

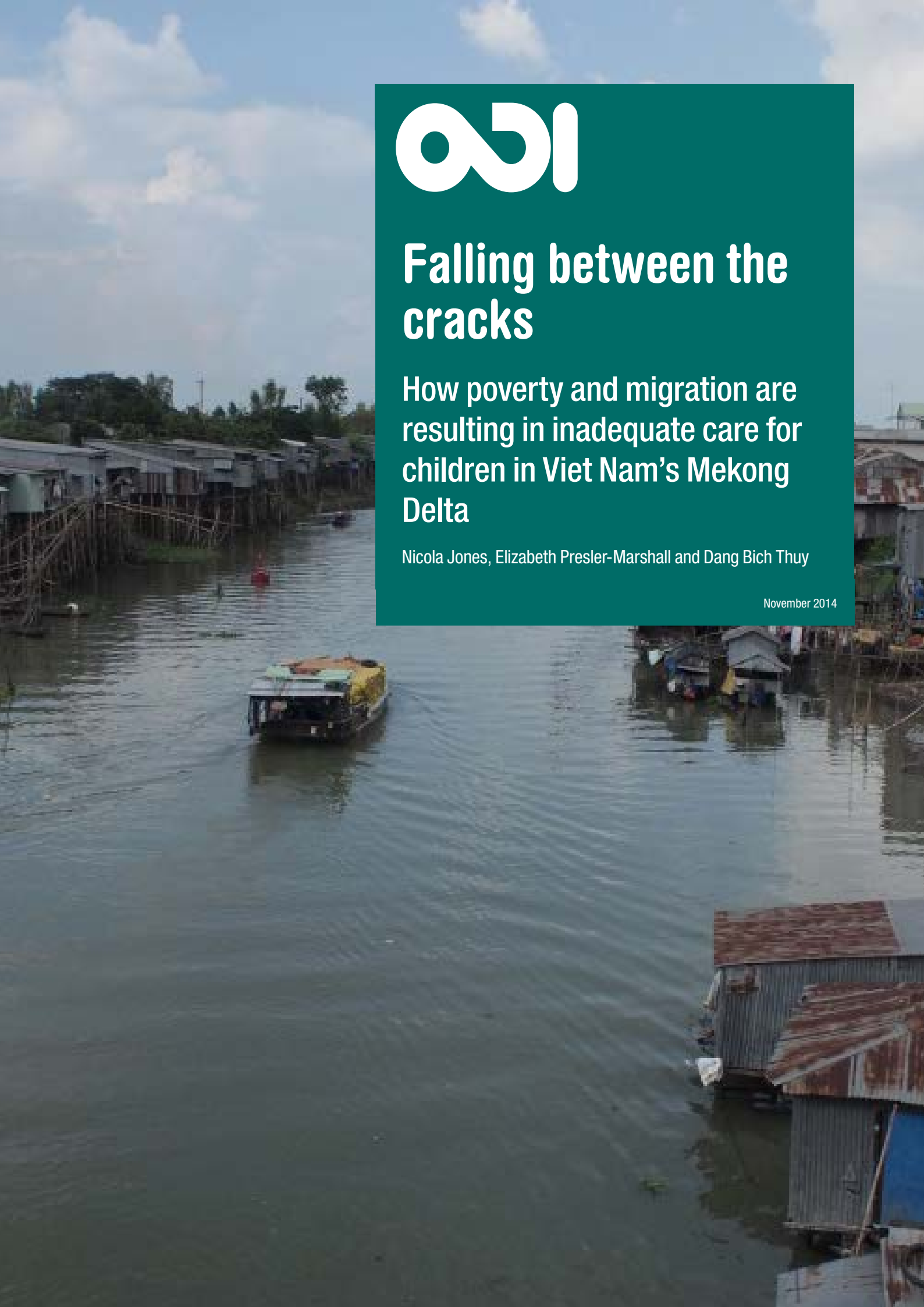


Falling between the cracks

How poverty and migration are resulting in inadequate care for children in Viet Nam's Mekong Delta

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Overview

While internal, rural-to-urban migration is responsible for much of Viet Nam's recent economic growth, there has been little attention directed at the ways in which migration is intersecting with poverty to leave some children particularly vulnerable to exploitation and inadequate care. Indeed, a complex household registration system, which serves to limit both legal migration and access to social services, means that many young migrants migrate illegally—and thus invisibly—and the children of migrants, whether they migrate with their parents or are left-behind in the care of rural relatives, have difficulty accessing needed educational and health services. Given the diversity of children's migration experiences, the frequency with which they migrate and the reality that poverty exacerbates risk, a wider lens is required in order to better understand – and design policy and programming to address – the patterning of care and protection vulnerabilities that face children situated at the nexus of economic disadvantage and migration.

