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## Mapping the Employability Skills for Marginalised Girls in Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Timor-Leste

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## About this document

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## Abbreviations and acronyms

|                |                                                                                            |
|----------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>ADB</b>     | Asian Development Bank                                                                     |
| <b>ATQ</b>     | Accountancy Technical Qualification                                                        |
| <b>GDP</b>     | Gross Domestic Product                                                                     |
| <b>GPE</b>     | Global Partnership for Education                                                           |
| <b>GIZ</b>     | Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit<br>(Development agency of Germany) |
| <b>ICT</b>     | Information and communications technology                                                  |
| <b>IFAD</b>    | International Fund for Agricultural Development                                            |
| <b>ILO</b>     | International Labour Organization                                                          |
| <b>ILSA</b>    | International large-scale assessments                                                      |
| <b>MoEYS</b>   | Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports (Cambodia)                                        |
| <b>Lao PDR</b> | Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR)                                                     |
| <b>OECD</b>    | Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development                                     |
| <b>OOSCY</b>   | Out-of-school children and youth                                                           |
| <b>PSE</b>     | Pour un Sourire d'Enfant (French non-governmental organisation)                            |
| <b>QITEP</b>   | Quality Improvement for Teacher and Education Personnel in<br>Science                      |
| <b>SEAMEO</b>  | Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization                                        |
| <b>TVET</b>    | Technical and vocational education and training                                            |
| <b>EAPRPO</b>  | UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office                                               |
| <b>UNDESA</b>  | United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs                                   |
| <b>UNDP</b>    | United Nations Development Programme                                                       |
| <b>UNFPA</b>   | United Nations Population Fund                                                             |
| <b>UNIDO</b>   | United Nations Industrial Development Organisation                                         |
| <b>WFP</b>     | World Food Programme                                                                       |
| <b>WLAS</b>    | Women-Led Agriculture Service                                                              |
| <b>WWDA</b>    | Women with Disability Association                                                          |

# 1. Introduction and objectives

This report presents a desk-based review of the learning and employment barriers faced by marginalised girls in Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR), and Timor-Leste. It focuses on gendered inequalities in education and employment outcomes, highlighting persistent gaps in digital literacy and limited access to skills training that constrain the employability of girls and young women. In doing so, it explores the potential of educational technology (EdTech) as an enabler of inclusive skills development.

The review draws on secondary data and existing literature to examine structural and contextual factors that shape marginalised girls' participation in education and the labour market. It provides an overview of the economic, technological, and demographic landscape in the three countries of focus; identifies existing skills gaps and mismatches in priority economic sectors; and maps national efforts and programmes aimed at advancing girls' education and employment. The report also identifies potential education-sector mechanisms—such as community centres, ethnic minority boarding schools, and programmes for out-of-school children and youth (OOSCY)—where future skills training courses could be embedded.

The overarching objective of the report is to inform the development of targeted, contextually grounded interventions that support the employability of marginalised girls. Specifically, it aims to:

- Identify priority pathways and learning needs that enhance employability outcomes for marginalised girls in Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR), and Timor-Leste.
- Assess the role of EdTech in bridging key skills gaps and improving access to training opportunities.
- Examine ongoing initiatives by governments, development partners, and civil society actors, and assess potential opportunities for collaboration or scale.
- Highlight entry points in the education sector where the proposed course could be integrated.
- Provide a data-informed overview of gender disparities, skills demands, and policy priorities across the region.

This report was prepared in response to a Helpdesk request by the British Council to inform ongoing efforts to improve the employability of marginalised girls in Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Timor-Leste. It aims to provide evidence-based insights into the structural barriers and enabling factors that shape girls' access to education, skills development, and economic opportunities. By mapping existing initiatives, identifying gaps, and highlighting context-specific challenges, the analysis supports more strategic and targeted programming aligned with national priorities and regional needs.

Following the background and introduction, [Section 2](#) outlines the methodology used for the review. [Section 3](#) presents the employability skills mapping, including country-specific analyses for Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Timor-Leste, followed by a discussion of common trends and challenges, the role of digital skills in employability, identified skills gaps, and relevant education pathways. [Section 4](#) concludes the report with key findings and recommendations.

## 2. Methodology

The analysis incorporated desk research that outlines a broad narrative on the employment needs of girls, contextual challenges and commonalities, main skills gaps, and digital literacy levels across Lao PDR, Cambodia, and Timor-Leste. The process entailed a review of existing reports from international and non-governmental organisations, governmental data, and studies giving overviews of education and labour market systems in the three countries.

To provide comprehensive mapping, a framework comprising socio-demographic, economic, political, and governance indicators, as well as an education system overview and an analysis of the infrastructure and technology landscape, was used to measure gaps in the employability of girls and women.

[Table 1](#) below presents an overview of the framework used in the analysis, structured around four core domains: economic limitations; sociocultural and demographic factors; the education system; and infrastructure and technology. For each category, relevant indicators were selected, along with a rationale for their inclusion, to capture the multidimensional barriers and enablers of employability in each context.

**Table 1.** *Overview of the framework used to measure gaps in the employability of girls and women*

| Category                                       | Indicators                                                                                                                                                                       | Rationale for inclusion                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Economic limitations</b>                    | Economic constraints and opportunities in urban vs. rural areas                                                                                                                  | Insufficient household income or lack of government funding can significantly restrict access to education for women and girls and lead to higher dropout rates.                                                         |
| <b>Sociocultural and demographic factors</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Societal gender norms and traditions</li> <li>■ Linguistic barriers</li> <li>■ Ethnic background</li> </ul>                             | Traditional gender roles and domestic responsibilities are barriers to girls' schooling.                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>Education system overview</b>               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Education system structures and planned/delivered reforms</li> <li>■ Decision-making processes in the education system</li> </ul>       | Planned and implemented reforms, policies on compulsory education, scholarships, or science, technology, education, and mathematics (STEM) initiatives for girls, either promote or hinder gender equality in education. |
| <b>Infrastructure and technology landscape</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ ICT skills among women and girls</li> <li>■ Development of infrastructure</li> <li>■ EdTech solutions in education for girls</li> </ul> | Limited internet access, lack of digital devices, and inadequate school facilities can severely impact girls' access to quality education.                                                                               |

## Limitations

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The desk review faced several limitations, primarily the limited availability of recent and high-quality data. Many datasets lack disaggregation by specific employability skills, regions, and gender. These data gaps can be filled through triangulation of desk research with primary data to better understand the needs of a country's specific regions/districts. Additionally, the informal sector remains underrepresented in available data, and discrepancies in data quality and methodologies across countries introduce comparability challenges.

