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## Article

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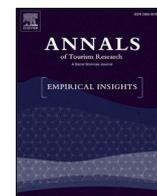
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## Tourism workers' resilience in Siem Reap during COVID-19

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### ABSTRACT

This article identifies factors influencing hotel and guesthouse workers' coping strategies during COVID-19 in Cambodia's premier tourist destination, Siem Reap. Drawing on qualitative data including 135 semi-structured interviews conducted between March 2022 and March 2023, we found that individual characteristics, dense community networks and government interventions did strengthen hotel and guesthouse workers' capacity to cope with the economic shock caused by the pandemic. Importantly, however, a series of deeper structural issues – most notably the structure of the labour market, the unevenness of social security coverage and pre-existing debt – greatly undermined their capacity to exercise resilience. As these findings suggest, it is necessary to look beyond individual traits and behaviours, and even community-level structures, if we are to truly understand community resilience.

### 1. Introduction

In January 2022, Angkor Wat's main entrance – which is normally bustling with international tourists – was deserted. The worst of the pandemic had passed, and Cambodia's borders were again open, but the country's most popular tourist destination felt like a ghost town. In the nearby town of Siem Reap, the famous Pub Street was empty and many souvenir shops, restaurants, hotels, and guesthouses were closed. The eerie silence made us wonder what had happened to the town's residents, whose livelihood depends so heavily on international tourists. It also raised questions about how they coped with the prolonged economic crisis stemming from COVID-19.

We know a great deal about the pandemic's impact on tourism businesses across Southeast Asia, a region that welcomed 133 million international visitors in 2019 (Asian Development Bank (ADB), 2022a). However, there is still much to be learned about how tourism workers responded to the decimation of the industry and the factors that supported – or discouraged – resilient behaviours. Individual factors and community-level characteristics has long been discussed in the tourism literature on community resilience. For example, Koliou et al. (2020) and Mulligan, Steele, Rickards, and Fünfgeld (2016) assessed individual members' capacities and infrastructure systems, their interdependencies, and community economic and social systems. However, there has been little consideration of how broader structural factors affect community resilience, although a few recent studies have

begun to take this approach. Widiastini, Rosa, Putera, Susilowati, and Wibowo (2021), for example, demonstrated how broader labour market characteristics within Bali's hotel industry in Bali influenced female hotel workers' resilience and Xie, Zhang, Chen, and Morrison (2023) found that hotel's crisis response strategies shaped employees' resilience in China.

This study expands on this body of work through a close study of the experiences of Siem Reap's hotel and guesthouse workers during the pandemic, with a focus on their working conditions pre-COVID-19, their relationship with employers, and other support systems available to them. The article begins with a discussion of the tourism resilience literature and a description of our research context and methods. We then summarise and analyse our findings on workers' socioeconomic well-being in the period between 2020 and 2022, describing their employment conditions, the external support available to them, and their coping mechanisms in the face of the pandemic-induced tourism crisis. Based on this analysis, we argue that while individual characteristics and dense community networks underpinned hotel and guesthouse workers' capacity to cope with the impact of the pandemic – and government interventions assisted some workers – deeper structural issues related to employment conditions, social security coverage and high levels of debt greatly undermined their capacity to exercise resilience.

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## 2. Conceptualising resilience in the tourism industry

A concept invoked across several academic disciplines, resilience is commonly understood as the ability to rebound from adverse events (Ledesma, 2014). In general, studies of resilience assess individuals' or communities' capacity and process of adapting to changes while also continuing to thrive in the face of adversity (Connor & Davidson, 2003; Masten & Obradovi, 2006; Stockholm Resilience Center, 2021; Ungar, Ghazinour, & Richter, 2013; Walker, Holling, Carpenter, & Kinzig, 2004).<sup>1</sup> Within tourism studies, scholars have focused mainly on highly vulnerable systems in fragile social or ecological settings (Coaffee & Wood, 2006; Larsen, Calgaro, & Thomalla, 2011), economic development (Lew, 2014), businesses practices (Adams, 2018; Dahles & Susilowati, 2015;), long-term climate change and environmental change (Dogru, Marchio, Bulut, & Suess, 2019; Lew & Cheer, 2017), and short-term disasters and hazards (Bec, McLennan, & Moyle, 2015). Another significant focus is on sustainability, community, policy, and planning (Hall, 2018; Moyle, Glen Croy, & Weiler, 2010) while, more recently, a small number of studies have explored tourism industry practitioners' adaptation strategies (Adams, Choe, Mostafanezhad, & Phi, 2021) and tourism workers' psychological responses (Luu, 2021) to COVID-19.

The growth of resilience studies in tourism led some researchers, such as Bec et al. (2015), to identify community resilience as a core concept in the study of tourism decline and rejuvenation. In the tourism literature, community resilience is understood as the ability of a group of people to manage within the constraints of available resources (Magis, 2010) and adapt or cope with external disturbances caused by social, political, economic, and environmental change (Adger, 2000; Lew, 2017). In other words, it concerns the ability of a community to harness available resources in order to adapt to change (Bec et al., 2015). Studies of COVID-19 have operationalised the concept of community resilience to understand the impact of the pandemic in popular tourist destinations around the world. For example, Prayitno, Hayat, Efendi, Auliah, and Ikbarr Farrah (2022) found a strong connection between the existing social capital and the resilience of Malang residents during the pandemic (see also Aldrich & Meyer, 2014). Gabriel-Campos, Werner-Masters, Cordova-Buiza, and Paucar-Caceres (2021), meanwhile, assessed and compared the preparedness of an eco-tourism community in Peru for two different kinds of crises, namely the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change, with a focus on individual characteristics such as self-organisation skills, topophilia, cultural identity and social humour.