Investigating the relationships between poverty, migration and child well-being, this briefing synthesises findings from one of three country case studies undertaken as part of a 2-year Oak Foundation-funded programme of work which explored the potential for greater linkages between child protection and anti-poverty work in low and middle income countries. The research draws on qualitative and participatory research methodologies to ascertain the drivers of migration, assess the key threats facing migrant and left-behind children and explore the programming options that communities believe would better protect their children.

Vietnamese context

The World Bank (2013) notes that 'Vietnam is a development success story' – moving from being one of the world's poorest countries in the mid-1980s to middle-income status in 2010. Gross domestic product (GDP) growth has been over 5% a year since 2000, and nearly half of the country's population has escaped poverty in less than two decades. Viet Nam has also made tremendous progress towards increasing education and reducing child labour. Net enrolment rates for primary school are over 95% and for upper-secondary school are approaching 60%; children's involvement in economic activity has dropped accordingly, from nearly 50% in the early 1990s to about 10% in recent years. However, despite this laudable progress, significant lacunae remain, particularly for ethnic minority and rural families, whose incomes often remain just above the poverty line, leaving them vulnerable to systemic and idiosyncratic shocks that force them to pull their children out of school and push them into the labour market.

While increased migration has been linked, largely through the impacts of remittances on poverty, to a variety of positive outcomes for children, it is also clear that, in some contexts, migration may aggravate children's

vulnerability. In Viet Nam there are concerns that it precludes education for children migrating with their parents and traps independently migrating children in poorly paid and often dangerous jobs. It also risks leaving them living in sub-standard housing with inadequate physical and emotional care. Furthermore, despite their ever-growing numbers, left-behind Vietnamese children have been almost totally excluded from discussions about migration and child protection.

Study Sample and Methodology

Our research was conducted in An Giang province, which is in the Mekong Delta of southern Viet Nam. An Giang, while having an income poverty rate a full one-third lower than the national average (9.2% versus 14.2% in 2010), has a high rate of multidimensional poverty, in large part due to a history of land concentration and landlessness, and the highest rate of primary school non-completion in the country. Within An Giang, we chose Da Phuoc and Vinh Nguon communes to situate our research. Located on a river on the Cambodian border, these communities have seen recent improvements in infrastructure and advances in agriculture that have lessened flooding and doubled harvests—but also face reduced opportunities for local work, causing rates of out-migration to sky-rocket.

We employed a multi-layered, participatory and qualitative research approach. Focus group discussions, conducted with groups of adolescents and adults, allowed us to explore general, community-level views about the drivers of migration, the threats facing young migrants and left-behind children, and the local impacts which migration is engendering. In-depth interviews with former child migrants, as well as the parents of currently migrating children and the carers of left-behind children, allowed for an in-depth look at the ways in which poverty and migration are working in tandem to increase children's vulnerability. Key informant interviews at both community and provincial levels allowed us to examine the scope and impact of existent policy and programming.

A variety of participatory techniques, including rankings, timelines, and community drawings, were used to stimulate conversation regarding the vulnerabilities that push, and the opportunities that pull, children—and parents—into migration, as well as to solicit ideas about what might be done in order to better ensure children's well-being.

Two caveats are required. First, it is important to note that because our research was undertaken in rural, origin communities—and was aimed at identifying the needs of the most vulnerable, our respondents' stories are not necessarily representative. More successful migrants come "home" only once a year, meaning we only heard their stories second-hand. Second, we also deliberately included children with complex protection needs, such as those who had been trafficked or were living on the streets, in order to better understand the intersecting vulnerabilities facing children

who are juggling the pressures of poverty and migration on their own--without the safety-net of stable home lives.