## 3. Employability skills mapping

This section examines the social, economic, and demographic landscapes of each country. It provides an overview of population distribution, economic drivers, employment sectors, and education systems. This background information is essential for understanding contextual challenges and opportunities, especially for marginalised populations, and for identifying relevant indicators, existing barriers, and potential areas for impactful development.

### 3.1. Cambodia

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#### Demographic overview

In 2023, Cambodia had a population of 16,944,826, of which 49.5% were male and 50.5% female ([↑World Bank, 2023a](#)). The dominant ethnic group is Khmer (96%), with Chinese, Vietnamese, and other ethnicities representing 4% of the population. The most significant minorities of Katu, Mnong, Jarai, Rhadé, and Stieng live in the northeastern provinces close to Vietnam and Lao PDR ([↑Chandler & Overton, 2025](#)). Only 25% of Cambodians reside in cities ([↑World Bank, 2022b](#)).

#### Sociocultural factors

Traditional gender norms in Cambodia have historically influenced societal attitudes and roles, often positioning men in more prominent roles. These longstanding perceptions have contributed to limitations on women's participation in certain aspects of socio-economic development ([↑Dim, 2018](#)).

#### Education system overview

Over 13% of primary-school-aged children are OOSCY, with children from wealthier households and urban areas more likely to complete their education ([↑Thinley et al., 2024](#)). Dropout rates rise in line with educational level due to poverty, sociocultural pressures to work or do household chores, and academic difficulties ([↑Action Education, 2021](#)).

According to the *2019–2023 Education Strategic Plan*, the anticipated education budget for 2023 was 5,256 billion Riels, with the government's allocation for that year estimated at 19.1% of total projected government spending ([↑MoEYS, 2023](#)). There is a need for external funding to bridge the gap. Such financial constraints have prompted the Ministry of Education,

Youth, and Sports (MoEYS) to explore decentralised management approaches, including the School-Based Management System (SBM) ([↑MoEYS, 2021](#)).

Cambodia offers formal and non-formal vocational pathways for OOSCY, including flexible learning programmes like the Basic Equivalency Education Programme (BEEP), which integrates online learning. However, challenges such as limited teacher training and insufficient resources for lifelong learning centres hinder these efforts ([↑UNESCO, 2024b](#))

Enrolment rates for girls are higher than for boys at all educational levels, with a gender parity ratio of 1 in primary education and 1.1 in both lower and upper secondary education between 2010 and 2022 ([↑UNFPA, 2025](#)). Girls' dropout rates tend to increase at higher grade levels ([↑UNFPA, 2025](#)).

## Technological and infrastructure landscape

In 2018, 88.2% of households in Cambodia had access to at least four hours of electricity supply per day ([↑Dave et al., 2018](#)). However, only half of the country's 3.6 million households had internet access at home that year, with most internet usage relying on mobile-cellular networks. By 2022, cellular network coverage reached the entire population, though broadband adoption remained low, with only about 509,830 subscriptions nationwide ([↑OECD, 2023](#)).

A study reveals that 39% of high school students in Cambodia are regular self-learners in information and communications technology (ICT). Additionally, ICT is taught as part of the technical curriculum, with classes held weekly in secondary school. However, students are granted access to school computer labs only once a month ([↑UNICEF EAPRO, 2023](#)).

Only 8.44% of female students pursue studies in technology-related subjects, and among those who graduate, only 30% secure jobs in the IT sector ([↑Rodionova, 2021](#); [↑World Bank, 2023a](#)). Studies show that women are 25% less likely than men to be able to perform basic technological tasks. In Cambodia, only 27% of girls can access mobile internet compared to 46% of boys ([↑UNICEF EAPRO, 2023](#)).

## Economic overview

Approximately 90% of non-agricultural employment is classified as informal ([↑UNDP, 2023](#)). Seventy per cent of youth aged 15–29 years are economically active, representing 37% of the entire working-age population ([↑ILO, 2023b](#)). The macroeconomic policy framework does not adequately address the

structural disadvantages women face, including unpaid care work, low wages, and undervalued employment ([↑Oxfam, 2020](#)).

In Cambodia, the agriculture, tourism, entrepreneurship, and construction sectors are the main economic drivers that can help the government achieve its ambition of becoming a middle-income country by 2030. Moreover, these are the sectors where women make up most of the workforce ([↑B2B Cambodia, 2024](#)).

[Table 2](#) below provides an overview of key skills gaps and emerging opportunities across the highlighted sectors in Cambodia, highlighting the competencies required to improve employability outcomes for marginalised girls and young women.

**Table 2.** *Overview of skills gaps in economic sectors in Cambodia*

|                 | <b>Agriculture</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | <b>Entrepreneurship, retail trade, and services</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | <b>Construction</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|-----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Overview</b> | <p>75% of all farmers working in agriculture, forestry, and fishing are women (<a href="#">↑Oxfam, 2025</a>).</p> <p>Despite receiving the same support and technical advice as male farmers, some women farmers still achieve yields that are up to one ton per hectare lower than those of men (<a href="#">↑Muzata, 2024</a>).</p> | <p>Only 15% of all workers in Cambodia’s craft and related industries are women (<a href="#">↑ADB, 2013</a>).</p> <p>In Cambodia, women make up 63% of the workforce in the wholesale, retail trade, and services sector, which largely consists of self-employed individuals and microenterprises focused on selling food, household goods, or vehicle repair services (<a href="#">↑ADB, 2013</a>).</p> | <p>Only 22% of construction workers have access to formal training (the average training rate in East Asia is 57%) (<a href="#">↑B2B Cambodia, 2024</a>).</p> <p>Up to 30% of workers in the construction industry are women, and 77% of them have incomplete or no primary school education (<a href="#">↑CARE Cambodia, 2023</a>).</p> <p>Around 50% of women have not received any training in the construction sector (<a href="#">↑CARE Cambodia, 2023</a>).</p> <p>Women’s salaries are systematically lower than those of their male colleagues. Female construction workers frequently do not receive any maternity benefits (<a href="#">↑Yon, 2018</a>).</p> |

