Vol 3, No 2, July - December 2018, pp: 53 - 66

Faculty Publications
ISSN: 3008-1017
Title DOI: https://doi.org/10.62458/021024

The Causes Of The Skills Gap And Need For A Coherent Migrant Labor Program In Cambodia: A Background to the Establishment of MEIHO APHIVAT CO. LTD.

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Executive Summary

This research paper is intended to be the first in a series that will effectively form an archive of the history and growth of a specific company known as MEIHO APHIVAT CO., LTD. The second part will chart the origin and first steps of the start-up company, but preceding that in this paper I will review literature that will help to explain the historical, cultural and economic background in order to demonstrate the importance of this company to the Cambodian economy, and indeed society.

In its initial guise, Meiho Aphivat is a Japanese-funded recruitment agency along with language school and training centre charged with recruiting and training Cambodians to serve for three to five years as migrant trainees/workers in Japan before returning to Cambodia where their skills will be put to use to the betterment of the Cambodian economy. Thus, the first section of this paper will briefly illustrate the background of the industry with reference to the demographics of the two nations.

The second section will examine more closely the need for Cambodians to seek work overseas and the associated serious issue of the skills gap in the local job market. There are important – although well-known – historical causes to be considered. However, my main focus will be on far-less recognized cultural issues that impede the development of human resources in Cambodia today.

My analysis will then turn to the current state of the Cambodian migrant-labour market and the extent to which the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training assists and protects the rights of workers. I will complete this survey of literature by demonstrating that whilst there are a number of systemic problems concerning Cambodian migrant workers, all of them can be overcome with appropriate preparation and training.

In the second paper I will then introduce Meiho Aphivat and its dynamic president, presenting the results of extensive interviews with her along with the initial tranche of recruits being prepared to work in Japan. It will be seen that actually listening to the views of the workforce severely challenges the conclusions of a lot of the secondary literature, especially when the latter is based on interviews with government officials and business-owners. It is my intention to demonstrate that by taking the workers' needs and perspectives seriously, the chasm between the two sides that hampers the development of human resources in Cambodia so badly, can be bridged. This is a conscious aim of Meiho Aphivat; in part two the manner in which it faces such obstacles and others will be scrutinized before finishing with a summary of the intended evolution of the business.

When we compare the demographics of the two nations, Japan and Cambodia, at its most basic level we can see that sending Cambodian workers to Japan is very much a 'win-win' situation. The demographic issues of Japan are very well-known – the population is aging: birth-rates are plummeting, life-expectancy increasing so that currently the average (median) age in Japan is the highest in the world at almost 47 (projected to increase to over 50 in seven years and continue rising), and the unemployment rate is the lowest since the financial crash 25 years ago (c.f. e.g. Weller, 2018). Cambodia, in contrast, is a very young nation (the average age is half that of Japan) with a current workforce of nine million and over 300,000 young people adding to that total every year (Sry 2016 p3). Whilst no reliable unemployment figures are kept, it is evident that even with a growing economy, the country cannot absorb such a quantity of human resources; thus, over a million Cambodians at any one time find employment outside

the country (ILO, TRIANGLE II Quarterly Briefing Note, 2016). As I shall go on to indicate, the hitherto popular destinations – primarily Thailand are problematic in terms of pay, conditions and skills development; hence, the newly emerging market of Japan is poised to prove advantageous in all these categories and is expected to rapidly become a popular destination for low-skilled Cambodians seeking employment.

It is of course in the nature of any developing nation to have a young population, and education and training policies that do not quite keep up with the needs of the emerging workforce as the nation goes through a structural transformation from an agricultural to a manufacturing/service-based economy. There are, however, factors that exacerbate the problem in Cambodia, the first of which is unique to this nation. I am referring to the period of civil war culminating in the Khmer Rouge regime of 1975-79 during which time the nation's intellectuals were targeted for extermination. I don't wish to understate the tragedy, but it is well recounted elsewhere and has become a bit of a cliché (it's easily the most written-about topic on the nation, from popular histories such as Chandler (2008) to research papers - note title of Jeong's paper that I'm going to extensively draw on: *Legacy of Khmer Rouge on Skill Formation in Cambodia*). As I shall however show, firstly the skills gap problem is a result of historical factors that far pre-date the civil war and Khmer Rouge regime, and secondly, dwelling on the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge maybe masks focus on another major long-term effect of this period of chaos – the subsequent baby boom.