Economics: The heart of the matter

While some of the non-migrant adolescents, as well as their parents, were able to envision a plethora of reasons that people might migrate to an urban metropolis, ranging from the excitement of new opportunities to better access to consumer goods, key informants and migrant families were very clear that there was only one pertinent reason that either adolescents or the parents of young children migrated: to find a job. Employment in Da Phuoc and Vinh Nguon is, according to our respondents, both hard to come by and poorly paid. Agricultural day labour and fishing, both key livelihoods in the past, now rarely provide an adequate income—the former due to the recent mechanisation of farming, which has side-lined the land-constrained, and the latter to over-fishing.

My daughter migrated when she was 13 years old. We were so poor. (Mother)

Their families are poor, staying at home, they can't save any money. Migrating there, they can make money and send home. (Out-of-school adolescent)

There are also people who are in debt so both husband, wife and children migrated to work. (Adult woman)

Poor families who don't have land or cultivation land. (Community leader Da Phuoc)

In the case of seasonal migration, poor households go – children often with their parents. (Provincial-level KI P)

With wages low and work irregular (often only one day in three), families reported that children's wages could be crucial to income smoothing. This was particularly the case for large families with high debt loads due to either illness or bad agricultural loans, many of whom relied on their adolescent children's income –earned either locally or through migratory work—for daily living, dedicating adult wages solely to repayment. Debts, and the shame associated with them, also forced many parents to leave their children with their grandparents and seek urban work themselves.

A sense of relative poverty is also crucial to understanding adolescent migration. As poverty rates in the commune continue to drop, albeit in large part due to politically defined targets, families whose lives are not improving in-line with those of their neighbours feel poorer and are thus more willing to send their children away for work.

Education: complex links with migration

In most developing countries education is a key driver of migration, with adolescents moving independently, primarily in search of secondary education not available in their rural homes, and whole families relocating for higher quality schools. In Viet Nam, however, the restrictive *ho khau* household registration system, which makes it difficult – or impossible – for children from rural areas to attend school in urban areas, means that while familial commitment to education causes families to leave their school-aged children behind, education is not driving migration.

Equally important, given that school enrolment rates are increasing throughout Viet Nam, which with its Confucian legacy has long valued education, it is also the case that demand for schooling is, amongst our respondents, not sufficiently strong to prevent the migration of children and adolescents. Independently migrating adolescents rarely left school specifically in order to migrate, most having been out of school working in the community for several years by the time they were judged old enough to move. However, our respondents indicated that it is not uncommon for parents to migrate—with their children—at the end of primary school, effectively ending their children's educational careers and thus limiting their futures.

While teachers report that poverty-induced, short-term thinking is the primary reason that parents make their children leave school, it is also the case that the poorest face the greatest constraints even when they are willing to bear the opportunity costs that continued education entails. Multitudinous fees burden the parents of even primary school children, who do not pay tuition, and the costs associated with secondary education are high.

I'm not sure about my future. I just work day and night at home cooking, washing clothes. I don't have a plan [...] I must help my mother. I do not go out at all – even to the market. I just stay home to work. (18-year-old girl who left school after fourth grade)



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Culture: The importance of filial piety and sacrifice

While around the world adolescent migration is most often a family decision, with parents playing a key role in decision-making but adolescents expected to benefit in some way from the endeavour, amongst our respondents, filial piety and an ethic of sacrifice so pervaded adolescents', and particularly girls', beliefs that they were willing to act against their own longer-term interests in order to maximise their parents' current economic situations. Our respondents noted that children left school when told to do so, turned over all of their wages to their parents and often considered their own limited prospects to be a "sacrifice" made in order to improve their parents' daily comfort or increase the life-chances of their siblings. Indeed, despite an emerging global consensus, we saw little evidence of migration as a "future-seeking" endeavour in our research.

Independent child migrants: long hours and loneliness

Because factory work is proscribed for children under the age of 18, most young migrants, who are disproportionately likely to be girls, either work in the informal economy or in small workshop environments, where work papers are optional but wages correspondingly low. Paid by the piece or by the hour, rather than by the month, most of our young respondents reported working over-time in order to

maximize their—and thereby their parents'—incomes. They also worked hard to minimize spending on their own needs, limiting their diets, choosing to forgo needed medical care and, at times, living in barely adequate housing.