|                                              | <b>Agriculture</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | <b>Entrepreneurship, retail trade, and services</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | <b>Construction</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|----------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Skills gaps that need to be addressed</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Training on income-generating skills.</li> <li>■ Technical training and access to credit.</li> <li>■ Training on supplies for women in rural areas.</li> <li>■ Skills on how to leverage locally available agriculture techniques and traditional farming practices (<a href="#">↑ADB, 2013</a>).</li> <li>■ Agricultural cooperative leadership training (<a href="#">↑Muzata, 2024</a>).</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Enhanced microcredit programmes.</li> <li>■ Improved access to information, training, and outreach services that can build entrepreneurial capacity and help women and girls grow their businesses over time.</li> <li>■ Supportive measures are essential to help women advance their businesses, improve their employment conditions, and foster their integration into the formal economy (<a href="#">↑ADB, 2013</a>).</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Planning, budgeting, and scheduling skills.</li> <li>■ Proficiency in construction software, problem-solving, and financial management is also important, as are negotiation and contract management skills, for receiving management positions.</li> <li>■ Health and safety awareness knowledge.</li> <li>■ Leadership and communication skills.</li> </ul> |

|                      | <b>Agriculture</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | <b>Entrepreneurship, retail trade, and services</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | <b>Construction</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|----------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Opportunities</b> | <p><b>Farmers' field schools</b> can provide skills training and uncover opportunities in rural areas (<a href="#">↑Brink, 2012</a>). These schools provide women with educational resources through loans.</p> <p><b>Women-Led Agriculture Service (WLAS)</b> consists of landless women trained in agricultural techniques and skills. They offer technical farming services within their community. Their expertise spans a range of areas, including rice cultivation, vegetable farming, animal husbandry, and aquaculture. These teams have enhanced their own livelihoods and incomes while assisting small-scale farmers to optimise their land for greater productivity and benefits (<a href="#">↑Oxfam, 2025</a>).</p> | <p><b>Indochina Starfish Foundation (ISF) Cambodia</b> provides the necessary resources and support to help children and their families gain access to quality education, enhance their employment opportunities, and develop the skills to become leaders who contribute to their communities (<a href="#">↑ISF Cambodia, n.d.</a>). 86% of former trainees secure stable employment in the <b>fashion and garment sector</b>.</p> <p>ISF Cambodia offers <b>sewing courses</b> and collaborates with partners to help women secure employment or launch their own <b>small businesses</b>.</p> <p><b>Avodah Global</b> supports women recovering from trafficking and exploitation. The '<b>Avodah Way</b>' programme offers trainees a living wage, meals, health insurance, and access to sewing equipment (<a href="#">↑Avodah Global, n.d.</a>).</p> | <p>The <b>Pour un Sourire d'Enfant (PSE) Institute for Vocational Training</b> in Phnom Penh provides underprivileged youth with the skills needed to reintegrate into Cambodian society with dignity. Today, the PSE Institute serves approximately <b>1,500 students</b>.</p> <p>The institute comprises three specialised schools: the Hotel &amp; Tourism School, the Business School, and the Trade &amp; Technology School. Together, they offer around <b>20 vocational programmes</b>, including ones related to <b>project management and budgeting</b>, tailored to meet the demands of the Cambodian job market (<a href="#">↑PSE, n.d.</a>).</p> <p>The Institute is officially recognised by the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training (<a href="#">↑PSE, n.d.</a>).</p> |

## 3.2. Lao PDR

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### Demographic overview

Lao PDR's population is estimated at around 7.42 million and is expected to increase to 8.1 million by 2030 ([↑Choi et al., 2024](#)). The country has over 100 distinct ethnic groups ([↑Choi et al., 2024](#)). Sixty-two per cent of the nation's people live in rural areas ([↑IFAD, n.d.](#)).

Nearly one-third of the population is aged 10–24, making Lao PDR among the youngest nations in Southeast Asia ([↑Ministry of Planning and Investment & UNDP, 2022](#)).

Women have a higher life expectancy (69.7 years) compared to men (66.1 years), and the sex ratio at birth is balanced at 99.8 males per 100 females ([↑UNDP, 2022](#)).

### Sociocultural factors

In many households, traditional gender roles are still highly valued. Thus, women are often expected to take on caregiving duties and manage household responsibilities ([↑Steventon, 2023](#); [↑UNICEF, n.d. a](#)). Additionally, factors that contribute to dropout rates, such as child marriage and early pregnancy, tend to disproportionately affect girls in certain communities ([↑UNICEF, n.d. a](#)). This impacts both girls' educational progress and their families' emphasis on supporting their education.

Girls from ethnic minority groups in poor rural areas encounter substantial obstacles to accessing education. Ethnic minorities make up nearly half of the Lao population, with many residing in isolated regions where the Lao-Tai language is not predominantly spoken. Although these communities represent only about one-third of children eligible for primary school, they account for around 75% of those not attending school ([↑UNESCO & UNESCO Bangkok, 2017](#)).

### Education system overview

The education system in Lao PDR has been shaped by a range of influences, including indigenous cultural heritage, colonial history, the socialist revolution, and the growth of a market economy ([↑World Bank, 2016](#)).

Government spending on education fell from 17.2% in 2020 to 13.7% in 2022 ([↑GPE, 2024](#)).

Challenging terrain creates barriers to equal access to education, especially in remote regions ([↑Oum, 2019](#)). In rural areas of Laos, only 77% of girls can afford education, while 83% of boys attend schools ([↑Steventon, 2023](#)).

In early childhood education, enrolment numbers for boys and girls are nearly equal ([↑Noonan, 2020](#)).

A small gender gap appears at the primary level, with enrolment rates of 75% for boys and 71% for girls. This gap becomes slightly larger at the secondary level, where 36% of boys and 31% of girls are enrolled ([↑Steventon, 2023](#)).

In urban areas, 95% of both boys and girls attend primary school, whereas in rural areas without road access, enrolment drops to 83% for boys and 77% for girls ([↑Steventon, 2023](#)).

High dropout rates, especially at lower levels, limit progression to upper secondary education: only 79% of students who began in Grade 1 reach Grade 5 ([↑Afzal et al., 2024](#); [↑Steventon, 2023](#); [↑World Bank, 2020](#)).

### **Technological and infrastructure landscape**

In terms of access to technology, women have slightly less access to the internet and mobile phones than men ([↑UN Women, n.d.](#)). Additionally, historical influences, including colonisation and political turmoil, have left lasting effects on educational infrastructure and human capital development. Efforts to rebuild and modernise the education system have also been slowed by limited resources and competing priorities ([↑Oum, 2019](#)).

### **Economic overview**

The poverty rate in Lao PDR dropped significantly from 46% in 1993 to 18% in 2019, in part due to rapid economic growth. The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) increased at an average annual rate of about 7.3% ([↑Ministry of Planning and Investment & UNDP, 2022](#)). Lao PDR has also been experiencing one of the most accelerated urbanisation trends in Southeast Asia ([↑UNDP, 2020](#)).

