tend to want to be self-employed and start their own business. Therefore, many returned migrants stated that they need more skills support to learn how to run a business, as well as access to finance to start a new business (Table 3.8). However, in reality, most migrants return to work in agriculture, so they have a greater need for agricultural land and extension services. Returnees seeking job opportunities as employees report that they need more job vacancy information.¹³

Table 3.8: Support Needed by Returned Migrant Workers

Type of Support	Migration within Cambodia	Migration to Foreign Countries	Total
Access to finance	23	28	51
Knowledge of how to run a business	38	40	78
Information regarding investment opportunities	5	5	10
A skills development programme to secure a job	9	19	28
Information on available vacancies	6	13	19
Agricultural land	56	106	162
Agricultural extension programme	18	29	47
Other	8	11	19

Note: Respondents could give multiple choices.

Source: Returned Migrants' Survey in Cambodia, 2015.

2. Workers and Employers in Poi Pet City

The city of Poi Pet is one of the favoured destinations for Cambodian workers in the manufacturing and service sectors. Casino hotels and the factories in the SEZs provide most of the job opportunities in the city. In 2015, there were nine casino hotels providing employment in the SEZs and five factories employing several thousand workers. The city lies along the Southern Economic Corridor in the Mekong Subregion, which is a strategic area for the 'Thailand plus one' type of investment (Chapter 1). Labour-intensive industries in Thailand in search of a new destination to locate their factories started to choose Poi Pet in the 2010s because of the good connections with infrastructure in Thailand and the relatively cheaper

¹³ The Government of Cambodia has sought to promote job opportunities in the country since 2009 by setting up the National Employment Authority. The agency provides job vacancy information in the Poi Pet area for job seekers through job fairs and information boards.

labour force in Cambodia.¹⁴ There are plans to expand the SEZs, and a railway will connect Thailand and Cambodia through Poi Pet, so employment opportunities in this area are expected to increase further.

Poi Pet's workforce comprises people from the neighbouring villages, internal migrants from various provinces in Cambodia, and migrants returning from Thailand.

The development of the SEZs and casino hotels has provided the people in the neighbouring villages with employment opportunities without leaving their families. However, there are too few people living in the area to provide all the employees needed by the hotels and factories, so employers in Poi Pet must employ people from outside the local area as well. The internal migrants from various provinces consist of (i) those who migrate after gathering more information and having saved money to pay the brokers for the next international migration; and (ii) those who choose to stay in Poi Pet, satisfied with wages that are sufficient but lower than they could earn in Thailand and with the easier access to their families. For migrants returning after working in Thailand, Poi Pet offers reasonable opportunities for those who prefer not to return to their original village.

Employers in Poi Pet compete not only with Thailand for workers, but also with other areas of Cambodia. However, many Cambodians choose to work in this location because it is easier for them to visit their family members or because they are afraid to work in Thailand and prefer to stay in the country.¹⁵ Therefore, despite Poi Pet's location close the Thai border and far from the central area of Cambodia, employers in the city can acquire the labour force they need.

3. Concluding Remarks

The number of Cambodian migrants working abroad has been increasing. Most of them are economic migrants who intend to return home in the future. It is necessary for them to utilise their experience strategically, as stated in Cambodia's Migrant Policy and Action Plan 2015, otherwise people will repeatedly migrate and return without achieving their goals, and Cambodia will be unable to utilise the labour force for the industrial development effectively.

¹⁴ See chapters 1 and 4. Chapter 4 focuses more on the relocation of the garment industry and migrant workers.

¹⁵ This finding is from interviews with nine workers (three working in casino hotels and six in two manufacturing factories) in the Poi Pet area in December 2015.

Cambodian workers currently choose to work in (i) their original village, (ii) Phnom Penh, (iii) other areas with factories or hotels, (iv) other rural areas with agricultural development, or (v) Thailand. The reasons for returning are often personal, such as feeling homesick, family illness, or not achieving their goal.

Returned migrants often work in sectors that are different from their job experience in Thailand. Some are grocery store owners who started their business from savings accumulated during migration, others are garment factory workers in the provinces who returned because they wanted to work closer to their families. These people are examples of those who have been successful in reintegrating economically.

Migrant workers' remittances improve the human capital of their families (Chapter 2). However, their job experience should be utilised to ensure their self-sufficiency and the country's development. Only a few of the returned migrant workers surveyed had applied the experiences they gained abroad in their original community.

Labour-intensive industries in the Mekong Subregion have started to relocate from Thailand to neighbouring countries. Vocational training and mutual skill recognition will facilitate labour migration to support human resources development in the interconnected labour markets of the subregion, while at the same time supporting the relocation of factories within the Mekong Subregion. The Mekong countries have begun to collaborate on vocational training. Although it will take several years to see the outcome, these collaborations will help the human resources development and industrial development in the Mekong Subregion.

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