While the concept of community resilience provides a useful tool when considering tourism workers' responses to COVID-19 (e.g. Adams et al., 2021), we argue that it is important to consider the limits of community-level analyses when it comes to the *structural dimensions* of resilience. In this article, we demonstrate the impact of different structural dimensions, in particular labour market structures and the selective availability of social security benefits, on hotel and guesthouse workers' coping strategies during the pandemic.

## 3. Context and method

Cambodia was relatively untouched by the spread of COVID-19 in 2020, in large part because the government implemented precautionary public health measures following the declaration of a global pandemic. The measures include the closure of schools, entertainment places and a mandatory off-site quarantine for those found to be infected with COVID-19, those who had direct contact with infected persons, and inbound travellers (Crisis24, 2020; Ford & Ward, 2021). Following a second spike in cases in early 2021, the government implemented

<sup>1</sup> Within the Cambodian context, studies of resilience have focused on the post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia, dealing with topics ranging from psychological trauma to social structures, environmental sustainability, and more urbanised settings (Greene, 2015; Lee, 2020; Marschke & Berkes, 2006).

additional public health and social restriction measures including stay-at-home orders with some exceptions (such as going to work, markets or hospitals), social distancing, and a ban on gatherings of more than 10 people. As a result, many families faced severe economic and emotional hardships as well as food insecurity (Johnson & Srey, 2021; Phorn, 2021).

Even more serious than the impact of public health measures was the impact of COVID-19 on Cambodia's internationalised economy. While agriculture remains important, Cambodia relies heavily on foreign income generated through its export-oriented garment sector, foreign investment in its construction sector and international tourism (International Trade Administration, 2019). All three sectors were heavily impacted by COVID-19. Some 400 of the country's 1100 garments, footwear, and travel goods factories suspended their operations during COVID-19 leaving 150,000 workers jobless (Khmer Times, 2020). Likewise, construction projects – especially those owned by foreign investors – slowed down or stopped completely leaving nearly 150,000 workers out of work (Hin, 2022; Macmillan, 2022). Approximately 3000 tourism-related businesses across the country ceased operations due to the pandemic resulting in some 51,000 jobs being lost (Ngin, 2021). During this initial period, hundreds of thousands more workers had their wages reduced. Workers in the hospitality and services sector were deeply affected, with income reductions up to 56.4% between January and April 2020, compared with losses of 36.8% for construction workers and 29.8% for garment workers (Angkor Research Cambodia, 2020).

## 4. Method

In order to understand the impact of the pandemic on Siem Reap's hotel and guesthouse workers and the factors that contributed to their ability to be resilient, we adopted a qualitative, interview-based approach to our research. We began by identifying a range of hotels targeting different market segments as well as a selection of smaller, less expensive guesthouses with between 4 and 10 rooms to rent. Having done so, we visited 22 hotels and 24 guesthouses that were open as of the beginning of January 2022 to assess the impact of the pandemic on these businesses. Between March 2022 to March 2023, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 135 key informants including 80 hotel workers and 33 guesthouse workers (both men and women aged between 20 and 55), as well as union leaders, businesses, representatives of non-governmental organisations, and government officials based in Siem Reap.

We recruited workers using a snowball sampling approach through our established contacts, including union officials, and recruited additional contacts from public venues where workers congregate. We spoke to front-of-house staff (guest relations, receptionists, bellboys, and staff in florists and spas), food and beverage workers (in hotel restaurants, cafes and bars, but also kitchen staff) and housekeeping staff (cleaners, maintenance workers and gardeners) (Table 1). The hotel and guesthouse workers we interviewed were employed in the same job categories

**Table 1**  
Summary of worker interviewees.

Hotels and Guesthouses	Category	No.	Workers						Total	
			Front of House		Food & Beverage		Housekeeping & Maintenance		M	F
			M	F	M	F	M	F		
5-star hotels	9	7	12	12	11	8	5	27	28	
4-star hotels	5	2	2	1	1	6	2	9	5	
3-star hotels	5	3	3	–	–	2	3	5	6	
Guesthouses	12	6	6	1	8	10	2	17	16	
Total	31	18	23	14	20	26	12	58	55	

as they had been before COVID-19.

We used open-ended questions designed to elicit information on workers' family background, their employment status, worker–management relations, as well as on the effects of COVID-19 on their employment and income, their coping strategies during the pandemic, and their access to external support. These interviews focused on understanding workers' experiences and coping strategies, and how their employers and other institutions and networks supported (or undermined) their capacity to be resilient. Our interviews with management focused on questions related to business operations pre-COVID-19, the effects of COVID-19 on their businesses and their employees, and their ability to support their employees during the pandemic. Interviews with union officials and staff from non-governmental organisations focused on the community networks available to hotel and guesthouse workers during COVID-19. We also interviewed government officials about the overall impacts of COVID-19 on the tourism sector in Siem Reap and on government interventions. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and 1.5 hours and were conducted in Khmer by the second author, who is a native Khmer speaker. Interview recordings were first transcribed in Khmer and then translated into English.

We analysed our interview data using the structured thematic coding method using the reflexive thematic analysis approach and systematic coding process proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019). We coded the data according to the study objectives and the overarching research questions, which concerned with the resilience behaviours of the targeted respondents, while ensuring flexibility so that no key information was excluded. We worked to ensure that our analysis reflected workers' own accounts of their attitudes, opinions, and experiences while also accounting for the influence of our own interpretation as the researchers. In order to achieve this, we engaged reflexively by taking notes and using our own judgments to make sense of individual respondents' situation. In addition, we analysed publicly available documentary sources and other datasets provided to us by our informants to verify and complement our findings. This mixed-methods approach allowed us to analyse the pandemic's effects more thoroughly than would otherwise be possible.

