Falling between the cracks

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

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<tr>
<td>CEOPC</td>
<td>Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre</td>
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<tr>
<td>GDP</td>
<td>Gross Domestic Product</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DOLISA</td>
<td>Department of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>FGD</td>
<td>Focus Group Discussion</td>
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<td>GSO</td>
<td>General Statistics Office</td>
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<tr>
<td>HIV</td>
<td>Human Immunodeficiency Virus</td>
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<td>IDI</td>
<td>In-depth Interview</td>
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<tr>
<td>ILPO</td>
<td>International Labour Organisation</td>
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<td>ILSSA</td>
<td>Institute of Labour Science and Social Affairs</td>
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<td>IOM</td>
<td>International Organisation for Migration</td>
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<tr>
<td>KI</td>
<td>Key informant</td>
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<td>KII</td>
<td>Key informant interview</td>
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<td>MICS</td>
<td>Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey</td>
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<tr>
<td>MOLISA</td>
<td>Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-governmental organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RCFLG</td>
<td>Research Centre for Female Labour and Gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAVY</td>
<td>Survey and Assessment of Vietnamese Youth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SERC</td>
<td>Social Environment Research Consultants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWOT</td>
<td>Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UCW</td>
<td>Understanding children’s work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNDP</td>
<td>UN Development Programme</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNFPA</td>
<td>UN Population Fund</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNICEF</td>
<td>UN Children’s Fund</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNRISD</td>
<td>UN Research Institute for Social Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>US</td>
<td>United States</td>
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<tr>
<td>VHLSS</td>
<td>Vietnam Household Living Standard Survey</td>
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<td>WHO</td>
<td>World Health Organisation</td>
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Executive summary

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 report is 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. However, they 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.

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: a surprising relationship**

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.

**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.

While seasonal migration, which was common amongst our respondents, kept adolescents away from their families for only a few difficult months at a time, 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 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. 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. 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 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 fees, and support 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. For example, safe migration programming is essential 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 – and supported – 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 also be strengthened in terms of both financial and human resources, drawing on international good practice.
1 Introduction

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 (World Bank, 2012). 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% (GSO, 2011b); children’s involvement in economic activity has dropped accordingly, from nearly 50% in the early 1990s to about 10% in recent years (UCW, 2009). However, despite this laudable progress, significant lacunae remain, particularly for ethnic minority and rural families, which often have ‘incomes very near the poverty line and remain vulnerable to falling back into poverty as a result of idiosyncratic shocks [...] or related economy-wide shocks’, leading them to pull their children out of school and push them into the labour market (World Bank, 2012: 1; also Baulch et al., 2010; 2012; Chi, 2011).

While increased migration, almost all internal, has been a primary driver of Viet Nam’s ‘economic miracle’ (Taylor, 2011), and has been linked on both a global and a national level, largely through the impacts of remittances on poverty, to a variety of positive outcomes for children,1 it is also clear that, in some contexts, migration may aggravate children’s vulnerability.2 In Viet Nam, for example, 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, as well as leaving them living in sub-standard housing with inadequate physical and emotional care.3 Furthermore, despite their ever-growing numbers, left-behind children have, until recently, been almost totally excluded from discussions about migration and child protection, leaving them, according to Toyota et al. (2007: 9), to ‘remain in partial shadow’ (see also de la Garza, 2010; Whitehead, 2013).

Davidson and Farrow (2007: 9) note that ‘policy-makers have paid very little attention to broad questions about children and migration’ (see also Castaldo et al., 2009; Edmonds and Shrestha, 2009; Whitehead and Hashim, 2005). This is particularly the case in Viet Nam, where a complex registration system limits both official migration and access to social services, and much of the research on child migrants has focused on the cross-border trafficking and sexual exploitation of children. While continued attention and monitoring on that front remain important, particularly given that underreporting is rampant, child trafficking and sexual exploitation of children. While continued attention and monitoring on that front remain important, particularly given that underreporting is rampant, child trafficking in Viet Nam is becoming comparatively rare.4 Internationally comparable data also suggest that sexual abuse of children in Viet Nam is

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1 Adams (2011); Adams and Page (2005); Binci and Gianelli (2012); Boyden and Howard (2013); Castaldo et al. (2012); Collinson (2009); de Brauw and Giles (2012); de Brauw and Harigaya (2007); Du et al. (2005); GSO (2005); (2011b); Hashim (2006); Hertrich and Lesclingand (2012); Lokshin et al. (2010); Mansuri (2006a); 2006b); Migrating out of Poverty (2013); Park and Lee (2010); Pham and Hill (2008); Punch (2007); Siddiqui (2012); Thorsen (2006); Whitehead (2013); Whitehead et al. (2007).

2 Bakk et al. (2009); Cameron (2012); Cortina (2011); de la Garza (2010); Fern (2006); Hashim and Thorsen (2011); Hu (2013); ILO (2006); ILSSA et al. (2009); Le et al. (2011); Marcus (2013); Rushing (2006); Save the Children (2007a); (2007b); (2008); Scott et al. (2006); Siddiqui (2012); UN Viet Nam (2010); Yoednunn-Aligt et al. (2007).

3 Cameron (2012); Fern (2006); GSO (2011b); ILO (2006); ILSSA et al. (2009); Le et al. (2008); Pierre (2008); SERC (2008); UN Viet Nam (2010).