Jeong maintains that the Khmer Rouge were responsible for a "double demographic shock". Firstly, "it sever[ed] the link of human capital transfer between generations" (p3) , the effect of which he states as follows: "The true problem is not about this transitory negative shock in human capital level itself, but is rather about the severance of the link of the generational transfer of human capital, which can have long-run effects on growth." (p4). Secondly, as soon as the regime fell, the population surged, tripling within five years (Jeong pp2-3). Jeong does not appear to have factored in the return of refugees which accounts for about a third of the increase; nevertheless, his overall contention that there was an enormous baby-boom is easily verifiable. The ILO report *Skills Shortages And Skills Gaps In The Cambodian Labour Market* (Bruni, Luch, Kuoch 2013) notes that in the 1980s the fertility rate was as high as seven children per woman (p8; it is currently 2.8).

Both Jeong and the ILO report go on to focus on the problem that as these children entered school, the nation was faced with the reality that the teaching profession had been wiped out in the genocide. That the education of a generation and more has been consequently vastly inadequate is incontrovertible, but I'm going to cut to the chase here: this issue is currently being addressed. The current education minister is commanding universal admiration for his reforms in the primary and secondary sectors. Therefore, the fairly recent figures used by Jeong such as "60.2% of the population of 25 or older have no schooling or have not completed primary education, and only 7.7% among them achieved the upper secondary or higher level of education" (p14) needs to be assessed alongside the current reality where school attendance is now no longer a major issue and the focus has shifted to delivering better quality education. These reforms take time of course, and the youths who benefit have only recently starting to enter the workforce (admittedly, there is still plenty of room for ongoing criticism: *c.f.* SE Asia Globe, 10 October 2017, Phnom Penh Post and Khmer Times, both 16 March 2018). The area that needs to be addressed here, therefore, is the tertiary sector. In terms of education the overall picture hasn't greatly changed since Jeong wrote his paper – although university entrance is increasing year on year, it is still the case the over 50% of undergraduates are studying for degrees in the same field – business administration and finance, thus producing an annual glut of surplus skills whilst neglecting the skills the nation needs (Jeong p15).

Nevertheless, I believe that the Ministry of Education is gradually addressing problems at all levels and so I will switch my focus to another ministry that I feel lacks a similar sense of vision – the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training (MOLVT).

According to the latest Cambodian government figures, there are about 375,000 students in the tertiary sector in 2018 (Education Strategic Plan 2014-2018, 2014), or about 94,000 in each year-group (which is a 100% increase from six years ago (OECD, 2017 p14)). Given that some 300,000 young Cambodians enter the workforce every year, we can see that around 70% have, at best, a school-leaving certificate. Numerically speaking, the problem of inadequate vocational training far outweighs the problem of inappropriate degree courses. The vocational training provided by the MOLVT is badly out of step for the nation's needs. Unlike the situation in the field of education, little has changed since Jeong commented in 2014. Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) is divided into three areas – short-term training courses provided by state and approved private institutions, long-term training and higher education courses (the latter two provided by the state only).

About 95% of the courses provided are the short-term ones, and only 1% is accounted for by long-term training courses. Furthermore, about 75% of the trainees of all types completed courses in agriculture, rather than in industrial or service sectors where the growth occurs (Jeong pp12-13). It is important to realise this – because I still see too many 'experts' – even government ministers – stating that 80% of Cambodians work in agriculture. This hasn't been true since the 1980s; the proportion of the population engaged in farming has been plummeting since this time and is now barely 45% (OECD 2017 p74 - but I suspect this includes seasonal activity; a full-time figure is likely to be closer to Jeong's (p 11) figure of 24%), with very few youths having any interest in perpetuating the lifestyle. Maybe the emphasis on agricultural training courses is an attempt by the MOLVT to stem the flow, but it doesn't meet the wishes and needs of the emerging youth workforce. Just as shocking is the observation that even *if* these courses were popular, the average duration of an agricultural training course is less than two weeks. Even hairdressing and beautician courses last over four months (data from MOLVT 2012, quoted in Jeong p13)! As well as being of little value to the domestic workforce, the excellent and thorough OECD study, *Interrelations between Public Policies, Migration and Development in Cambodia* (2017) concludes, "While in some countries in the IPPMD study, vocational training programmes appear to be helping would-be migrants be more employable overseas, the Cambodia results show no evidence of links between vocational training programmes and plans to emigrate." (p26). I trust you can see the necessity for the private sector to step in and provide long-term, high-quality vocational training. Before I come to that, however, I need to highlight another obstacle that appears to be rarely considered.