## 5. The impact of COVID-19 on hotel and guesthouse workers

Tourism supports one in ten jobs globally, providing an income source for millions in developing and developed economies. The tourism sector was among the sectors most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (UNWTO, 2023; Vincent, 2021).<sup>2</sup> The impact of the pandemic on tourism was nowhere more evident than in Cambodia, where it is one of three key pillars of the economy (Ford & Ward, 2021). Before COVID-19, the sector was growing, with annual average increases in the number of international tourist arrivals of 12% over the past decade (Strangio, 2021). Indeed, in 2019, tourism was the country's second-largest growth driver, contributing approximately 18.7% of real GDP (The Asia Foundation, 2021). At that time, Cambodia had 16,221 registered tourism establishments catering for 11.32 million domestic and 6,610,592 international tourists and providing approximately 630,000 tourism-related jobs (Asian Development Bank (ADB), 2022b; Ministry of

<sup>2</sup> Tourism had the highest unemployment rate of any major sector during the pandemic (Klein & Smith, 2021). For instance, India's tourism and hospitality industry experienced job losses of around 38 million – 70% of the sector's total workforce – due to the pandemic (Vasant and Ganatra, 2021). Sri Lanka was also devastated, with almost 450,000 tourism workers losing their jobs in 2020 alone (Hasna & Thavaprabha, 2021). Income from Indonesia's tourism sector fell from USD 65.4 billion in 2019 to only USD 32.2 billion in 2020 (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2022). In the same period, tourism revenue for the Philippines dropped from USD 45.3 billion to USD 17.6 billion and for Thailand from USD 90 to just USD 24 billion (Government of the Philippines, 2021; Thacharoen et al., 2022).

Tourism, 2020; The Asia Foundation, 2021).<sup>3</sup>

Approximately one-third of international tourists and many domestic tourists travel to Siem Reap, the country's premier tourist destination. In 2019, these tourists generated employment for 27,119 people in the province (Ministry of Tourism, 2019; Siem Reap Provincial Department of Tourism, 2022), of whom 54% were employed in hotels or guesthouses. Travel restrictions meant that the impact of the pandemic on the local economy was immediate. Of the 232 hotels registered with the Siem Reap Provincial Department of Tourism, 18 shut down permanently, and 168 suspended operations over the course of the pandemic. The impact was even greater on guesthouses: of a total of 261 registered guesthouses, 56 suspended operations and 129 shut down permanently. The suspension and/or shutdown of these businesses affected an estimated 11,514 hotel and guesthouse workers, many of whom were suspended or made redundant (Siem Reap Provincial Department of Tourism, 2022).

In most cases, hotels and guesthouses provided little or no support for affected workers. As a result, workers were forced to turn to other institutions, including the government, but also non-governmental organisations, unions and other community-based organisations. However, these were no more than stop-gap measures. Support from non-government sources was nominal and inconsistent, and the USD 40 per month in emergency cash assistance provided by the government did not even cover the basic needs of those who received it. To maintain any semblance of a livelihood, workers had to resort to other income generation opportunities, including jobs requiring hard physical labour, or migrate to other provinces and cities to find work. Many of those who had moved to Siem Reap for work opted to return to their hometowns or villages to save money on housing and/or to seek work in subsistence agriculture.

### 5.1. Income and security of employment

The COVID-19 pandemic deeply disrupted the lives of workers in the hotel and guesthouse sector. Those who remained employed during the pandemic experienced serious reductions in working hours and income. Hotel workers and some guesthouse workers also receive service charges and sometimes tips, and the loss of these additional income streams – on top of partial cuts or complete loss of their basic salary – constituted nothing short of financial disaster. There were, however, some important differences in its impact on income and employment security even among workers who did not immediately lose their jobs.

Differences in the level of support received by furloughed and terminated workers were largely determined by the type and size of the businesses they worked for. Among the nine five-star hotels in our sample, the three unionised hotels and three others offered some compensation to the 30–80% of their workforce they retrenched. According to a hotel union leader, compensation provided to retrenched workers amounted to between USD 1000 and USD 3000, depending on the employee's length of employment and position (Interview, September 2022). It was this same small group of large hotels that provided additional support for workers, for example, occasional additional cash payments or food packages. The workers at the remaining three five-star hotels, five three-star hotels and twelve guesthouses reported that their employers laid off workers without compensation or suspended them indefinitely without any support. Just three (unionised) five-star hotels, one four-star hotel and one guesthouse paid partial salaries to workers who remained on their books but were suspended. Suspended workers at those five businesses had their basic salaries reduced by between 50 and 80%.

<sup>3</sup> China was the largest source of international tourists, accounting for 36% of all international visitors in 2019. In order of importance, other key source countries were Vietnam, South Korea, Thailand, Japan, Australia, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America.

Even workers who continued to receive some kind of payment experienced moderate to severe food insecurity. The pre-pandemic average monthly salary for workers we interviewed was USD 178 in hotels and USD 166 in guesthouses. As [Ngin \(2021\)](#) has reported, workers spend USD 69 per month on average for food alone. During the pandemic, many were left with no money to cover other basic household utilities, including water, electricity, fuel, and medicines, but also rent if they did not own their own home. Workers' economic situation was exacerbated by the need to service pre-existing debt. Some 46% of hotel workers and 52% of guesthouse workers reported that they had borrowed from private banks, microfinance, and other private sources for purposes such as building a house, buying land, buying a motorbike or a car, and for household expenses. They factored in service charges and tips when determining how much they could afford, taking on monthly repayments of between USD 50 and USD 400. A significant proportion had to borrow more money during COVID-19 to buy food and other necessities. Another impetus to increase borrowing during the pandemic for many was that family members also worked in the tourist sector. Among our interviewees, 66% of hotel workers and 70% of guesthouse workers had parents, spouses, children, or siblings who had also lost their jobs. Many of these households lost all their income, placing them in economic precarity and subjecting them to social and emotional hardship.