4 In 2012, the US State Department moved Viet Nam off the Tier 2 watch list, recognising that it was making significant progress towards compliance with international standards regarding human trafficking (US Department of State, 2013). The Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOPC) (2011) reports that, between 2005 and 2009, the Vietnamese government officially identified approximately 6,000 women and children as victims of trafficking. As data regarding child victims are not disaggregated, exact numbers are not available. However, a Save the Children study in northern Viet Nam found that approximately 10% of returnees were under the age of 18, and the non-governmental organisation (NGO) Pacific Links reports that, since it began work in Viet Nam in 2005, nearly 1,000 Vietnamese children have been trafficked (in CEOPC, 2011). While real numbers are certainly higher, as returnees are not included in official statistics, the absolute number of child victims remains low. (See also MOLISA and UNICEF, 2011).
relatively uncommon. Given the diversity of children’s migration experiences, even within Viet Nam, the frequency with which they migrate and the reality that ‘poverty creates situations where the risk to children is exacerbated’ (MOLISA and UNICEF, 2011: 95), 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.

This study is part of a two-year Oak Foundation-funded programme of work that explores the potential for greater linkages between child protection and anti-poverty work in low- and middle-income countries. It is one of three country case studies (the others being in Ethiopia and Uganda). It is informed by a systematic review of the literature on four key dimensions of child protection – sexual violence and exploitation, physical violence, early marriage and inadequate care – and their linkages to poverty. The report is concerned primarily with inadequate care for children (although impacts on the other three dimensions are also explored) and focuses on the impacts of migration on children in Da Phuoc and Vinh Nguon communes, which are located on the Cambodian border in An Giang province in southern Viet Nam. While An Giang’s poverty rate is significantly lower than the national average – as are measurements of its inequality – it has very high rates of multidimensional poverty and dismal educational statistics. Given the recent mechanisation of farming, and commensurate drops in local employment opportunities, out-migration flows are very high.

The report begins by laying out the conceptual framework and the larger body of literature in which this study is situated; it also introduces the broader Vietnamese context, which is required in order to locate the stories of our respondents. We then briefly outline the study sites, sample, methodology and research tools. Our primary findings are presented in Sections 6 and 7. The report concludes with a discussion of possible policy implications, informed by respondents’ ideas about what would improve the care and protection of children.

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5 The sexual abuse of children is also comparatively rare in Vietnam. A 2010 study – which allowed for anonymous reporting – found that only 2.5% of women had been sexually abused before the age of 15 (vs. 1.5% for non-anonymous reporting) (GSO, 2010c). Using a similar methodology, the World Health Organization (WHO) (2010) reports rates of 18% in rural Peru (vs. 8% non-anonymous), 9% in rural Brazil (vs. 6% for non-anonymous) and 5% in Thailand.
2 Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework for the broader programme of work of which this research is a part recognises that the drivers of violations of children’s rights are multi-layered, complex and interconnected. That said, it emphasises the key and often underestimated role of poverty in mediating children’s wellbeing outcomes, noting that, ‘while economic deprivation is never the only factor underlying child protection violations, it is often an important factor exacerbating the risk’ (Marcus and Page, 2013: 104) because households not only ‘respond in ways which do not safeguard and may directly conflict with children’s rights to protection’ (Marcus, 2013: 68) but also lack information about alternatives and access to ameliorating social services. As a result, even accounting for the considerable variation in norms regarding acceptable child care practices between and within cultures, children from low-income families are disproportionately more likely to experience abuse and receive inadequate care (Marcus, 2013; MOLISA and UNICEF, 2011; Whitehead and Hashim, 2005). It is critical to note here that the framework takes as its starting point that inadequate care is linked to broader structural problems, including poverty and inequality, rather than assuming that care deficits are a matter of parental wilful neglect.

In the case of migration, which we identify here as one potential response to poverty, for households and/or children, we hypothesise that child outcomes could be either positive or negative depending on the configuration of protective and risk factors at play at the national, community, household and individual levels. For some children and adolescents, migration may represent an opportunity to escape rural drudgery, further their education and productive skills and assert their emerging maturity by helping their households escape chronic poverty. On the other hand, for those who are tightly constrained by the limited skills and education that all too often accompany the deepest poverty, migration may place children in environments in which their physical safety, health and educational and emotional needs receive inadequate attention – limiting not only their options for today but also those for tomorrow.

In the analysis of our primary research findings in Sections 4-7, we use the macro to micro framework presented in Figure 1 to unpack the structural drivers of poverty and deprivation that are fuelling the unprecedented migration of children and their families in southern Viet Nam. We aim to explain the patterning of community, household and individual protective and risk factors that leaves some children particularly vulnerable to inadequate care when either they or their parents migrate in an effort to make ends meet. In Section 8, we return to the framework to consider potential policy and programming entry points that can best capitalise on and strengthen protective factors while mitigating the most serious risk factors.