Whether directly the legacy of the Khmer Rouge regime as Jeong maintains or not, the aforementioned issues are certainly of vital importance; however, there were also critical historical faults that pre-existed the Khmer Rouge and have remanifested today that hamper the development of human resources in Cambodia. From my cursory investigation of the literature in English, I note that much existent research relies on data collected from ministries, NGOs, and employers. For example, the full title of the ILO report I cited earlier is *"Skills Shortages And Skills Gaps In The Cambodian Labour Market: Evidence From Employer Skills Needs Survey"* (Bruni, Luch, Kuoch 2013). The authors note, "This survey was the first to be conducted in Cambodia with the aim of describing and understanding employers' points of view in support of better-informed design, and implementation of, employment and labour market policies." (p *xiii*, Executive Summary). Whilst such research is undoubtedly a useful contribution, in practice it lends further weight to an unbalanced picture.

That ILO report along with Jeong (pp5-7) notes that the consensus among employers is that the major problems they have with unskilled Cambodian workers boils down to not lack of experience, but 'work attitude' (Jeong) or "lack of motivation" (Bruni et al p68). To understand the accuracy or reasons for these problems requires empathy with the workers, which these studies overlook. As we shall see in the second part of this paper via the interviews of trainees preparing to work in Japan, there are two sides to this issue, both of which need addressing.

Histories of Cambodia such as Chandler (2008) show how historically, political control has always been by means of a client-patron relationship. In essence, the patron offers 'protection' in return for loyalty, duty and servitude without question. As Dell, Lane and Querubin define it, "Power relations were personalized, with peasants paying tribute and receiving protection from landowning patrons, who in turn had their own network of relations with higher level patrons." (Dell, Lane and Querubin 2015).

Throughout changes in dynasties that basic relationship between rulers and populace never really changed apart from one short-lived interruption – ironically, the Khmer Rouge regime. Where this dynamic is examined academically today it is nearly always in terms of political power and the exchange of money and gifts (c.f. Strangio 2014, Morgenbesser 2016). What they observe is that the introduction of democracy in 1993 hardly diminished the traditional system. The political system, however, is not my concern here; what I wish to focus on is the extent to which the patron-client relationship is a mind-set that has existed in the Khmer psyche for millennia – except that with the current young generation being exposed to broader ways of thinking like never before in history, this hitherto unquestioned paradigm is starting to crumble – or rather, change its nature. Turner (2013) has examined the role it plays in bureaucracy. He concludes, "[A] specific constellation of reform-inhibiting factors explains the slow progress of public administration reform in Cambodia. At the center of the constellation is patronage. The cluster of surrounding and interrelated factors includes weak accountability, hegemonic political regime, high and legitimate power distance, low wages, and bureaucratic dysfunction. The chances of reform success increase with the removal or absence of these inhibiting factors." (Turner, abstract. For further detail *c.f.* Blunt and Turner (2005) p78).

The point that I wish to emphasise is that the observations Turner makes regarding the performance of government ministries can also be seen in the private sector, together with the associated negative outcomes. As historians such as Chandler show, one thing lacking in this traditional patron-client relationship was a middle, or mercantile class. The French discovered that that role was largely the domain of Chinese and Vietnamese traders; Khmers hardly developed their own managerial class. Santry in *"When Apsaras Smile" Women and Development in Cambodia 1990-2000: Cultural Barriers to Change* (2005) notes,

> "In Cambodia the traditional organisation has consisted of three classes, royalty, officials and peasants, with more recent additions of a very small middle-class during periods of urbanization …. The modern patron-client relationship is essentially an exchange between two parties of unequal status. The patron holds the superordinate position and provides protection, convenience, social connections, and at times, economic benefit to their subordinate client. The client is expected to reciprocate with loyalty, support and commitment to obligation….. This system is also prevalent in the private sector, where those in a position to bestow favours and financial assistance assume patronage. Those who depend on these patrons are indebted to them through allegiance and respect." (pp34-35)

She goes on to add an interesting observation which indicates just how pervasive this mind-set is:

> "[D]uring the 1990s, NGOs providing aid programs in villages have frequently usurped the traditional patrons (who still retain respect from the villagers) and become the new patrons, with power to accept or deny membership into credit, training or other programs.… many [Western] development practitioners have difficulties understanding the actual nature of their relationship with the villagers they wish to empower. (p35)