## 5.2. Support from other sources

The main form of government support available to hotel and guesthouse workers was the USD 40 emergency cash payment provided to selected tourism workers from June 2020 to February 2023 ([Chea, 2023](#); [Romdoul & Lay, 2020](#)). While all the workers we interviewed were in theory eligible for this payment, only 86% of the hotel workers and 33% of the guesthouse workers we spoke to had received support through this scheme. This was the case because the emergency cash assistance during COVID-19 was strongly linked to the National Social Security Fund. Only registered tourism businesses in the eligible category – hotels, guesthouses, restaurants, and travel agents – that had contributed to the National Social Security Fund before COVID-19 were eligible to apply for cash assistance for their employees. These pre-conditions left many tourism businesses ineligible to apply for support through the scheme.

A large proportion of beneficiaries of the scheme were among the 32% of interviewees who worked in a unionised hotel ([Fig. 1](#)). Those who received cash payments were grateful for the support. Even though it was a small amount, it helped them keep food on the table or pay basic household expenses like utility bills. As one worker commented, 'It was very meaningful to us when we were in a difficult situation. It's like money falling from the sky. It's not much, but it helped fill the gaps in our daily needs during COVID-19.'

Another source of support in unionised hotels was the hotel union itself.<sup>4</sup> Cambodia has 4722 local unions, 189 union federations, and 29 confederations. This constitutes a large number of unions for a relatively small country with a large informal sector ([Long, 2019](#)). However, there are just two union federations in the tourism sector. The Cambodia Tourism Service Workers' Federation brings together 11 unions, six of which are in Siem Reap (Interview with CTSWF President, March 2022). Of those six, only three are based in hotels or guesthouses, all three are in large, five-star hotels. The Cambodian Tourism Workers' Union Federation has nine affiliates, including one hotel union, based at Sofitel Phnom Penh Phokeethra. Previously it also had one hotel affiliate in Siem Reap, based at Le Meridien Angkor, which closed permanently in 2020 (Interview with CTWUF President, March 2022).

In addition to negotiating with management for workers to receive

<sup>4</sup> For an in-depth discussion of conditions in the unionised hotels before and during the pandemic, and the attempts by union officials to mitigate the pandemic's impact on their members, see [Ford and Im \(2023\)](#).

partial salaries, the three hotel unions did their best to find other ways to support members. The union at Raffles Grand Hotel d'Angkor asked management to continue to pay holiday and annual bonuses and to provide food assistance to the workers facing severe economic hardship (Interview with Raffles Union President, April 2022). The union at the Sofitel Angkor Phokeethra Golf & Spa Resort used internal resources to help workers who contracted COVID-19, giving them USD 25 each and food donations (Interview with Sofitel Union President, September 2022). The union at Park Hyatt Siem Reap also used its savings to buy food for their members who faced food insecurity (Interview with Park Hyatt Union President, April 2022).

The 68% of interviewees employed in non-unionised enterprises relied almost exclusively on family members, relatives, non-governmental organisations and community-based organisations for support. Around 60% of hotel workers and 73% of guesthouse workers reported that they relied on these sources of support during the pandemic. Eleven of the 33 guesthouse workers we interviewed had received some support from a local non-governmental organisation, while only 9% of hotel workers had received such assistance. Most of the local non-governmental organisations providing this support had not previously worked closely with tourism workers; their focus had been on vulnerable groups including women and children. One Family at a Time, for instance, redirected their food packages to terminated hotel workers. It also provided free mental health support services and disseminated important information and updates to workers in need (Interview with Country Manager, April 2022). The Shinta Mani Foundation, which had been working closely with a broader underprivileged community in Siem Reap, also extended its support to affected hotel and guesthouse workers – some of whom had been employed at the Shinta Mani hotel. In addition to providing food assistance, the Foundation extended a small free-interest loan program to hotel and guesthouse workers during COVID-19. As of 2022, around 50 to 60 workers had borrowed money for agricultural or business investments of between USD 500 – USD 5000 (Interview with Shinta Mani Assistant Director, May 2022).

## 6. Workers' coping strategies

Siem Reap's hotel and guesthouse workers employed a wide range of coping strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic. Economic strategies – key among them, additional income generation, cutting expenses, borrowing or drawing on assets or savings – were of course key to their physical survival. However, workers also used social and psychological strategies, including keeping busy, making time for leisure activities and to enjoy their surroundings, spending time with family and friends – and, in some cases, turning to religion – to shore up their capacity to endure the crisis. As the discussion in [Sections 5.1 and 5.2](#) reveals, all three kinds of strategies contributed to a greater or lesser extent to hotel and guesthouse workers' ability to adapt (or not) to the 'new normal'.

### 6.1. Keeping food on the table

Facing a total or partial loss of income, a small proportion of the workers we interviewed had other financial resources to draw on, with just 30% of hotel workers and 15% of guesthouse workers in possession of savings to draw on, or assets like jewellery, a motorbike or car, or livestock or sell in order to cope with their financial struggles ([Fig. 2](#)). Echoing a common theme in the interviews, one hotel worker told us, 'We used up all of our savings during COVID-19. We also had to sell all my jewellery.'

The majority of the workers we spoke to – 73% of hotel workers and 61% of guesthouse workers – had found other sources of employment during the pandemic. In some cases, they managed to leverage skills they had developed in the tourism sector. For example, one worker found a job doing lighting for special events. Another, an electrician, did work for general members of the community. In most cases, however, hotel and guesthouse workers were forced to do work like construction,



Fig. 1. Sources of support for workers interviewed.