Marcus (2013: 57) notes that ‘(in OECD [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development] countries inadequate care is usually framed as “neglect” and is variously seen as a result of either wilful inattention or ignorance (see also Dyson, 2008; McSherry, 2007). On the other hand, in developing countries, reflecting an awareness of the restricted options that parents many face, the word ‘neglect’ is rarely used (ibid.; see also Coope and Theobald, 2006).
Figure 1: Conceptual framework diagram

Source: Marcus (2013).
3 Setting the stage: structural drivers shaping children’s relationship with migration – in Viet Nam and around the world

After years of comparative neglect, somewhat surprising given the near universal understanding that migration is ‘a family-based strategy for poverty alleviation’ (Migrating out of Poverty, 2013; also Le et al., 2011; Toyota et al., 2007), particularly for rural families living in areas in which both land and non-agricultural employment options are scarce,7 there is a rapidly growing – and very diverse – body of research that examines the impact of migration on children in the developing world. Noting that national-level statistics rarely capture the full extent of child migration, some of this work attempts simply to count young migrants. Independent child migration is also an important focus of recent research, with questions increasingly framed around motivations, mechanisms and outcomes. Other work attempts to ascertain the impacts parental migration has on the children they leave behind and how these vary across populations. As Whitehead (2013) observes, however, the vast majority of this burgeoning research is focused on transnational migration, primarily to the global North. Children who migrate internally by themselves – or who are left behind when their parents migrate internally – continue to be comparatively neglected, despite the fact that they represent the bulk of children affected by migration (Deshingkar, 2006; UNDP, 2009).

3.1 How many children are affected?

Ascertaining how many children are affected by migration is a difficult endeavour, as many countries either fail to collect data about migration at all or define it so narrowly that a large proportion of migrants are excluded (Collinson et al., 2007; Deshingkar and Akter, 2009). In Viet Nam, for example, the government’s definition of migrants excludes all children under the age of five as well as the temporary migration in which adolescents – and parents of young children – are particularly likely to engage (see Box 1). Even given those caveats, however, the UN Development Programme (UNDP) (2009) estimates that one-eighth of the global population is an internal migrant. In Viet Nam, where migration has long been actively discouraged (see Box 2), official rates remain somewhat lower: 6.5% in 2009.8 The impact on Vietnamese cities, however, is vast. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2012) estimates that up to 30% of the populations of the largest cities consists of migrants, and the 2009 Census found that ‘16% of the urban population aged 5 or older are migrants who arrived between 2004 and 2009’ (GSO, 2011b: 25, emphasis added).

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7 Bebbington (1999); Bryceson (2002); Massey et al. (1998); McDowell and de Haan (1997); Stark and Bloom (1985); Vu (2012).
8 The 2009 Census (accessed via www.ipums.org) found that 6.5% of all respondents between the ages of 5 and 99 were internal migrants at the time of the survey.
Box 1: What's in a name?

The Vietnamese government – and its decennial Census – states that a ‘person is considered a migrant if their current place of residence at the time of the survey and the place of residence 5 years prior to the survey are not the same administrative unit at the commune level’ (GSO, 2010a: 75). This definition has two key gaps that are particularly relevant to children. First, it does not capture children under the age of five. Second, and likely more relevant, it does not capture temporary, circular or seasonal migration – which is particularly prevalent during harvest season and immediately before the Lunar New Year – and is extremely common among adolescents (Cacioppo, 2006). The 2004 Migration Survey estimated that up to half of all migrants are unofficial, and therefore uncounted (as cited in Le et al., 2012). Similarly, UN Viet Nam (2010: 23) argues that, based on the Chinese experience, it is possible that ‘unregistered migrants may outnumber registered migrants by four to one’.

Box 1: Migration law in Viet Nam

Counting child migrants themselves is even more difficult, as different mechanisms yield different results and, as was mentioned above, young people are particularly likely to engage in statistically invisible temporary migration (Whitehead, 2013). Yaqub (2009) offers one of the most rigorous attempts to count young migrants. Using census data, he estimates that over one-quarter of all migrants in Argentina, Chile and South Africa are children under the age of 18. Child migration appears to be less common in Viet Nam – likely because of the above-mentioned legal discouragement of migration. While Yaqub (2009) reports that, on average, 4% of children in South Africa, Argentina and Chile are migrants (ranging from 2.9% to 9.3%), the 2009 Census found that only 2.5% of Vietnamese children aged 5-18 were migrants. That said, it also found that older adolescents were among the most likely to migrate, a finding echoed by the second Survey and Assessment of Vietnamese Youth (SAVY), which reported that over half of rural youths had lived away from home for at least one month (GSO et al., 2010).

Box 2: Migration law in Viet Nam

Hoang (2013) notes that, ‘Vietnam is one of the few countries in the world whose citizens must live where they’re registered or ask the government’s permission to relocate’. Imported from China, the ho khau system remains, for all citizens, necessary in order to purchase housing, work, receive vocational training, register births and – in many cases – enrol in school or access health care (Le et al., 2011; see also Cameron, 2012; Locke et al., 2008; UN Viet Nam, 2010). While the system is significantly less restrictive than it once was, the overwhelming number of migrants in urban areas has not only made it difficult for them to obtain legally permissible and affordable services, but has also begun to lead to a backlash, with a law passed in 2012 set to ‘slash migrant numbers to Hanoi by one million people within the next five years’ (Thao, 2012).