Two observations made from the primary research for the subsequent paper are that many owners and managers of businesses in Cambodia are from the patron class (whether through their ancient family heritage or through usurpation of the role in the wake of the demise of the Khmer Rouge) and subconsciously maintain the attitudes and mind-set indicated above. Prum Virak (2016) notes that the legal framework concerning the validity of contracts in protecting staff from unreasonable managerial demands is improving, as can be measured via analysis of arbitration cases, but the extent to which this would apply to Cambodia migrant workers remains to be seen. Regardless, in focusing on the attitudes of employers and employees, what I shall be maintaining is that the younger generation that comprises the workforce, however, resent the expectations – when they feel it is undeserved. Despite that, when the workers do feel that loyalty and devotion is deserved, they are more than ready to give it whether welcomed or not, as we shall see in part two.

Having analysed the historical causes and ongoing problem of the skills gap in Cambodia, let us now focus on a key response to the issue – unskilled or low-skilled Cambodians seeking employment outside the country in the form of what is termed 'guest workers', 'foreign workers' or (the term used here) 'migrant workers'. The OECD study introduces the issue as follows:

> "Emigration is a significant and growing phenomenon for Cambodia. Between 2000 and 2015, the stock of Cambodians abroad increased by about 160%, from around half a million to 1.2 million people. Today, about 10% of Cambodians over the age of 15 plan to emigrate. Despite the country's steady economic growth, labour market demand has not been sufficient to meet the increase in the working population, and poverty remains significant, despite encouraging
> signs. Many households choose migration as a strategy for improving their livelihoods." (OECD 2017, p15)

It opens by confirming my argument that "Cambodia is missing opportunities to harness the development potential of its high rates of emigration" (p19).

By far the most common destination has been and still is neighbouring Thailand, and until recently the vast majority have been undocumented, or illegal migrants. As the ILO reported just over a year ago,

> "With 300,000 young Cambodians entering the labour market each year and no nationally set minimum wage, many Cambodian workers go abroad seeking employment opportunities and higher wages. The primary destination country for Cambodian migrant workers is Thailand, with workers commonly migrating into the fishing, agriculture, livestock, construction, manufacturing and service sectors, including domestic work. Only a small minority of these workers (and ever fewer women workers) use regular channels to migrate, instead relying on social networks and unlicensed

> brokers to cross the border and seek employment. Thai Government data shows that between July and October 2014, following a mass exodus of Cambodian workers from Thailand, 693,630 Cambodian migrant workers and 42,395 dependents without legal documents registered at One-Stop Service Centers for temporary amnesty from deportation." (ILO, TRIANGLE II Quarterly Briefing Note, 2016).

According to Sry (p3) 80% of Cambodian workers in Thailand before the Thai government's crackdown (the cause of the 'mass exodus') were undocumented.

A lot of work has been done noting the dangers to migrants of seeking to work illegally (c.f. e.g. Burnett 2015) although Derks' paper is more nuanced. Back in 2011 she began by observing,

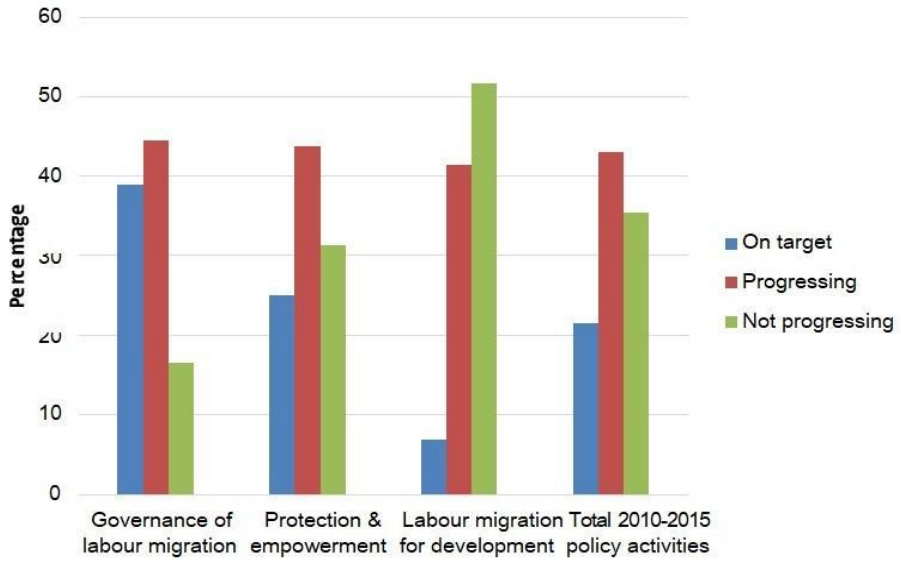
> "[T]he Cambodian government has started sending labourers abroad as a way to deal with the lack of employment opportunities at home and as a source of revenue for the country. The "export of labour" has now become part of an official policy to enhance professional skills and improve the living conditions of the people. Yet, considering the fact that Cambodian migrant workers tend to end up mostly as undocumented workers in low-paid, low-skilled, dirty and dangerous jobs, it is questionable whether they are in a situation that permits them to realize such lofty objectives." (p182)