Women predominantly work in the agriculture and informal services sector ([↑The Sasakawa Peace Foundation & Dalberg Global Development Advisors, 2017](#)). Significant disparities exist in women's representation in leadership roles across legislative bodies, public administration, and local governance. As of 2021, women occupy only 27.5% of seats in the national parliament, with even lower representation at regional levels ([↑UN Women, n.d.](#)).

Agriculture, logistics, and transport remain the key sectors of the economy, with over 70% of the population employed in these industries. Tourism is also a priority for advancing economic development by 2035 ([↑ADB, 2021](#)).

Table 3 below presents an overview of key skills gaps and sector-specific opportunities in Lao PDR, outlining the competencies in demand across the highlighted sectors to support the employability of marginalised girls and young women.

**Table 3.** Overview of skills gaps in economic sectors in Lao PDR

|                 | Agriculture                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Logistics and transport                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Tourism                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|-----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Overview</b> | <p>Although the agriculture sector employs more than 73% of the population in Lao PDR, it contributes only about 28% of the country's GDP, highlighting a productivity and efficiency gap (↑Choi et al., 2024).</p> <p>The sector faces challenges due to the scarcity of arable land. Overcoming these hurdles requires embracing advanced agricultural technologies and improving post-harvest handling and food processing (↑Choi et al., 2024).</p> <p>The agriculture sector provides jobs for almost 50% of households (↑IFAD, n.d.).</p> <p>Forestry equals 16.2% of the GDP and had a 2.87% growth rate in 2017 (↑UNIDO, 2020).</p> | <p>Lao PDR's logistics industry has significant growth potential due to its strategic location in the Mekong region and the government's intention to transition the country from landlocked to land-linked (↑Choi et al., 2024).</p> <p>The logistics and transportation sector currently faces challenges of fragmentation, high operational costs, an ageing and undertrained workforce, limited logistics management capabilities, low safety standards, and insufficient driver training (↑Choi et al., 2024).</p> <p>The GDP share of the logistics and transport sector is estimated to be 4% (↑GIZ, 2014).</p> | <p>Tourism-related businesses have been expanding recently, entering new markets and focusing on green tourism (↑Xinhua, 2024).</p> <p>Before the pandemic, tourism contributed 12% to the Lao PDR GDP. Since reopening its borders, the industry has seen a steady recovery, supported by new passenger routes on the Lao-China Railway, linking Kunming, China, to Vientiane, Laos (↑Medina, 2024).</p> <p>The government has set a target of welcoming at least 4.6 million foreign visitors per year, with over 1 million arrivals recorded in the first three months of 2024 (↑Lao News Agency, 2023).</p> |

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|                                              | Agriculture                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Logistics and transport                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | Tourism                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|----------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Skills gaps that need to be addressed</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Organic farming techniques: Sustainable practices like composting, crop rotation, and pest management.</li><li>■ Knowledge of international certification standards and quality control for export compliance.</li><li>■ Marketing and branding: Soft skills such as teamwork, communication, and strong work ethics among agricultural workers (↑Choi et al., 2024).</li><li>■ Machinery operation and repair training, including equipment like tractors, transplanting machines, and harvesters (↑Choi et al., 2024).</li><li>■ Flexible training programmes offering shorter, focused modules to accommodate diverse learners. Tailored programmes targeting groups like OOSCY, the unemployed, and active farmers can maximise impact (↑Choi et al., 2024).</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Training for freight forwarders and traffic planners, trained and licensed truck drivers proficient in trip planning and vehicle maintenance, and specialists such as vehicle mechanics and auto electricians for heavy vehicles.</li><li>■ Qualified warehouse management and operation training (↑Choi et al., 2024).</li><li>■ English language training and basic business competencies are essential (↑Choi et al., 2024).</li><li>■ Logistics-specific training opportunities. Existing programmes face challenges of vague curricula, low enrolment rates, and a shortage of qualified instructors, further hindering workforce development (↑Choi et al., 2024).</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Ethical standards and the ability to effectively guide groups to various destinations and communicate in English clearly.</li><li>■ Expertise and skills to showcase Laos' rich cultural heritage and religious sites.</li><li>■ Training on high standards of service.</li></ul> |

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|                      | Agriculture                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Logistics and transport | Tourism                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|----------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Opportunities</b> | <p>The development organisation <b>Helvetas Laos</b> supports vocational schools that equip young people with practical, market-relevant skills. Helvetas Laos teaches youth how to treat tea leaves to improve harvests. In this project, Helvetas reached out to around 5,000 small farmers from 21 villages in northern Laos (<a href="#">↑Helvetas, n.d.</a>). Teaching youth how to plant tea sustainably is an accessible way for rural youth to enter the industry.</p> <p>The international programme <b>Sowing Diversity = Harvesting Security (SDHS)</b> works with the <b>National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute of Laos (NAFRI)</b> in Oudomxay, Xayabouly, Vientiane, Saravane, Attapeu, Xiengkhouang, and Louangprabang provinces to <b>upskill communities in rice, maize, vegetable, and bean production</b>. The organisations developed tools and materials to promote awareness and knowledge of growing underutilised local crops and incorporating them into nutritionally balanced diets (<a href="#">↑Seeds for Resilience, n.d.</a>).</p> | No data available       | <p>The <b>Lao Women’s Union</b> provides training leadership for indigenous women in co-managing the Hin Nam No National Park (<a href="#">↑Hin Nam Mo, 2023</a>).</p> <p>The <b>Lao Disabled Women’s Development Centre</b> empowers women from rural areas, minority ethnic groups, and women with disabilities with sewing and needlework skills. During a 6-month programme, students received training on social development, women’s civil rights, healthcare, small business management, IT, and Lao and English language skills (<a href="#">↑WWDA, n.d.</a>).</p> <p><b>The Houey Hong Vocational Training Center for Women</b> provides upskilling for women in weaving and tailoring. The Centre supports Lao’s traditional crafts, dyeing and traditional weaving, and helps women with little or no education (<a href="#">↑Houey Hong, n.d.</a>).</p> |

### 3.3. Timor-Leste

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#### Demographic overview

Timor-Leste is a lower-middle-income country<sup>1</sup> divided into 13 municipalities and 67 districts, with a population of 1.40 million ([↑UNDESA, 2024](#)). The population reflects a nearly even gender split, with 50.6% male and 49.4% female residents ([↑ILO, 2022](#)).