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9 Yaqub defined migrants as those who had moved either i) internationally or ii) between provinces. His definition excluded children who were intra-provincial migrants. The Vietnamese statistic, based on data accessed via www.ipums.org, followed this rubric in order to ensure comparability. Of note, international migration was more common in Yaqub’s study – ranging from 0.2% in South Africa to 0.6% in Chile. In Viet Nam, the number of international child migrants was so low that the rate was 0%.

10 In Viet Nam children are one year old on the day of their birth. Thus, 18 year olds are still children as per UN convention.
The feminisation of education in Viet Nam

While accurate headcounts are impossible to come by, it is clear that in Viet Nam, as in much of the developing world, migration is a livelihood strategy that is on the rise – particularly for the young. A variety of facts make it likely this trend will continue to intensify. First, Vu (2012: 87) notes that in Viet Nam, which is over 80% mountainous, ‘households face severe pressures of land shortages, epidemic animal diseases, frequent price fluctuations on agricultural produces and lack of financial credit’. Second, and closely related, is the fact that, ‘(t)here is already evidence of internal migrations in Viet Nam that have been induced by changing environmental conditions’, which are likely to become exacerbated over the coming decades (UN Viet Nam, 2010: 22). Third, Viet Nam’s population is young: nearly 25% of its citizens are under the age of 16 and over the next three decades it is expected that ‘1 million young people will enter the labour market each year’ (ibid.). Finally, exacerbated by the above, the urban–rural divide continues to grow. With rural poverty rates nearly five times as high as those in urban areas,11 migration is increasingly seen not only as a ‘golden ticket’ but also as the only show in town.

Box 3: The feminisation of education in Viet Nam

Not only are girls more likely to be enrolled in school than boys – and have higher test scores –but also there are marked gender differences in aspirations, with both girls and their parents aspiring higher than boys and their parents (Dercon and Singh, 2013; Nguyen, 2013; Pells, 2011). For example, among the Young Lives sample of adolescents, over 70% of girls, but only 50% of boys, would like to complete university (Pells, 2011). Trends are, notes Nguyen (2013: 5) ‘somewhat surprising in the context of rural Vietnam, where families still show a preference for boys’.

Another trend that may intensify in Viet Nam is the feminisation of migration. Already well advanced, ‘due to labour markets mostly favouring female workers’ (Vu, 2012: 87), girls and young women in Viet Nam not only are more likely to migrate than boys and young men, but also do so at a younger age – ‘on average a year younger than their male counterparts’ (UNFPA, 2011b: 30). Given the increasing feminisation of education, and the changing nature of the Vietnamese labour market, which increasingly favours the more educated (Oostendorp and Doan, 2013), it is likely that gendered labour preferences will solidify (see Box 3).

3.2 Children who migrate with their parents

While the majority of this paper focuses on children who migrate independently or have been left behind, given data constraints it is worth noting at the outset, particularly given our emphasis on the relationship between migration and inadequate care for children, that ‘children who migrate with their parents/carers are by no means guaranteed protection from exploitation and abuse’, as many end up working in highly dangerous environments although they continue to enjoy parental care (Davidson and Farrow, 2007: 30). Children who migrate with their parents face other threats as well. In Viet Nam, for example, there is particular concern that they are unable to access schooling, as public schools often exclude migrants and private schools are too expensive.12 Indeed, the General Statistics Office (GSO) (2011b: 101) concludes, based on 2009 Census data, that the ‘likelihood of attending primary and secondary schools was much lower among migrants than non-migrant children’. Marcus (2013) also observes that, because many migrant parents must work long hours to make ends meet, younger siblings are frequently left in the care of older siblings, with consequences for the safety of the former and the education of the latter.

11 The World Bank reports a 2010 urban poverty rate of 6%. The rural rate, for the same year, was 27%.
12 Cameron (2012); GSO (2011b); Locke et al. (2008); UN Viet Nam (2010).
It is also worth noting that, while Yaqub (2009) found that more than 90% of child migrants in Argentina, Chile and South Africa were living with their parents, there is no analogous picture for Vietnamese children. It seems likely, given restrictions on migration, that Vietnamese child migrants are older and thus more likely to be living independently of their parents.

Box 4: Child labour in Viet Nam

Rates of employment for Vietnamese children have plummeted over the past few decades (UCW, 2009). Vietnamese law now heavily restricts the employment of children under the age of 15. Furthermore, although the age of majority is 16 and not 18 in keeping with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 18 is the legal minimum age for a wide variety of jobs. However, the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) 4 found continuing cause for concern – with ‘9.5 per cent of children at aged 5–14 years […] involved in child labour in Viet Nam […] and the percentage of child labourers being highest among poorest households (19.8 per cent for children aged 5–14 years)’ (GSO et al., 2011: 172). This has devastating consequences for children’s schooling: over half of child labourers 12-14 are out of school (ibid.). Similarly, the 2009 Census found that ‘over 40 per cent of the youth population aged 15-19 […] participate in the employment sector’ (UNFPA, 2011b: 32). Ethnic minority children and adolescents are even more likely to work.