Here I shall focus on what the Royal Government of Cambodia is currently doing in 2018 to regulate the industry and ensure protections for Cambodian migrant workers, and assess the degree to which the reality matches the rhetoric. Firstly, I should note that the predecessor to the MOLVT first started to regulate the movement of migrant workers in 1995 with Sub-Decree 57 on the "export of Khmer labour overseas" (Derk p184). This was updated in 2010 (Sry p12) with the *Policy On Labour Migration For Cambodia 2010-2015* (MOLVT 2010). It was a noble effort, yet by the ministry's own metrics, implementation by the end of the period in question proved to be shockingly poor. According the ministry's own data as presented by Sry (p13) in her table 5 below, it was only about 21% towards meeting the policy's targets in 2014. The OECD report explains,

> "Of the activities that are on target and progressing, most are undertaken with the support of donor partners and NGOs. The activities concerning harnessing labour migration for development are much further behind, with around 62% of the activities identified as not on target." (2017, p47)

Following the evaluation of the policy for 2010-2015, a second policy document, *Labour Migration Policy for Cambodia 2015-2018 (2014),* was drawn up which focused more on the most disastrous aspect, tying migrant labour to the development of Cambodia's economy. Frankly, I haven't seen radical change over the intervening period due to what I perceive to be the root causes of the failure of the policies. I shall outline these causes below.

Table 5: Progress of activities against the policy on labour migration for Cambodia for 2010-2015



Source: Policy on labour migration for Cambodia, 2014

The first reason is that over this period, the policies drawn up were very sparsely enforced. As we have already noted, the vast majority of migrants moved with the assistance of unlicensed agents or brokers, who were rarely punished if exposed, and licensed agents who broke the rules were treated leniently. Lee in *A Study into Exploitative Labour Brokerage Practices in Cambodia* (2007), whilst dated describes practices that are still common, whilst Drolet's paper *Domestic Workers and Sub-Decree 190: Time to Protect Cambodia's Migrants* (2013) is a more recent analysis highlighting government policy inadequacies (Sub-Decree 190 succeeded Sub-Decree 57 in 2011). Whilst Meiho Aphivat will not be sending domestic workers to Japan, the ministry's recent focus on the issue is instructive in exposing one of the deep-seated problems I've been alluding to.

In 2011 the Royal Government of Cambodia banned the movement of domestic workers to Malaysia after numerous reports of abuses including deaths (other countries also called a moratorium on Malaysia at the same time). The scandal exposed not only the appalling behaviour of some Malaysian employers, but the lack of preparation and oversight on the part of the Cambodian agencies that sent them – or *should* have exposed them (c.f. the Human Rights Watch (2011) report *"They Deceived Us at Every Step" Abuse of Cambodian Domestic Workers Migrating to Malaysia*). It took the MOLVT six years to draw up a fresh Memorandum of Understanding with Malaysia so that supposedly from July 2017 workers' protections could be guaranteed. The MoU was actually signed between the Cambodian MOLVT and the Malaysian Association of Foreign Maid Agencies which is not affiliated with the Malaysian government. Not only did the MOLVT exclusively deal with the organisation that represents employers such as the ones responsible for the abuses and murders in the first place, but unions and organisations representing the workers were not consulted (Phnom Penh Post, 30 November 2017). At the time, many stakeholders complained that the two parties that drew up the MoU would not release the text for scrutiny although an unsigned version is now publicly available (draft MoU undated).