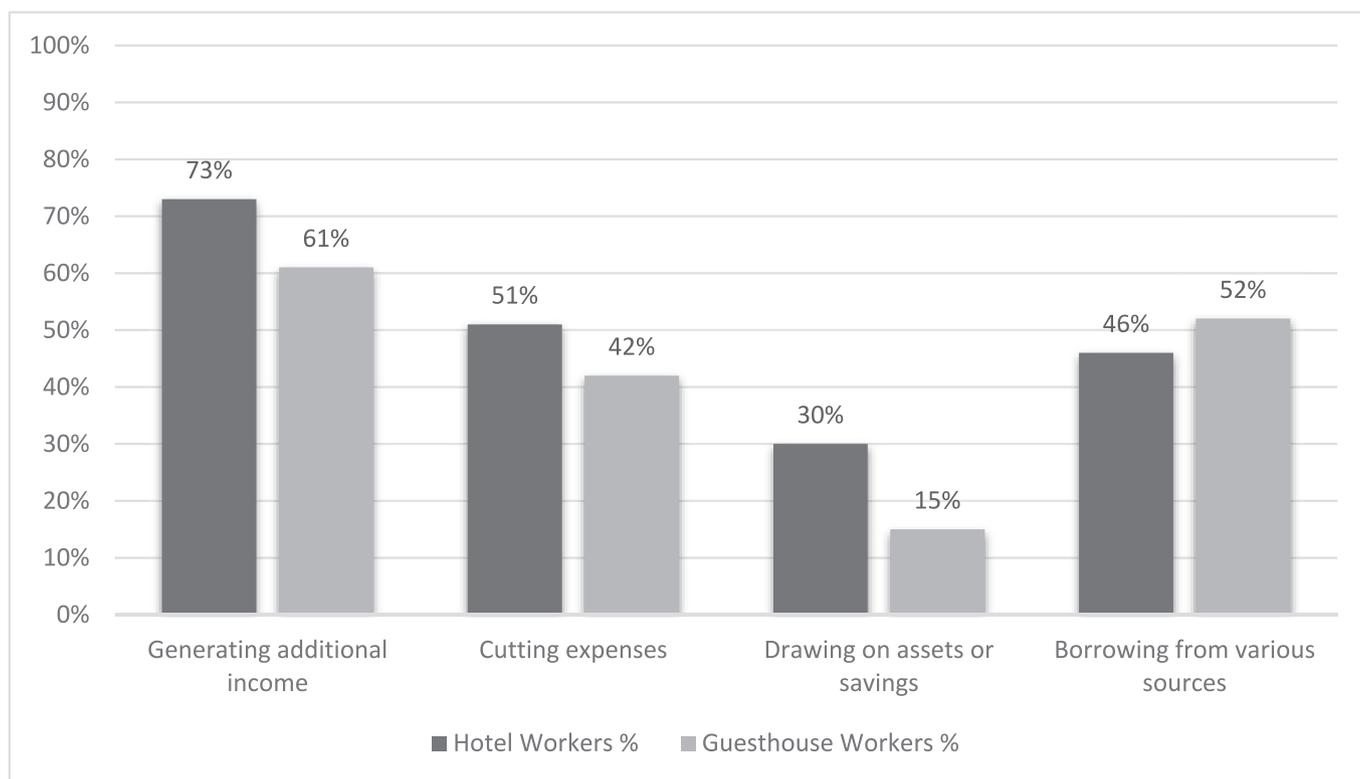


Fig. 2. Workers' financial coping strategies.

blacksmithing, painting, food delivery or craftwork, for example, making rattan baskets; work that gave them no opportunity to use the skills they had developed in their time in the tourism sector. Not only were these jobs poorly paid – some paid as little as USD 2.5 per day – but many of them were physically challenging. For example, one worker who found a construction job had to leave it because he could not cope with the harsh conditions.

Many of the jobs they found were also unstable, as the experience of one guesthouse worker illustrates:

After staying home for a while, I asked my neighbours and friends if they had any cleaning jobs I could do. I cleaned a French woman's house. She paid me a monthly wage. But the job only lasted a few months because she moved out of Siem Reap. Then, I went to help my relatives sell noodle soup on the street, but their business was impacted by the road construction, and they had to shut it down.

Yet while many workers found other ways to generate an income, several workers saw no point in trying. For example, one worker told us

that they did not start a side business because their house is not on the side of the road so they 'couldn't sell anything'. Another said, 'I am illiterate, so I face a lot of challenges. I am 43 so I'm also too old to find a new job or start a business.'

Some workers set up their own micro-businesses, mostly in street vending or driving tuk-tuks. Others were more adventurous. One set up a car and motorbike wash, another sold second-hand clothes. A third set herself up for business as a wedding decorator, while a fourth started an online store selling plants. One enterprising woman found a way to leverage their understanding of the tourism industry to keep afloat financially:

I have friends with creative and entrepreneurial minds. Together, we started a travel agent business in collaboration with resorts in various provinces, like bungalow resorts. We made arrangements for local people who wanted a family weekend getaway and charged a commission fee. I'm also a freelance properties salesperson but that's more like my side hustle.

Another worker leveraged the skills she acquired to set up a food stall business and provide catering services to generate income to support her household:

I rented a stall to grill chickens for sale at the market. I also worked with a caterer. There's an old saying, 'It's better to master one thing than to be a jack of all trades.' I don't agree. If I didn't have all these skills, I wouldn't have been able to keep my family afloat during COVID-19.