3.3 Independent child migrants

Independent child migrants have been the primary focus of the small but growing body of research that has linked migration and child protection. Whitehead and Hashim (2005: 24) note that early work, which most often equated independent migration with trafficking, sexual abuse and family dissolution, was crucial in terms of ‘visibilising the harmful situations of many child migrants’ but also served to ‘invisibilise’ the larger group of child migrants who do not fit into that rubric 13. This has certainly been the case in Viet Nam, where Social Environment Research Consultants’ (SERC’s) 2008 study confirmed that coercion was largely absent but that peer and family pressure played key roles in migration decisions. This has had two untoward effects. First, the largest group of young migrants, those who migrate voluntarily in mid- to late adolescence – for economic reasons – have received disproportionately little attention, as most studies have focused on especially vulnerable groups such as street children or child sex workers. Second, the everyday threats facing young migrants, such as bad housing, inadequate nutrition, insufficient rest, and poor access to health care, education and emotional support14, because they are far removed from the ‘horror stories prevalent within the trafficking narrative’ (Boyen and Howard, 2013: 355), have rarely entered the policy spotlight.

Box 5: “Social Evil” in Viet Nam

Young migrants in Viet Nam have also been disadvantaged by the government’s tendency to view them through the lens of ‘social evil’ rather than child protection, asking not ‘what do they need?’ but ‘what are they up to?’ Growing, like migration, out of the freer economy and open borders inherent in doi moi’s liberalisation, the ‘social evils’ campaign, run by the Department of Social Evil Prevention under the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA), is aimed at preventing vices such as drug use, prostitution and gambling and features heavily in community education programming as well as in the citizenship education classes offered at school (Robert, 2005).

13 See also Boyden and Howard (2013); Davidson and Farrow (2007); Hashim (2006); Heissler (2013); Huijsmans and Baker (2012); Whitehead (2013); Whitehead et al. (2007).
14 Cameron (2012); Fern (2006); Locke et al. (2008); Scott et al. (2006); SERC (2008); UN Viet Nam (2010); Yoddumnern-Attig et al. (2007).
Recent migration research has largely left the trafficking narrative behind and, while acknowledging that young migrants are more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation, has tended to highlight agency and the way children’s migration can play a key role in their ‘future-seeking’\textsuperscript{15}. It emphasises that childhood is socially constructed and notes that in resource-poor environments, where children are less likely to be seen as economic dependents, children’s work – and their migration for work – is more likely to be framed positively than negatively, in part because of the social embeddedness it facilitates.\textsuperscript{16} In Lao PDR, for example, Huijsmans (2011) observes that ‘(b)y becoming involved in migrant work […] girls position themselves more firmly as youth and step out of the moral framework of childhood’ (in Huijsmans and Baker, 2012: 935). Similarly, in Latin America, Punch (2004; 2007) concludes that migration ‘offers young people a source of identity as well as enhancing their social and economic autonomy’ (Punch, 2004: 179). In Ghana, Hashim (2006: 4) found that children were generally positive about their migration experiences, as they ‘afforded them the opportunity to develop important relationships or skills, and/or to earn an income that allowed them to buy the things necessary for their progression into adulthood or to pay for education’.

The relationship between migration and education is one of the key themes explored in recent research. On the one hand, Boyden (2013: 583) concludes that the ‘recent expansion of school systems and associated escalation in educational aspirations have intensified child mobility among populations living in poverty’, who increasingly see education as the sole way of bettering their economic situations. For example, in Ghana, where secondary schools are scarce in rural areas, Porter et al. (2011: 405) observe that, ‘migration for education, particularly at secondary school level, is widespread’. Similarly, in Peru, Crivello (2011: 395) notes that, for both young people and their parents, migration is part of ‘becoming somebody in life’ and is closely linked to educational aspirations. On the other hand, child migration is also common among groups of children who are already out of school or for whom school is not working. For example, Hashim (2005) found that, in southern Ghana, young migrants were largely dropouts who had left school because of high real and opportunity costs. In India, Iversen (2002) reported child labour migrants were largely ‘educational misfits’: children who disliked school and refused to go. In Viet Nam, where secondary schools are widely available and ‘migration for education is curbed by restrictions on access to

\textsuperscript{15} Yaqub (2009); see also Boyden (2013); Boyden and Howard (2013); Crivello (2011); Denov and Bryan (2012); Heissler (2013); Huijsmans and Baker (2012); Orgocka (2012); Porter et al. (2011); Whitehead (2013).

\textsuperscript{16} Bourdillon et al. (2010); Boyden (2013); Boyden and Howard (2013); Hashim and Thorsen (2011); Heissler and Porter (2010); UN Viet Nam (2010); Whitehead (2013).
schools in destination communities’, migration for education is comparatively uncommon (Boyden, 2013: 589). Indeed, Cameron (2012) found, in a sample of adolescent migrants living in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, that none was enrolled in school.

The pursuit of formal education is clearly not the only way children and adolescents use migration to position themselves in a more secure future. Given endemic rural poverty, child migration is also a key way in which families ‘diversify their income portfolio’ and children begin to build their own economic lives (Edmonds and Shrestha, 2009: 2). As Boyden (2013: 595) notes, ‘children’s familial contributions have both instrumental and symbolic value, helping fulfil immediate domestic requirements and also serving collective ambitions for the future’. While acknowledging the veracity of this statement, we wish to point out that it also, to some extent, obscures a fundamental tension we wish to highlight: while some children – and adults – migrate to improve their economic lives, others migrate simply in order to keep food on the table. This dichotomy is evident in India, for example, where Deshingkar and Akter (2009: 46) observe, ‘at one extreme are the poorest […] for whom migration is no more than a coping strategy providing at best subsistence and the money for repaying debts; while for better educated and better connected migrants, it provides additional income which can […] lead to economic and social gains’.