What we see here is a pattern whereby when new laws are drafted in Cambodia, in many cases the usual checks and balances are included such as reference to people's welfare, but senior Cambodian ministers with the patron mentality will regard workers as clients and fail to consider their rights or welfare. A further observation, which is admittedly by no means exclusive to the Cambodian government, considers the language the ministry uses to discuss migrant workers. As Derks notes, the Khmer term *"noam chenh"* – 'export' in relation to labour is noteworthy. With the habitual reference to migrant workers as a 'source for export' or 'the export of Khmer labour', Derks states that "[M]igrants are thus treated as "a form of exportable commodified labour"" (p184).

Even more unsuccessful than protecting the rights of and empowering migrant workers, the MOLVT has failed to put in place plans to enable migrant workers to contribute to the development of the national economy on return to Cambodia. We have already seen that the MOLVT cannot provide adequate vocational training courses in the short term, so expecting long term planning to increase the skills base of the nation is perhaps unrealistic. We shall see in the follow-up paper that when we scrutinise the interviews of trainee migrant workers, there are various motivations that lead a person to seek work overseas; however, there is no doubt that the main motivation is money. Either the worker cannot find paid employment close to home, or he/she wishes to earn a higher salary by working abroad. Many wish to start earning as soon as possible, so are happy to spend minimal time preparing to work abroad. Whilst unlicensed brokers do not provide any preparatory training, we shall soon discover that a lot of licenced agencies are woeful in executing their responsibilities in this area. The MOLVT has the power to punish or de-licence such companies but the will is not there – the OECD report finds that as recently as 2015 some 90% of Cambodian migrant workers were not using licenced channels (2017, p38), and it is understandable that licenced agencies see themselves as competing with the cheaper black labour market. In the vast majority of cases, therefore, workers spend months or years performing tasks that they could just as easily do in Cambodia (but for lower remuneration) and not add significantly to their skill set. They leave Cambodia unskilled or semi-skilled, and they return unskilled or semi-skilled, adding nothing to the quality of human resources.

This is not to suggest that migrant workers offer nothing to the national economy, just that in terms of human resources all we have is a short term fix. What is important to most workers is the remittances they send home. The sums sent back to Cambodia have been fairly modest; how much cannot currently be ascertained with a high degree of accuracy as the official figures conflate workers' remittances with money sent by diaspora Khmer communities, and furthermore omit the remittances from the substantial numbers of undocumented migrant workers. OECD estimated is that in 2015 almost 8% of the population, or 1.2 million was currently outside the country (2017, p37) although the value of remittances per head was low (contributing about 3% of GDP although it too does not make it clear whose remittances were being counted – about 25% are, by implication, from emigres to Western nations). It can be argued that as donations from Western-funded rural developmental non-governmental organisations recede, remittances from migrant workers to provincial communities will be evermore essential as compensating for those shortfalls. The report by Jampaklay and Kittisuksathit in 2009 is somewhat concerned by the mechanisms by which money was sent to Cambodia; the OECD report stated that a startling 13% of the value of remittances went on transaction costs – the highest in the world (OECD 2017 p24). However, these ought to be problems which are now being overcome by technological developments in sending money electronically over the last few years. The OECD report finds that apart from some investment in ensuring siblings continue their 'free' education, hardly any migrant remittances or savings

upon return go into productive investments; rather the money pays off family debts and slightly improves food security (OECD 2017 pp17, 43, 79-91).

> "Despite the large amounts of remittances flowing into Cambodia, the research finds that these funds are not being invested productively (other than in education). This is a major missed opportunity for a country that is rebuilding much of its capital stock. Similarly, return migration does not seem to boost investments either: households with a return migrant spend less on agriculture assets and are less likely to run a business than households without a return migrant. Policies to support and enable households to channel remittances towards productive use, and
> measures that stimulate investments by return migrants, would not only benefit the household, but also the entire country's development." (p29)

The report doesn't seem to tie this situation in with the actual amount of cash it states as flowing into the country; it maintains that 30% of migrants do not send money back to their families at all, and of those who do the average remittance is $889 per annum (p67). It is not reasonable to expect significant funds from these remittances to be invested.

The OECD report concludes, "A more coherent policy agenda can unlock the development potential of migration" (p30) – but as it is severely lacking, my contention is that a visionary private company can not only fill part of the void, but inspire the government and other companies into following its lead. Thus, as I shall indicate next time when the focus turns to solutions and ways forward, Meiho Aphivat is creating an integrated or holistic strategy that intends to prepare young rural Cambodians to work and train in Japan for 3-5 years, enabling them to remit or save some ten times more than the amounts cited above, and continuously monitor and support the workers and their families left behind before finding good jobs for them on their return to Cambodia.

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