Young migrants in our study, situated in a culture that emphasizes inter-, rather than in-, dependence, missed their parents, though most worked hard to keep their feelings to themselves. While many were living with extended family, who had often been instrumental to locating employment, and most appeared to have co-workers who were mindful of age- and gender-related vulnerabilities, the majority of adolescents reported that the only reason they were able to endure their work hours and the complexity of city life was their desire to improve their parents' lives (see Box 1). Seasonal migration, which was common amongst our respondents, kept adolescents away from their families for only a few difficult months at a time, whereas parents reported that those who had found stable, reasonably remunerated work were often able to return home only once a year, due to the high cost of travel.

Left-behind children: poverty and inadequate care

Poverty is a key threat facing left-behind children. Although their parents have migrated for work, and often earn a higher, more regular income than they would have had they stayed in the commune, the children and

Box 1: A childhood lost

The story of Ly Van Long, who migrated to Ho Chi Minh City at the age of 11, indicates the overwhelming vulnerability independent child migrants can experience – and also highlights that, while girls may be more likely to sacrifice themselves for their parents, boys are capable of this as well. Leaving school after sixth grade, Long moved with his older brothers to work on construction projects in the city. For five years he lived with other bricklayers, some of whom were also young adolescents, in a tent at a series of jobsites. For only VND 60,000, he spent his days *'assisting the mortar making, mixing the mortar, carrying the bricks, carrying bags of sand and cement [...] in an 18-floor building'*. Many days he was expected to work 24-hour shifts. He explained, *'Pouring the concrete started at 7 am, and we had to work through to 8-9 am the next day'*. Furthermore, *'When we got exhausted and wanted to sit down to rest for a while they wouldn't let us. They shouted and swore at us but didn't hit us'*. While he missed his parents terribly, particularly at first, and often thought of quitting his job to go home and take care of them, he felt he had to *'work to get much money as possible to support my parents'*.

When he was 16, Long left his *'thankless job'* and entered *'the most smeary time of my life'*. He worked nights at Thu Duc Farm Produce Market, loading, delivering and unloading *'from 10 to 20-something tons of goods all by myself'*, seven nights a week. While the pay was better, up to VND 120,000 on busy nights, the work was even harder than bricklaying and he was unfairly penalised for accidents. In the rainy season he often had to pull a fully loaded cart uphill. If it slipped, and boxes of fruit fell off, he was forced to pay for them. As each box was worth VND 1 million, a single accident could consume his monthly wages. Furthermore, because he lived in a room that lacked cooking facilities, and was attempting to maximise the money he sent home, *'In a month I had instant noodles for 30 days'*. His parents worried about his safety and health, but *'When my parents called and asked if I could handle the work, I told them I could, just so that they didn't get worried. So I told them I could do it fine. I didn't dare tell them how exhausted I felt, because they would cry and get worried, and I didn't want that. I didn't want them to be concerned at all'*.

Long is nearly 18 now and is working as a waiter in a restaurant. While he only makes VND 80,000 and never takes a day off, he does not define his life in terms of hardship. When asked about his future plans, he explained, *'I'm gonna work until I earn enough to secure a decent life for my parents, then I'll think about myself'*.

caregivers in our study indicated that parents' remittances were not facilitating upward mobility – only survival. Finances were particularly tight, and nutrition particularly compromised, when grandparents were caring for multiple sets of grandchildren. Moreover, given the near absence of policy and programming aimed at left-behind children, once children were old enough to incur school expenses and to have aged out of the free health care provided to pre-schoolers, economic vulnerability was especially acute.

Despite the good intentions of carers, many left-behind children receive care that is barely adequate.



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Grandparents are usually elderly—and often still working to meet consumption expenses, leaving them less vigilant than parents. Aunts and uncles are busy with their own families and can resent the expense of an extra mouth. Our respondents reported that it is not uncommon for older adolescent siblings, particularly girls, to assume responsibility for their younger brothers and sisters, usually while also juggling part-time work (see Box 1). While left-behind children understand the poverty that has pushed their parents into migration, they, like their independently migrating peers, miss the daily love and support of their parents. Even older adolescents reported great sadness at being left-behind.