Ethnically, the population comprises individuals of Papua, Malayan, and Polynesian descent. The official languages are Portuguese and Tetum, although Portuguese is spoken by a small minority ([↑Britannica Editors, 2025](#)). The majority of the population is rural (63.2%), with 36.8% living in urban areas. ([↑ILO, 2022](#)).

Timor-Leste has one of the youngest populations globally, with about 42% under 18 and 57% under 25. In 2022, there were approximately 809,300 people of working age, constituting 62.9% of the population, with a labour force of around 247,000, of which 39.7% were women. This demographic presents opportunities for significant economic and social growth ([↑UNICEF, 2022](#)).

#### Sociocultural factors

Traditional gender roles place women primarily in caregiving and household responsibilities. Other barriers include safety concerns and inadequate transportation in rural areas, which prevent some girls from attending school regularly, as parents may prioritise sons' education due to perceived safety risks ([↑UNESCO & SEAMEO QITEP, 2023](#)).

#### Education system overview

Enrolment rates for girls exceed those for boys across all educational levels, with boys also showing higher dropping rates: 91% of girls and 82% of boys are enrolled at the primary level, while at the secondary level, enrolment drops to 56% for girls and 41% for boys ([↑Honda et al., 2024](#); [↑Ministry of Education, 2021](#)).

Overall, 37% of the rural population between 15 and 24 is illiterate while only 6% of the urban population of the same age has never attained any form of education ([↑Pekular, 2019](#)).

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<sup>1</sup> World Bank's classification of countries by income in 2024. See <https://datatopics.worldbank.org/world-development-indicators/the-world-by-income-and-region.html>. Retrieved 28 October 2024

This imbalance in education enrolment contributes to a gap in adult literacy rates, where 60% of women aged 15 and above are literate, compared to 69% of men ([↑Pekular, 2019](#)).

Timor-Leste's educational system experiences high repetition rates in early grades, with 20.2% of primary and 29.3% of pre-secondary students being over age ([↑UNESCO, 2024a](#)).

Tetum and Portuguese are the official languages, but many students come from backgrounds where other local languages are dominant. Although a 2015 curriculum adopted Tetum as the primary language of instruction in primary schools, a 2023 law mandates Portuguese as the language of instruction at all educational levels. This shift has implications for both students (many of whom speak a different first language) and teachers—79% of whom were assessed as possessing only elementary knowledge of Portuguese ([↑Klinken & Olinda, 2021](#)).

## Technological and infrastructure landscape

Though some schools in Timor-Leste offer Wi-Fi, its low speed often forces teachers to rely on personal devices and pay for internet access themselves. Students also struggle to complete assignments that require internet connectivity. Data costs are prohibitively high, with data packages priced at around USD 1.67 per gigabyte—significantly higher than in Indonesia, where prices average USD 0.42 per gigabyte. Additionally, internet download speeds in Timor-Leste are the slowest in Southeast Asia, roughly seven times slower than in Indonesia and 36 times slower than in Singapore, further hindering digital access for both students and educators ([↑UNESCO & SEAMEO QITEP, 2023](#)).

## Economic overview

The economy is largely driven by the service sector, which comprises 59.1% of total employment ([↑ILO, 2022](#)). The agriculture and industry sectors make up 26.9% and 13.5% of the economy ([↑ILO, 2022](#)). The country has a small and emerging private sector with limited diversification, due to its heavy reliance on the national sovereign wealth fund, known as the Petroleum Fund ([↑Triwibowo & Miranda, 2016](#)).

In Timor-Leste, over 45% of the population lives below the poverty line, with about 26% experiencing severe food insecurity. The nation has one of the highest stunting rates in Southeast Asia, affecting nearly half of its children ([↑WFP, 2024](#)).

In 2022, the rate of vulnerable employment in Timor-Leste was 80% for women and 54.2% for men, both significantly higher than the regional average for East Asia and the Pacific ([↑World Bank, 2024](#)).

The *Timor-Leste Strategic Development Plan 2011–2030* envisions a transition to upper-middle-income status by 2030. To achieve this, it emphasises advancements in education, healthcare, infrastructure, and private sector growth ([↑Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste, 2011](#)).

In Timor-Leste, agriculture and the service sector employ most of the population, with 59.1% of workers employed in the service sector and 27% in agriculture ([↑ILO, 2022](#)).

The table below presents an overview of key skills gaps and sector-specific opportunities in Timor-Leste, outlining the competencies in demand across the highlighted sectors to support the employability of marginalised girls and young women.

**Table 4.** Overview of skills gaps in economic sectors in Timor-Leste

|                                              | <b>Service sector</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | <b>Agriculture</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Overview</b>                              | <p>The proportion of men and women working in the service sector is almost equal (59% and 59.3% respectively) (↑ILO, 2022).</p> <p>Health, education, and other social services account for 18% of GDP, while hotels and restaurants contribute 12% (↑Das &amp; O’Keefe, 2007).</p> <p>Informal employment represents 33.1% of total industry employment (↑ILO, 2022).</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | <p>Women’s employment in agriculture is notably higher (31%) compared to 24.2% for men (↑ILO, 2022).</p> <p>36.9% of agricultural employment is informal (↑ILO, 2022).</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| <b>Skills gaps that need to be addressed</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ English and Portuguese language skills.</li> <li>■ For manual workers, key missing skills include technical and practical abilities, as well as basic literacy and numeracy (↑Das &amp; O’Keefe, 2007).</li> <li>■ Service workers are noted to lack skills in language, customer service, and administrative and financial management.</li> <li>■ Administrative workers are reported to need improvements primarily in administrative, financial, and language skills (↑Das &amp; O’Keefe, 2007).</li> <li>■ Managerial workers need to enhance their language, management, administrative, marketing, and negotiation skills (↑Das &amp; O’Keefe, 2007).</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ A diverse set of agricultural skills, including sustainable crop production techniques such as planting, irrigation, pest management, and crop rotation.</li> <li>■ Post-harvest handling skills, such as storage, processing, and packaging, can help reduce waste and add value to products (↑ILO, 2024).</li> <li>■ Training in climate resilience strategies, agroforestry, and cooperative management (↑ILO, 2024).</li> </ul> |

**Opportunities**

**Dilicious** was an organisation formed to promote traditional Timorese cuisine. Dilicious initially sold traditional meals for USD 4–5 each, which limited its customer base due to the high price. However, after improving customer service, developing the administrative and management skills of its personnel and introducing a mobile kitchen concept, the services became more popular and increased the workforce by employing university students and youth ([↑Gomes & da Silva, 2023](#)).