Some of these pop-up businesses more than filled the financial gap. However, for most furloughed workers, part-time jobs or side businesses did not ensure their household's survival.

Hotel and guesthouse workers who owned land also turned to subsistence agriculture. Some 46% of hotel workers and 55% of guesthouse workers told us they had grown rice, vegetables, and fruit, and raised livestock like chickens, ducks, cows, and pigs so that they could avoid spending their reduced earnings on food. As one hotel worker reported, 'Producing our own food has helped us stay afloat during COVID.' For some, agricultural pursuits even generated some income, but this was not always the case. One hotel worker told us that he had borrowed a substantial amount of money from a non-governmental organisation to invest in a chicken farm, but that many of the chickens had died, leaving him with no income but loan repayments to make. Some workers without land foraged food around their community, for instance, picking vegetables growing on common land or fishing in nearby lakes. Another hotel worker reported that she hunted for birds, frogs, and snakes to sell: 'People buy frogs from the rice fields for \$3.50 a kilogram. Some days I get lucky, and the customs officer buys them for \$12.50 a kilogram!'

With few prospects in Siem Reap, some workers made the decision to migrate to other provinces or cities in search of work. In some cases, this strategy provided a way to pay the bills. One hotel worker reported:

After I got suspended, I had no choice but to go to my hometown to work in construction and on farms. With my physical labouring job, I only made between \$7.50 and \$8.25 a day. I also worked on the farm, harvesting sweet potatoes, planting rice, and picking mangoes.

But opportunities to move for work were not equally available. Women, especially, were less likely to be able to move because of family responsibilities. As one guesthouse worker said wryly, 'I have two young children to take care of. I can't move anywhere to find a new job.' Women with no care obligations, family and community perceptions of what work is appropriate for women often also had limited mobility. As one hotel worker reported:

After I got suspended from Shinta Mani, I wanted to go to Siha-noukville to look for a new job. But my mother did not let me go. I

told her, how can I afford to pay my rent? But she said that I'm a woman, and it's too risky to go far away from home.

Whether or not they were successful in generating an alternative income stream, the vast majority of our worker interviewees struggled economically. Among our interviewees, 51% of hotel workers and 42% of guesthouse workers said that they had to make deep cuts in household expenses – for example, reducing food consumption and their use of utilities, and not buying clothes, even taking their children out of school – in order to stay afloat during the pandemic. Some negotiated reductions in rent from their landlords, while others borrowed money from their relatives. Many reported reducing the frequency and quality of meals. For many of the better-paid hotel workers, these austerity measures came as a real shock. As one told us, 'I used to take my family out for dinner quite often, but not anymore. Instead of spending 5 to 6 dollars on a meal, I use it to feed the whole family for a whole day.'

As revealed by these findings, the crisis in the tourism sector forced many workers to employ various forms of coping strategies to keep food on the table. Survival was their main priority, as shown by their willingness to risk their safety collecting food or take on hard, physical work on farms or construction sites – work they were ill-prepared for by their employment in hotels and guesthouses. Importantly, also, the experience of the pandemic shook workers' faith in the industry. One hotel worker told us:

Before COVID-19, I never thought of switching careers. But with COVID-19, I'm considering learning another skill outside of the tourism sector as a backup. I certainly don't want to find myself in this kind of situation again.

Another said that she was upset because she studied hard to earn a degree and got a good job with decent pay and did not expect to ever find herself in a situation where she could not pay her bills.

## 6.2. Maintaining morale

All of the workers we spoke to struggled to cope with the mental pressure of losing all financial security. Echoing a common sentiment, one hotel worker told us, 'It was a stressful time for me. Sometimes, I felt depressed and didn't know how to keep going with this difficult situation.' Not surprisingly, some workers reported losing hope. As one guesthouse worker told us, 'I'd never been jobless before. I was depressed at first when I got suspended without any salary. I had two children to care for, and my husband didn't have a job.'

Personal debt was a key source of financial and mental pressure during the pandemic. As one hotel worker told us, 'It's been very difficult for us to accept the situation because we lost most of our income and are in debt. Since COVID-19, I've borrowed money from my relatives to pay back our loan and buy food for our family, which made me very stressed.' Another reported:

During COVID-19, my husband lost his job, and my salary was reduced by 50%. I only got paid around 140 dollars per month. I was heavily affected because I had two loans, one that I took out to buy some land and one with a private bank. I sold my land to get money to pay back our main loan. If I didn't have that option, I don't know where I would be or what I would do now. I still had to make repayments on the private loan, which were originally set at more than 200 dollars a month. I asked the bank if I could make interest-only payments, but they rejected my request. I ended up paying 100 dollars a month, but even this meant that I had to ask for help from my mother and sister to cover our other costs.

The situation tended to be worse for guesthouse workers, who tended to have fewer assets and less well-resourced social networks. In one case, a guesthouse worker with a large bank loan had to sell her house and land to service her debt. Forced to live on a neighbour's property, she

had little hope for her future.

For many workers, the stress of the situation led to conflict within the household. Four of our interviewees reported that their financial struggles during COVID-19 led to conflict so serious that it resulted in divorce. But most of our interviewees were psychologically very resilient. A significant number adapted by filling their spare time with purposeful activity. Workers who juggled multiple part-time jobs to generate additional income to support themselves and their families reported that these activities kept them going. Several reported that survival was their number one priority, and they were so busy that they had no time to think. In the words of one guesthouse worker, 'I didn't think about anything. I only focused on working and how to make money to buy food to feed my children and family.' Echoing this sentiment, another said, 'I had no time to stress. My coping strategy was doing whatever I could to make an income.'