The most vulnerable children: sex workers, street children and victims of trafficking

A subset of independent migrants, purposively sampled, highlights the extreme vulnerability of children who are both poor and lack stable home lives. Some end up as child sex workers, who are not uncommon in Viet Nam, or living on the streets. Given Viet Nam's laws, these children, regardless of their age, are seen as perpetrators of social disorder, rather than victims, and are at best “rehabilitated”, rather than supported. Others, desperate to improve their families' lives and win a modicum of

Tran Thi Mai is a 21-year-old woman living at Open House, a shelter in Long Xuyen for trafficked returnees. Left behind at the age of five, her story highlights the intersecting vulnerabilities of left-behind children and the importance of early intervention.

Mai's parents, like many others in An Giang, used to raise fish. While the income they earned was not high, it was enough to support Mai and her two younger siblings. Before kindergarten started, however, the bottom fell out of local aquaculture and Mai's parents were forced to turn to tending ducks to make an income. Leaving her with her mother's family, her parents ‘went away for a whole year before coming back home’ because ‘they didn't have money to do so’.

Mai spent her early primary years ‘running fields’ for one to two months every summer with her parents and being shuffled between various aunts during the school year. She was a strong student who was ‘appointed the class's deputy president in charge of music activity, and was in many activities’. In lower-secondary, she was invited to join her school's Young Pioneer's Club, which made her ‘more confident and dynamic’.

When Mai was in eighth grade her grandmother told her she had to leave school to help mind her younger siblings, take care of the house and run the family's small shop. Mai explained, ‘There was no one else to help.’ Mai worked very hard to make her grandmother happy. She said, ‘It was quite hard work. I weighed only 50kg because I had to run the coffee shop from 3-4 pm to 1-2 am. Sometimes I had to stay up until the dawn. I lost weight and became so skinny’. Despite her efforts, however, Mai's grandmother found fault with nearly everything she did. ‘My grandma scolded me so harshly as though I was doing the daughter-in-law role in my mom's place’, she reported. ‘I was eating rice with tears; I cried all the time’.

When Mai was 18, she was engaged, by her grandmother, to a boy whose family soon began to make disparaging comments about her poverty. She said, ‘After the gifts were exchanged, the guy's oldest uncle and his sisters said, “Isn't there anybody else? That girl, her family is worth nothing”’. Mai's grandmother immediately called off the wedding, which was mortifying to Mai: ‘It was like I was already married; we already got engaged. I was looked down on like that; I felt sad and ashamed’, she said.

Mai responded to this social exclusion by deciding to move abroad to find a foreign husband. However, rather than finding the love and economic support which she was seeking, she was sold, by a close friend of her grandmother, to a “marriage cavern”. Held against her will for three months, and witness to physical and sexual brutality before being rescued by the police, it took her the better part of a year to make it back to Viet Nam.

respect from their elders, end up being trafficked under the guise of marrying foreign men.