The **Timor-Leste Organic Fertilizer (TILOFE) organisation** advances employment for vulnerable communities, producing organic fertilisers from raw materials ([↑Gomes & da Silva, 2023](#)).

The organisation was founded in response to the challenges faced by youth, particularly the scarcity of job opportunities that forced many to migrate abroad for survival. To address this, the organisation launched initiatives to create opportunities for young people and promote the utilisation of local products ([↑Gomes & da Silva, 2023](#)).

The organisation works closely with the Ministry of Agriculture and customers in the Ermera and Maliana regions ([↑Gomes & da Silva, 2023](#)).

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### 3.4. Common trends and challenges

This section presents a comparative analysis of key trends and challenges related to employability skills and educational access for girls in Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Timor-Leste. These countries share common obstacles rooted in demographic pressures, infrastructure limitations, linguistic diversity, and digital literacy that affect the employability of young females.

#### Rapidly growing youth population

The proportions of the young population in Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Timor-Leste hold substantial potential for economic growth but simultaneously present an increasing pressure on the labour market.

**Table 5.** *Proportions of the young population in Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Timor-Leste*

|                    |                                                                                             |
|--------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Cambodia</b>    | 65% of Cambodia's population is under 30 years old ( <a href="#">↑Jennie B., 2024</a> ).    |
| <b>Laos PDR</b>    | Over 60% of the population in Laos is under 30 years old ( <a href="#">↑UNFPA, 2024</a> ).  |
| <b>Timor-Leste</b> | 57% of Timor-Leste's population is under 25 years old ( <a href="#">↑Syamsudin, 2024</a> ). |

This represents a unique opportunity for a demographic dividend if young people are integrated effectively into the workforce through relevant education and skills training. Entrepreneurship training is crucial to support the rapidly growing youth population in creating job opportunities for themselves by acquiring financial literacy, business planning, marketing, and management skills, particularly for marginalised girls.

All three countries face high levels of informal employment and limited job creation in the formal sector, constraining the job market and the potential for youth employability. In Lao PDR and Timor-Leste, over half of the young population remains engaged in informal or vulnerable work, which lacks stability and benefits. Limited private-sector growth and limited formal job opportunities exacerbate this challenge and underscore the need for targeted policies and training programmes that align with each country's labour market needs.

## Infrastructure and accessibility in rural communities

Infrastructure limitations, particularly in rural areas, create barriers to education access and quality. Internet access, electrification, and availability of learning resources are disproportionately lower in rural regions across all three countries.

People living in rural areas in Timor-Leste and Lao PDR, in particular, face high costs and limited access to the internet and mobile services. Electrification in remote areas is inconsistent, with limited access to devices in low-income rural schools in Timor-Leste and Lao PDR. Cambodia is slightly more advanced in rural electrification, but equipment shortages persist. Without a reliable electricity supply, computers, or mobile devices, the effective use of educational technology remains difficult ([UNESCO & SEAMEO QITEP, 2023](#)).

## Linguistic barriers

Linguistic diversity in Lao PDR and Timor-Leste poses unique challenges for education and skills development. In Laos, over 100 ethnic groups speak diverse languages, with Lao as the official language. In Timor-Leste, while Portuguese and Tetum are the official languages, many students have linguistic backgrounds where other local languages predominate. This complicates teaching and learning, especially when recent policies (e.g., mandating Portuguese in Timor-Leste) place language requirements on students who may lack foundational proficiency. Cambodia, on the other hand, does not face significant linguistic barriers in education due to Khmer's status as the dominant language, facilitating more straightforward delivery of curriculum content ([da Costa Cabral, 2021](#)).

## Digital literacy skills for EdTech adoption

Although adolescents across these countries are aware of the importance of digital skills, digital literacy education remains at a basic level, often limited to content consumption and elementary search skills. The digital literacy gap is more pronounced in rural and marginalised communities, where limited internet access restricts hands-on experience with technology. This gap poses a challenge for EdTech integration, as students require more advanced competencies to fully benefit from digital learning tools. Furthermore, digital literacy is further constrained by poor infrastructure and low levels of teacher digital competency ([UNICEF EAPRO, 2023](#)).

## Gender disparities in digital literacy

Across Cambodia, Timor-Leste, and Lao PDR, gendered approaches to digital literacy are largely absent, limiting girls' access to more advanced digital skills. Sociocultural norms that assign domestic responsibilities to girls further restrict their time for digital learning and skills development. Gender-blind digital literacy programmes tend to overlook the specific barriers that girls face in accessing technology, such as fewer female role models in digital fields, lower parental support for technology use, and concerns around online safety. This lack of targeted support for girls risks exacerbating the digital divide, particularly in rural areas where gender biases may be more deeply entrenched ([UNICEF EAPRO, 2023](#)).

## Teacher shortages and professional training

The shortage of qualified teachers, particularly in rural areas, and insufficient professional development opportunities are critical issues across all three countries. High rates of teacher attrition and inadequate training opportunities limit the adoption of learner-centred teaching methods, which are essential for developing employability skills. While initiatives like Timor-Leste's 'Learning Passport Program' and the Australian-supported **Apoiu Lideransa liuhosi Mentorja no Aprendizajen (ALMA)** project aim to improve teacher training, these programmes often fall short in reaching all regions and equipping teachers with the necessary skills for modern curricula and digital instruction ([Cassity & Chainey, 2021](#); [Cassity & Wong, 2024](#); [UNICEF, 2020](#)).

## Social norms and community buy-in

Changing parental attitudes toward education is a common challenge across Cambodia, Timor-Leste, and Lao PDR. In many rural communities, parents prioritise immediate income-generating activities over education. These cultural attitudes restrict children's time for school, particularly marginalised girls, whose education is often deprioritised due to caregiving responsibilities or sociocultural norms that discourage female education. Community engagement and awareness initiatives are necessary to shift this mindset and build parental buy-in ([UNICEF, n.d. b](#)).

## Lack of understanding of gender implications in education

In Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Timor-Leste, limited awareness of gender dynamics in education poses challenges that affect access, progression, and

the quality of learning outcomes for girls. While national education policies increasingly recognise gender equality as a priority, implementation of gender-sensitive approaches in classrooms is often insufficient, particularly in digital literacy and vocational skills training. This gender-blind approach can prevent educators from addressing specific barriers that girls face, such as lower digital engagement in STEM and other high-skill fields ([↑ADB, 2014](#); [↑Page & Cameron, 2024](#)).