Box 7: The state welfare regime

While Viet Nam remains a unitary state under the control of the Communist Party, its welfare institutions, like its economy, have been considerably transformed since doi moi’s shift away from central planning. London (2012: 28) notes that, since the early 1990s, ‘the Vietnamese government adopted a series of welfare institutions that shifted responsibility onto households […] in a move from principles of socialist “universalism” to a hybrid system where the state provides a floor of basic services and a system of safety nets for certain population segments’. The net result of these changes has been to create a system that is disadvantageous to low-income groups (Gao et al., 2013). This is particularly worrying given that many households have no access to safety nets at all. The World Bank (2012: 5) concludes that, ‘[i]n 2010, only half of the extreme poor were eligible for benefits’. Furthermore, vulnerability is exacerbated by the way the government relies on political ‘targets’ for accomplishments ranging from poverty reduction to child incarceration. Given that ‘there are strong incentives for local authorities to meet these targets’, economic reality can be less important than political aspirations (ibid.: 15).

In Viet Nam, Le et al. (2011: 3) express concern that ‘migration has taken place as a source of poverty alleviation and development of the sending communities’ (see Box 7). Indeed, there is evidence of this transition in children’s migration decisions. Fern (2006) notes that, in the 1990s, a sample of child migrants in Ho Chi Minh City found that over half had moved to be with their families and over a quarter had moved to further their education; young migrants’ families were not the poorest and migration was aimed not at poverty relief but at accumulation. By the time of her study, however, nearly all the children in a similar sample reported that poverty had driven their migration. Further evidence comes from the International Labour Organization (ILO) (2006) and Scott et al. (2006), who respectively note the key roles of family size and debt on children’s migration. Although, as Yaqub (2009) notes, poverty is not the only reason that children migrate, it is clearly a key factor in decision making.

Migrant’ remittances do improve the wellbeing of low-income households. They have been found to reduce poverty and increase expenditure on food, health care and education – particularly, note de Haan and Yaqub (2008: 9), ‘where large numbers of opportunities for unskilled labour exist, as in China or Vietnam’. Internal remittances have been found to be particularly important to low-income households, as, while they are smaller,

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17 See also Boyden (2013); Crivello (2011); de Haan and Yaqub (2008); Huijsmans and Baker (2012).
18 Awumbila and Ardayfio-Schandorf (2008); Bryceson (2002); Deshingkar (2006); Deshingkar and Akter (2009).
19 Adams (2011); Adams and Page (2005); de Brauw and Giles (2012); Deshingkar (2006); Du et al. (2005); Housen et al. (2013); Nguyen (2009); Özden and Schiff (2006).
they reach more households – and can be vital for smoothing incomes.\textsuperscript{20} In Viet Nam, where 90\% of households receive some form of remittance (2004 VHLSS, in UN Viet Nam, 2010), Nguyen (2009) found that internal remittances were used largely for consumption expenditures, Vu (2012) notes that migration can serve as a ‘survival strategy’ for rural families and Nguyen et al. (2011) conclude that that, even where work migration does not lift families out of poverty, it at least mitigates severity (see also Nimi et al., 2008). While the majority of research on remittances has not looked specifically at those provided by children, Fern (2006) found, in her small study of child migrants in Ho Chi Minh City, that the remittances children sent home amounted to an average of 20-30\% of family income. Indeed, she noted that, for the poorest families, adolescent migrants were able to earn more in a month than their parents earned in year.

That said, even where child migration stabilises household income, there are concerns that in many cases it may exacerbate inequality, because, as de Brauw and Giles (2008: 1) note, in the long run it ‘may worsen distributional outcomes as families from poor areas choose employment over investment in education’. This is certainly the case in Viet Nam, where, as was mentioned above, there is growing concern about inequality – particularly with regard to the ways increasing school fees are impacting the enrolment rates of the poor (Gao et al., 2012; London, 2012; World Bank, 2012). Furthermore, given that households define their own wellbeing not just in terms of concrete needs, but ‘also through comparison to other households in the community’ (Collinson, 2009: 6), it is possible that in middle-income Viet Nam not only will child migration reinforce the intergenerational transmission of poverty but also it will do so in households where relative poverty, and not destitution, is the economic concern.

Another important strand of research that has grown out of attempts to separate migration from trafficking examines ‘the role of the children’s social capital […] in facilitating their movements, in putting them in touch with employers and in mitigating […] the risks they run at destinations’ (Whitehead, 2013: 68).\textsuperscript{21} In Viet Nam, for example, Anh (2006) found that over 80\% of boys and 90\% of girls used their social networks to find urban employment after leaving their rural homes. Likely a result of this assistance, the 2004 Migration Survey found that only 31\% of Vietnamese adolescents aged 15-19 faced difficulties with their move – less than any other age group (GSO and UNFPA, 2004). Indeed, in Bangladesh, Heissler (2013: 93, 99) reports that child migrants in her study were clear ‘they would not have left home’ without social contacts, who not only help them find jobs, but also serve in ‘protective and supervisory’ roles. Furthermore, while it may seem counterintuitive for children to feel more secure if they use their own informal networks, rather than adult-based networks, Huijsmans (2012) concludes that child migrants in Lao PDR were ultimately less vulnerable if they followed peer-centred migration channels – which, because they have lower entry requirements, offer more space for children to exercise agency if they encounter abuse and exploitation.