While these interviewees drowned their worries in work, others took steps to manage their mental health while at work. As one hotel worker reported:

I was not well emotionally because I was overworked and had no time for leisure. I had to do everything I could to make an income. But sometimes, when I delivered fruit or clothes to customers, I stopped somewhere beautiful to take pictures to relieve my stress.

Others still kept busy at home with household chores or gardening, or physical exercise. These activities also made them feel productive, as well as helping them avoid ruminating on their financial situation releasing their stress and anxiety. A lack of structured activity also gave some workers an opportunity to be creative. For example, one hotel worker began making YouTube videos showing how to recycle unused materials to make flowerpots.

Our interviewees also made time for leisure activities, and especially for spending time with family and friends when regulations permitted. In fact, many of our interviewees reported that the pandemic had a silver lining for them, namely that they had more time to spend with their families. Before the pandemic, long days of 8–10 h, six days each week – and considerably more during peak season – meant that they rarely had time to spend with their families. Many younger workers also engaged in outdoor or entertainment activities, such as sightseeing, camping, or singing Karaoke to help take their mind off their financial worries. These activities, which overwhelmingly involved others, also helped strengthen their emotional well-being.

Friends and family were also an important source of support, both financial and moral, for most of the workers we spoke to. As one hotel worker observed 'We're struggling, but our family is still together, and we provide emotional support for one another. My wife told me we must be strong and resilient.' However, relationships were not always easy. Another hotel worker said, 'I was fortunate to have good and supportive friends around. So, when I'm stressed, I can always talk to them. My family was also struggling, so I couldn't really share my hardships with them to make them worry more about me.' Others still felt they had no support. As one worker told us, 'No-one helped me. I feel people became more selfish during COVID.'

Many workers also found comfort in the thought that the pandemic would pass. The theme of living one day at a time emerged repeatedly. For example, one hotel worker reported, 'I kept reminding myself that this situation won't last forever. Tourists will come back, and we can make income like we used to. What we can do now is live one day at a time.' Another said, 'Sometimes, I felt depressed and didn't know how to keep going. I reminded myself to just think one day at a time.' Workers also often recalled that they were not the only ones affected, and that their situation could be worse. One guesthouse worker told us, 'I kept reminding myself to be tougher and stronger. I am happy that I could still manage it despite all the hardships. At least I didn't have loans with the bank.'

Others looked to Cambodia's violent past for a source of perspective.

A hotel worker reported being very depressed and stressed. She found solace at work talking to her colleagues: 'When I went to work, I felt better as I get talk about my challenges. We motivated ourselves by remembering that our older generations survived the Pol Pot regime. In comparison, this is nothing. We could overcome it.' Others still felt that they had learned something from the pandemic. According to one hotel worker, 'Sometimes, I barely made it to the end of the month, but poverty taught me to be strong, resilient, and more creative.' A number of older workers reported that listening to or reading Buddhist Dharma and doing meditation made them feel calmer about the pandemic. As one guesthouse worker reflected:

I often reminded myself that COVID has affected everyone world-wide. Even if I'm stressed or worried, it won't change anything. And if I'm too stressed, I may lose the courage to live and become sick. So, it's not worth it. I read Dharma books in my free time or surf my Facebook news feed to distract myself. I went to the pagoda a few times to give some money to the elderly. It made me feel better when I practise good deeds.

Buddhist teachings on the need for self-reliance also influenced several less overtly religious informants, including many younger hotel and guesthouse workers. As one commented, 'I never expected to receive assistance. We have to rely on ourselves. We wouldn't have survived if we had expected someone to help us.' This worker assured us that she had not put her head in the sand. But, as she went on to say, 'I could only think about COVID so much.'

## 7. Implications for understandings of resilience

As our research reveals, there are significant differences between long-term and short-term resilience strategies in the tourism sector. Short-term strategies have featured strongly within studies on community resilience during the pandemic but, as emphasised by [Bec et al. \(2015\)](#), it is important to also examine the longer-term individual and structural dimensions that shape community resilience. In this respect, our analysis of the factors that influenced hotel and guesthouse workers' capacity to engage in resilient behaviours in the face of COVID-19 provides several insights. Key among these insights is that – while individual and social factors are of course important – structural factors really matter in determining the level of resilience exhibited by individuals and by communities in the face of exogenous shock.

First, our study attests to the salience of *community-level* concepts of resilience. Community resources, for example, food and cash donations, small loans, or rent reductions, were in many cases the only support available to furloughed or terminated workers. They were especially important for guesthouse workers, given the minimal external support that was available to them from the government or their employers in their time of need. However, as [Matarrita-Cascante and Trejos \(2013\)](#) have noted, community resilience depends not only on the relationships between community members, but also on individuals' access to capital and other resources. In Siem Reap, hotel and guesthouse workers' access to such resources was determined by their type of employer, their relationships with other members in the community, and on their own family's economic background.

Second, it contributes to understanding of the *individual dimensions* that shape community resilience. Prior to the pandemic, most tourism research on adaptation strategies tends to centre around climate change and business and consumer adaptation ([Njoroge, 2015](#)). Since then, a growing number of tourism studies have been published on community members' resilience practices and adaptation ([Ferguson et al., 2022](#); [Gascón & Mamani, 2022](#); [Movono & Scheyvens, 2022](#); [Noorashid & Chin, 2021](#); [Sharma, Thomas, & Paul, 2021](#);). For example, [Noorashid and Chin \(2021\)](#)'s study revealed that tourism establishments in Brunei helped community members to generate income from selling foods and crafts locally during the height of the pandemic. [Movono and Scheyvens](#)

(2022) showed that the tourism community in the South Pacific countries was also resilient and adaptable, resorting to traditional farming practices such as subsistence agriculture, fishing and food sharing to deal with the associated economic shock. Gascón and Mamani (2022), too, found that subsistence agriculture and pluriactivity were the source of resilience for the tourism community in Peru.