### 3.5. Digital skills and employability

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Employability encompasses a range of abilities and personal qualities that enhance graduates' prospects of securing and excelling in jobs ([↑Watkins & Smith, 2018](#)). These skills are often grouped into two main categories: technical or 'hard' skills, which relate to specific industry knowledge and job-specific expertise, and 'soft' skills that include interpersonal and self-management abilities ([↑Andrews & Higson, 2010](#)).

Recently, digital literacy has become a core concept of employability as more and more jobs become reliant on technology. Digital literacy skills are set to become a fundamental requirement for employability across Southeast Asia, with up to 80% of jobs anticipated to require ICT skills by 2030 ([↑ILSA, 2023](#)).

### 3.6. Gaps in employability skills

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#### Cambodia

The gaps in employability skills in Cambodia are wide-ranging, driven by limited soft skills, technical qualifications, and industry-aligned vocational training. Key soft skills—such as **oral communication, foreign language proficiency, customer service, and teamwork**—are cited by Cambodian employers as critical but underdeveloped areas among youth, particularly marginalised girls. This shortfall impacts sectors across the economy, making positions like technicians and associate professionals the hardest to fill due to a shortage of appropriately skilled candidates ([↑Madhur, 2014](#); [↑Sophornn, 2018](#)).

A deeper issue is the low rate of technical qualifications among Cambodia's employed population. Only 1.5% (1.8% for men and 1.1% for women) hold formal **technical and vocational education and training** (TVET) qualifications, and current TVET programmes lack advanced technical offerings in fields essential to higher-value industries, such as **precision machining, mechatronics, and electrical technology** ([↑ADB, 2016](#)).

Marginalised girls are particularly underrepresented in TVET programmes, facing barriers such as financial constraints and limited access to information about available training opportunities. Most private TVET institutes focus on business administration and ICT and do not offer specialised technical training. Consequently, employers face difficulties finding talent with advanced technical skills needed to support Cambodia's competitiveness and upward mobility in the regional and global markets ([↑ADB, 2016](#)).

Cambodia's TVET system faces additional limitations in funding and responsiveness to labour market demands. A lack of robust data on school-to-work transitions and skills mismatches restricts effective planning and programme adjustments within the education and labour sectors ([↑ADB, 2016](#)).

## Lao PDR

According to the Global Competitiveness Index 2017–2018, insufficient and irrelevant workforce education is identified as the most pressing factor for doing business in Laos ([↑World Economic Forum, 2018](#)). There are shortages of skilled workers in industries such as **agriculture, logistics, and information and communication technology**. These areas represent a high potential for development but lack skilled professionals ([↑World Bank, 2022a](#)).

Employment patterns are strongly shaped by seasonal and subsistence activities, and by high rates of international labour migration. The demand for **highly skilled workers**, especially in the **non-farm sector**, significantly outpaces local supply due to limited investment in education and specialised training programmes. Such investments targeting the employment of marginalised girls are also low ([↑World Bank, 2023b](#)).

Additionally, a spatial mismatch exists: high worker demand is concentrated in certain regions, such as Vientiane Province and Municipality, which also experience high levels of outward migration to countries like Thailand. This movement exacerbates local labour and skills shortages in these areas, impacting the overall workforce availability ([↑World Bank, 2023b](#)).

Since the Government of Lao PDR aims to increase the digital economy's GDP contribution from 3% to 10% by 2040, it prioritises digital transformation across all economic sectors. A shortage of skilled professionals in advanced technical fields such as **web design, coding, and software programming** limits the adoption of digital technologies. The education system struggles to provide **industry-relevant ICT curricula**, leaving graduates without the practical skills demanded by employers. Additionally, the lack of accessible upskilling and

reskilling programmes hinders workforce adaptation to rapid technological advancements ([↑Choi et al., 2024](#)).

From the geographic point of view, training would be most beneficial in the poorest regions of the country, namely, Xepon district in Savannakhet province and Toumlan district ([↑Open Development Mekong, 2016](#)).

## Timor-Leste

Overall labour force participation stood at 30.5% with a notable gap between women (24.2%) and men (36.9%). Regarding educational attainment within the labour force, 30.7% had no formal education or had not completed primary school, while 16.8% had attained some level of tertiary education or higher. Approximately 48.5% of workers are wage employees, while 50.3% are self-employed either as own-account workers or contributing family members. Marginalised women are more likely than men to be self-employed and less likely to hold wage-paying positions ([↑ILO, 2022](#)).

Key employability obstacles include low educational levels and persistent difficulties in advancing the technical and vocational skills of the workforce. In recent years, the labour market in Timor-Leste has been shifting from subsistence farming towards more market-oriented agriculture and from agricultural to non-agricultural sectors. This shift contributed to a 6% reduction in the agricultural workforce, alongside a 37% rise in non-agricultural employment ([↑Government of Timor-Leste, 2017](#)). There is limited data to reflect the transition for marginalised girls in non-agricultural roles.

Notably, employment in trade surged by 60%, accounting for 43% of the overall growth in non-agricultural jobs. Other expanding sectors included transport and communications (55%) and public services (43%). Despite this sectoral growth, the small formal economy has been unable to generate sufficient jobs to keep pace with the rapidly growing labour force ([↑Government of Timor-Leste, 2017](#)). This lack of job creation particularly impacts marginalised girls, who may already face challenges in accessing information about available job opportunities.

Employers are often hesitant to hire youth as they lack **technical** and **soft skills**, putting marginalised girls with limited skills at a further disadvantage. With regard to gender and employability, women are often overrepresented in lower-paid, informal employment, including agriculture and self-employment roles. Young girls face particular challenges entering the formal and wage-based job market as they have limited prior work experience, a lack of

job market information, and insufficient professional networks ([↑Government of Timor-Leste, 2017](#)).

Additionally, TVET remains the most essential field for advancing the employability and productivity of the national labour force. Therefore, young people could benefit from training in **technical and vocational skills** aligned with market demand, such as in hospitality, construction, or health services. Special focus on including marginalised girls in these training programmes is crucial to ensure their participation in growing sectors.

**Financial literacy and entrepreneurial skills** can empower young marginalised girls, particularly in regions where informal employment is prevalent, for example in Manufahi district (84% of informal employment), Ainaro, and Aileu (83% and 84% respectively) ([↑ILO, 2022](#)). This could help girls manage resources effectively and explore self-employment or small business opportunities ([↑Government of Timor-Leste, 2017](#)).

### 3.7. Education pathways

This section provides an overview of the existing initiatives across Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Timor-Leste that aim to advance the employability of youth and girls.