That said, it is also ‘necessary to consider the constraints on children’s agency’ (Hashim, 2006: 27) and be, as Huijsmans and Baker (2012: 934) phrase it, ‘wary of celebratory accounts’. Even where they are actively involved in migration decision making, children are often, owing to age, poverty or lack of family support, relatively powerless (Whitehead, 2013). Furthermore, while situating children’s migration in the larger nexus of family economics emphasises their rational future seeking and highlights their social embeddedness, it often fails to take into account cultural factors that overlay decision making (de Haan and Yaqub, 2008). In Viet Nam, for example, the concepts of ‘filial piety’ and ‘sacrifice’ often lead young people to make decisions that are not only contrary to their own best interests but also may ultimately, because they reduce adult earning potential, be contrary to the long-term interests of their families. Lewis (2005: 12) notes that the former, which mandates respect and obedience towards one’s elders – as well as care for them in their old age – permeates Vietnamese culture, leading to a ‘near-constant sense of awareness of the debt one owes’. Similarly, Shohet (2013: 212) observes that the ethic of sacrifice pervades decision making in Vietnamese culture: ‘sacrifice as ethical devotion to the family and community can involve routine […] acts of suffering such as forgoing food, medical care, or education’. Both of these factors may serve to mute the agency of young migrants in Viet Nam, ultimately increasing their vulnerability by positioning

\textsuperscript{20} Adams (2011); Castaldo et al. (2013); Du et al. (2005); Housen et al. (2013); Nguyen V.C. (2009).

\textsuperscript{21} See also Boyden (2013); Huijsmans (2012); Punch (2007); Whitehead et al. (2007); Whitehead and Hashim (2005).
them in situations in which earning ‘their living might easily go over the borderlines of harm and exploitation’ (Whitehead, 2013: 44).

3.4 Left-behind children

The wellbeing of children who are left behind when their parents migrate has largely been ignored by the migration literature, in part because those children are not migrants and in part because attention has remained focused tightly on the remittances they receive, which are often thought to mostly compensate for any disadvantage they may suffer. Furthermore, as Whitehead (2013: 75) notes, ‘no very clear trends’ emerge from existent research. While it is evident, as was mentioned above, that migrants’ remittances – those earned by both children and parents – reduce poverty and improve consumption levels, it is less clear what impacts parental migration have on children’s physical and mental health, education and work status. Impacts vary by a wide variety of intervening factors related to the child (such as age), the parent (such as gender) and the nature of the migration (such as distance from home or length of stay) – and also change over time (ibid.). Indeed, findings are so mixed that some studies, for example, find migration reduces infant mortality while others find the opposite, and it is often the case that a single study finds disparate – and contradictory – impacts. For instance, Hildebrandt and McKenzie (2005) report both lower rates of infant mortality and lower rates of breastfeeding and vaccination.22

Evidence from Viet Nam is no less contradictory. Binci and Gianelli (2012: 25) found, for example, using data from the 1990s, that internal remittances – but not international remittances – reduced child labour and increased child education, which they attribute to internal migrants’ ability to ‘preserve a relatively close relationship with their families of origin, thus maintaining control over their children’s welfare and the way in which remittances are spent’. Indeed, the 2004 Vietnam Migration Survey found that the third largest use for internal remittances was education, with one in five migrants spending remittances in that manner (in Siddiqui, 2012). On the other hand, Nguyen and Nguyen (2013), using data from the 2000s, found no evidence that remittances had an impact on either children’s schooling or their labour market involvement – although they do report an increase in outpatient health care contacts. Furthermore, the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) Viet Nam ‘found that more than half of the families of internal migrants reported a negative impact on children’s school performance after the migration of their parent(s)’, which they attributed to an increase in the amount of time children spent on domestic chores as well as a lack of academic supervision and support (in Siddiqui, 2012: 18).

Unpacking the effects of being left behind is complicated by evidence that the gender of the migrating parent may play a significant mediating role. For example, Collinson et al. (2009) found, in South Africa, that women migrants were more likely than men to send the remittances that were crucial in helping the poorest households escape chronic poverty. On the other hand, mothers’ absence, even if only temporary, jeopardised children’s health and life. Mortality rates for the children of temporarily absent mothers increased by 250%, which they attribute to carers being less vigilant about accidents and illness. They also speculate that long-term maternal absence may be associated with higher risks of malnutrition. This line of research could be particularly important in Viet Nam, where, as was mentioned above, migration is increasingly feminised. Locke et al. (2012) note that many of these female migrants are mothers of young children, who find it difficult to balance their children’s practical needs for regular meals and education, both of which are supported by migrant work, and day-to-day parenting. Further complicating women’s roles, Bui and Krugler (2011), also working in Viet Nam, note that women receiving remittances are more likely to prioritise spending on children than are male receivers.