The individual resilience practices adopted by members of these tourism communities in Brunei, the South Pacific and Peru to maintain resilience during the pandemic were very similar to those we found in Siem Reap. In the face of severe and sudden economic hardship, the workers we interviewed all revisited their spending patterns, identifying areas where they could tighten their belts. Most managed to identify alternative income-earning strategies – and in some cases, subsistence agriculture – to provide for their families' basic needs. Beyond these obvious measures, they demonstrated different capacities to adapt. Those who had assets and savings leveraged them to cover loan repayments or day-to-day expenses. Some demonstrated high levels of initiative and entrepreneurship, though others did not.

It was abundantly clear that individual workers' level of resilience was predicated on the broader pool of resources at their disposal – financial, social and human capital – not simply on their individual level of resourcefulness and initiative. Resourcefulness and initiative were nevertheless also important. Our data provides insight into *psychological patterns and behaviours* of workers which also influenced by *social context* (Kılınc & Sis Çelik, 2021). Many of our interviewees sought to maintain a healthy body and clear mind. By keeping busy – even doing household chores, gardening, or exercising – they managed to remain relatively optimistic. In addition, the capacity to reflect on their own lives and struggles provided many of our interviewees with a way to reframe their situation and strengthen their sense of resilience. Kinship and social capital were also a key part of the puzzle. Emotional comfort through the companionship and support of family and friends also made an important contribution to our interviewees' psychological strength in dealing with adversity. Among our interviewees, the least psychologically resilient were those most isolated during the pandemic.

At a deeper level, however, our findings underscore the impact of deficits in Cambodia's underlying *social welfare* and *labour market* structures on the level of disruption experienced by hotel and guesthouse workers during the pandemic and their ability to cope with it. Although relatively short-term, the COVID-19 pandemic brought Siem Reap's tourism industry to a halt for a period of years, not weeks or months. As Cambodia has no broad social safety net, no unemployment benefits were available to support terminated or furloughed tourism workers during this period. The only scheme already in place was the National Social Security Fund, which provided health insurance for furloughed workers, and whose provident fund comprised a key component of the compensation packages available to terminated workers. As noted earlier, the government extended the emergency cash assistance program it had created for garment workers to some categories of tourism workers in designated locations. This program theoretically covered all hotel and guesthouse workers in Siem Reap. In practice, however, access was patchy, with most hotel workers but only a few guesthouse workers receiving support. The failure of the scheme to provide more even support reflects the broader structure of Cambodia's social welfare program.

In terms of the structure of the labour market, our study contributes two key insights. The first – that most affected hotel and guesthouse workers tried to generate additional income in the informal sector, either as employees or as entrepreneurs – is unsurprising, since Cambodia's labour market remains largely informal and unregulated. This 'natural' choice had implications for their earning potential, as few could even begin to match their pre-pandemic income, and thus maintain even a semblance of their normal standard of living. Second, not all formal-sector employment is equal, and this matters for workers' capacity to be resilient. Before the pandemic, hotel workers generally had access to better working conditions, including a clear employment

structure, higher basic wages and more additional financial benefits and in some cases, the support of a union. As such, they tended to have a stronger likelihood of establishing a resource base that enabled them to better cope with exogenous shocks. In addition, hotel workers were more likely to be able to access support during the pandemic. Though only a handful of hotels, all but one of them unionised, continued to pay furloughed workers at reduced rates. As a category, however, hotels were much more likely than guesthouses to have signed their employees up to the National Social Security Fund, and therefore be in a position to help them access the government's emergency cash assistance program.

## 8. Conclusion

Around the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has served as a stress test for the tourism sector's preparedness in the face of externally driven crises. This study sheds light not only on its implications for Cambodian hotel and guesthouse workers' income and security of employment, and their economic responses, but also on their social and psychological coping strategies in the face of the pandemic. In Siem Reap, community resources were a key determinant of community-level resilience in the face of the pandemic, as were hotel and guesthouse workers' individual resources and traits. These findings resonate with Adams et al. (2021)'s findings on Indonesia's Toraja region and Movono, Scheyvens, and Auckram (2022)'s findings on the South Pacific. At a deeper level, however, our findings underscore the fact that – in true crisis situations – neither community support nor individuals' economic, social or psychological resources are enough to mitigate the impacts of structural factors related to conditions of employment or the availability of social security.

As we have argued here, tourism workers' resilience cannot be fully understood without understanding the broader structural context from within which they responded to COVID-19. Though our findings confirm the importance of community-level networks in determining individuals' levels of resilience we must also factor into consideration the structure of the labour market, the level of oversight the government provides for the private sector, and the state's capacity and willingness to provide a social safety net when assessing worker resilience. The experience of Siem Reap's hotel and guesthouse workers during the pandemic was to a large extent defined by the state's emergency response preparedness but also the arrangements in place during 'normal' times to support vulnerable groups of workers through the social security system. It is also clear that the overall structure of the labour market and conditions of employment greatly shaped workers' socioeconomic well-being and resilience during this period of crisis.

While these findings cannot be extrapolated to other geographical, social and political contexts, the analysis presented in this study offers two key insights for future research on the capacity of the tourism sector to survive severe exogenous shocks. First, it suggests that further studies of emerging economies, which provide an opportunity to interrogate the meaning of community resilience more deeply, would enrich understandings of resilience in the tourism sector. Second, and even more importantly, it underscores the necessity of looking beyond individual traits and behaviours – and even community-level structures – if we are to truly understand community resilience. In short, it is necessary to consider underlying structural factors at the national level, and not just within the tourism industry itself, in our analysis of resilience.

## Research statement

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## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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