**Table 6.** *Comparative table of initiatives aiming to improve employability of youth and girls in Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Timor-Leste*

|                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|-----------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Cambodia</b> | <p>Established in 2021, <b>Sisters of Code</b> is the first female coding club that encourages girls to gain confidence and study coding skills.</p> <p>Over 18 weeks, the programme educates girls aged 10–20 about project-based learning. Students select real-world issues to tackle by creating apps and websites.</p> <p>Since its opening, more than 400 girls from public schools have graduated from the course (<a href="#">↑Rodionova, 2021</a>).</p> | <p>Implemented from 2019 to 2023, the UNDP’s project <b>Promoting Decent Youth Employment in Cambodia</b> facilitated the implementation of the Accountancy Technical Qualification (ATQ) programme. 350 students (51% women) enrolled in the programme.</p> <p>As a result of the project, the ATQ was accepted by five teaching institutions and is expected to be expanded further (<a href="#">↑UNDP, n.d.</a>).</p> | <p>From 2020 to 2024, Switzerland supported the UN programme <b>Decent Employment for Youth in Cambodia — DEY</b>. The programme reached 170,900 young people (half of whom were female) by building industry-aligned skills and competencies. It provided training in basic education equivalency, literacy in factory settings, entrepreneurship and enterprise development, along with employment services (<a href="#">↑ILO, 2023a</a>).</p> | <p>The <b>Promotion of Youth Skills and Employability Project</b> targets vulnerable youth aged 15 to 25, offering vocational and on-the-job training alongside essential life skills. This approach is designed to expand their access to meaningful and productive employment opportunities and acquire the skills needed in the current labour market (<a href="#">↑World Vision Cambodia, 2024</a>).</p> |
|-----------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

**Lao PDR**

The **Digital Literacy Initiative** equips youth with coding, programming, and digital entrepreneurship training. It targets upper secondary and TVET students.

Digital entrepreneurship courses and ‘code clubs’ have also been established to foster creativity, analytical skills, and teamwork through collaborative tech projects.

The initiative is endorsed for wider adoption, promoting ICT as a non-formal activity across schools in Laos.

Expected impact includes 2,700 upper secondary students receiving ICT training and 450 TVET students developing digital business skills ([↑Swisscontact, 2024](#)).

In September 2019, the **Leadership and Entrepreneurship Camp for Young Women** was launched in Lao PDR. The camp empowers ethnic girls between 14 and 22 years old to gain employability skills.

The camp currently operates in Nongpor and Phonsavath villages, which are predominantly inhabited by H’mong and Khmu communities. These two ethnic groups face substantial educational disadvantages and uphold strong traditional gender roles.

Unemployment and school dropout rates, particularly among lower-secondary girls, are notably high within these communities ([↑Action Education, 2020](#)).

The **Let Laos Learn initiative** supported more than 1,300 children through constructing schools in Laos. The initiative aims to improve school attendance and reduce early dropout rates.

Additionally, Let Laos Learn operates a training centre that offers after-school programmes and skills training for children and teenagers with a focus on preparing them for employment in the local tourism industry ([↑Let Laos Learn, n.d.](#)).

The **BEQUAL programme**, co-funded by the EU, supported the Lao Ministry of Education and Sports in enhancing educational access and quality. To address teacher shortages in remote regions, the programme implemented the Ethnic Teachers Scholarships initiative. The initiative trains and deploys teachers from ethnic minority backgrounds to serve in disadvantaged areas.

Through this initiative, 359 young people from rural communities completed teacher training and returned to teach in their home villages, with women making up over 60% of these newly qualified educators ([↑European Commission, n.d.](#)).

**Timor-Leste** The **Youth Employment and Entrepreneurship Skills** project aims to generate job opportunities and foster entrepreneurship among youth. Supported primarily by Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), the initiative is being implemented from 2022 to 2027, and focuses on empowering young people to pursue entrepreneurial paths.

So far, 171 youth have received internship offers, and 63 people have secured full-time jobs after these internships. Additionally, 312 young people have taken part in entrepreneurship training.

The project also provides loans for females to start their own businesses ([↑UNDP, 2024](#)).

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## 4. Conclusion and recommendations

Mapping employability and education in Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Timor-Leste reveals common challenges as well as unique factors specific to each nation that influence the effectiveness of skill-building and workforce readiness.

A rapidly growing youth population presents both opportunities and challenges across these nations and requires investment in skills development to ensure sustainable employment. The findings emphasise a need to strengthen TVET and integrate digital literacy for marginalised girls to align with labour market needs.

At a broader Southeast Asian level, these challenges resonate with regional priorities outlined in the *ASEAN Work Plan on Education 2021–2025*, which promotes skills-based learning and digital inclusion ([↑ASEAN, 2021](#)).

### Country-specific recommendations

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#### Cambodia

In Cambodia, policies and programmes should preliminary focus on the sectors of agriculture, entrepreneurship, services, and construction, and help marginalised girls acquire project management and budgeting skills as well as specialised skills in areas such as construction software, financial management, and health and safety.

TVET collaboration with the private sector is also crucial for ensuring alignment with labour market needs.

Cambodia's ICT workarounds (e.g., using worksheets for digital learning) offer a model that can be adapted in other ASEAN countries facing resource constraints.

#### Lao PDR

In Lao PDR, workforce development should focus on sectors such as agriculture, logistics, and tourism to match labour demands. Additionally, any training in organic farming techniques, logistics, and transport management is essential for economic growth. Moreover, language training and the preparation of ethical tour guides could strengthen Laos' tourism industry.

## Timor-Leste

In Timor-Leste, training programmes should prioritise the service and agriculture sectors to address critical skill gaps and promote sustainable economic growth.

In the service sector, English and Portuguese language skills are identified as the most significant gaps across all worker categories.

Manual workers need basic literacy, numeracy, and technical skills, while service workers require proficiency in customer service, administrative tasks, and financial management.

## Cross-country recommendations

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Promoting gender-inclusive digital education aligned with ASEAN's Digital Integration Framework is recommended in all three countries. This could ensure equitable access to education for marginalised girls.

Expanding private-sector and multi-stakeholder engagement can also further enhance TVET programmes. Strengthening partnerships with industries, non-governmental organisations and development agencies can help scale impact and foster regional cooperation.

Investments in digital teacher training and modernisation of curricula are needed to improve the quality of education in the countries reviewed. Building upon existing national initiatives, such as Cambodia's ICT-in-education strategies, can create scalable and sustainable teacher training programmes.

At a broader level, ASEAN-wide coordination can harmonise TVET initiatives and establish mutual recognition of qualifications across member countries. This approach would facilitate workforce mobility, increase employability, and strengthen regional economic integration.

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