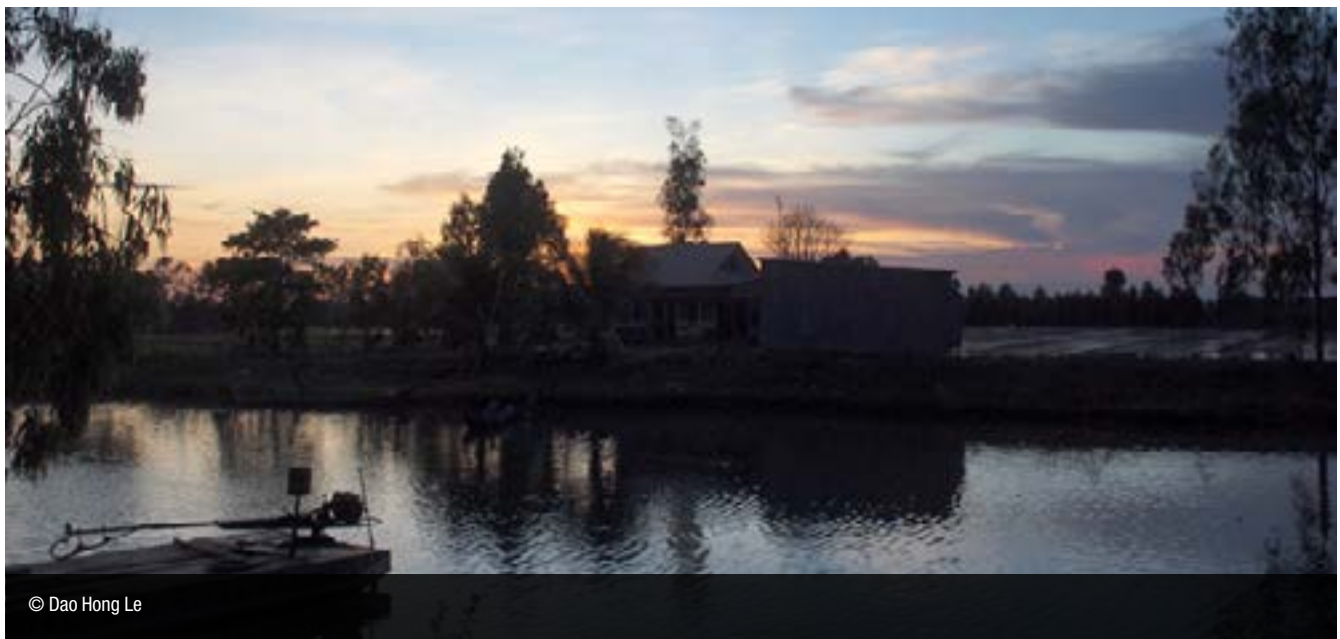
Policy and programme recommendations to reduce child protection violations in the context of migration

Poverty – and the distress migration to which it often leads – is a potent delimiter of children’s life chances in the rapidly urbanising border regions of the Mekong Delta. It often undermines education, leads to child labour, forces premature familial separation and places young adolescents in complex situations that they are ill-equipped to handle. Based on our qualitative research findings, we suggest that the following types of policies and programme interventions would do much to ameliorate the complex vulnerabilities facing children at risk:

- Household poverty alleviation is key. Our respondents were clear that migration is only “Plan B” and that they would prefer stable, local employment that paid a consistent living wage. Given the number of families with incomes just above the poverty line, it is also crucial that poverty programming be based on need, rather than politics, recognize the role of ill-health in poverty, and last long enough for meaningful change. Left-behind children need clearly delineated benefits, to ensure that their basic needs are met.
- Promoting adolescent vocational training and youth-focused employment programmes is vital. Credit needs to be made available to those with solid business plans, and vocational training needs to be practical, gender-neutral and targeted at actual job openings.
- Education, given the critical role it plays in reducing intergenerational poverty and inequality, needs to be provided on a level playing field, irrespective of both residency and poverty status. All content needs to be

folded into a standard curriculum, rather than offered through an ever-growing series of supplemental classes that require tuition, and support (e.g. education-related loans) needs to be made available to ensure that no student is forced to leave school due to short-term need. Programming also needs to be directed at parents—to ensure that they understand the importance of education; at out-of-school children—to ensure that they have options; and at left-behind children—many of whom have a broad spectrum of educational needs.

- Given that Viet Nam’s economy is increasingly reliant on migration, programming needs to be aimed not at limiting the internal flow of workers, but at ensuring that migrants are safe and have access to the social services that will help them maximize their economic contributions— today and tomorrow. This should include safe migration programming so that individuals and broader communities are aware of how best to maximise opportunities and minimise risks. Moreover, young independent migrants need better protection against exploitive work situations and emotional support that helps them balance their own needs with those of their parents. All children need to be counted and tracked, regardless of whether they are independent migrants, migrate with their parents or are left behind.
- The most vulnerable children need to be seen through a lens that prioritises protection rather than policing. The government needs to allocate resources to the development of a social work system that identifies fragile children early and is able to holistically meet their complex needs. Inter-agency child protection networks could support this process but require strengthening in terms of both financial and human resources, drawing on international good practice.



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