The impact of being left behind can also vary by children’s gender – although evidence is again mixed. For example, Mansuri (2006a; 2006b) found that remittances had a larger impact on girls’ growth than that of boys in Pakistan. Similarly, in China, Hu (2013: 56) finds that, while ‘boys’ education does not seem not to be greatly affected by the migration of adult household members […] the absence of adult household members has a large negative effect on girls’ educational performance’, perhaps because they are more likely to assume their mothers’

22 See Whitehead (2013) and de la Garza (2010) for a thorough review of the complex findings regarding the impact of migration on children.
roles (Bakker et al., 2009; de la Garza, 2010). On the other hand, Park and Lee (2010: 20), also working in China, found that fathers’ migration was good for girls’ education – and had negative impacts on boys’ psychological wellbeing.

Given that children’s development is uniquely relational, emotional impacts, although harder to capture, are also important. De la Garza (2010: 20) notes that, when children are left with older relatives, generational differences can deprive them of the ‘emotional support that is so crucial to their healthy and prosperous development’. In Viet Nam, while grandmothers play an important role in children’s upbringing, they are not – according to social norms – supposed to be primary caregivers (Locke et al., 2012). Vietnamese children are meant, note Locke et al. (2012: 19) to live with their parents, ‘ideally both a father and mother, but most particularly when they are young with mothers’. The stress caused by parental absence can be significant. Indeed, Cortina (2011) found that, after discounting the material benefits of migration, both children and their carers experience negative emotional impacts as a result of parental migration, and Locke et al. (2012: 20) note that migrant Vietnamese mothers ‘express severe anxieties’. That said, there is also evidence here of the need for contextualisation, as, while Graham and Jordan (2011) found no overall differences in the psychological wellbeing of Vietnamese under 12s living in two-parent versus transnational families, they noted variations based on household wealth, child gender and the gender of the migrating parent.

### 3.5 Children, migration and inadequate care

Keeping children free from harm is obviously a key component of ensuring they are receiving adequate care – and one which migration can make more difficult for all three groups of children: those who migrate with their parents, those who migrate independently and those who are left behind. We wish to note, however, that adequate care involves more than keeping children physically safe. It also, notes Whitehead (2013: 20), involves ensuring they reach adulthood as ‘healthy, well-nourished, socially well-developed persons, with appropriate practical and intellectual skills’. The confluence of poverty and migration is powerful, as the preceding discussion has evidenced. Where the latter can mitigate the former, children can thrive, particularly if they are emotionally supported. Where the two work in tandem, however, and children lack both financial and emotional safety nets, the care they are receiving is frequently inadequate – even in the absence of abuse or deliberate neglect. It is at this nexus that our primary research is situated. While our study is small, qualitative and confined to only one province in Viet Nam, we believe, given the twin realities of intergenerational poverty and expanding migration – which is likely have an impact on millions of children in Viet Nam alone\(^\text{23}\) – that it is crucial to identify patterns in the risk factors facing children in order to better target mitigating policy and programming.

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\(^{23}\) The 2009 Census reported 6.6 million internal migrants (as reported in UN Viet Nam, 2010). Of those, using data accessed via [www.ipums.org](http://www.ipums.org), over 800,000 were children under the age of 18 (taking into account Vietnamese age conventions). Given i) that Census data do not capture the migration of children under the age of five, ii) that Census data do not capture the left-behind children who are also impacted by migration and iii) that the 2004 Migration Survey (GSO and UNFPA, 2004) found that up to half of all migrants are ‘unofficial’, the number of Vietnamese children impacted by migration is certainly over 2 million.
4 Locating the study

4.1 An Giang province

Our research was conducted in An Giang province, which as can be seen in Figure 2, is in the Mekong Delta of southern Viet Nam. An Giang, while having a relatively low income poverty rate, 9.2% in 2010,\(^{24}\) compared with a national average of 14.2% (GSO, 2010b), has a high rate of multidimensional poverty: 45% compared with a national average of only 23.3% (as reported in UNDP, 2011). Indeed, UNDP (2011: 46) notes that the entire Mekong Delta, which ‘ranks third highest in terms of income […] compares less well on social indicators’ because of a history of both landlessness and land concentration. It further notes that the geography of the region, which is criss-crossed with both rivers and canals, is both particularly vulnerable to climate change and ‘presents distinctive problems in education and health’ (ibid.).

This is certainly reflected in educational statistics: An Giang has the highest rate of primary school non-completion in the country. Nearly one-third of inhabitants over the age of 15 left school before the end of fifth grade, compared with a national average of only 14.5% (UNICEF, 2012). Dropout rates for secondary school are similarly high.

Migration is an increasingly common consequence of An Giang’s endemic landlessness and its growing farm mechanisation. With a net migration rate of -46/1,000 inhabitants, the province has the highest incidence of out-migration in the Mekong Delta (GSO, 2011b). Despite its growing prevalence, the social consequences of migration in An Giang, particularly those experienced by children, are poorly explored.

Now there exists a process where land is being accumulated in the hands of some capable people. I can see that the government now starts to […] encourage this, because these people know how to deliver while the others fail all the time. (DOLISA key informant)

4.2 Da Phuoc and Vinh Nguon communes

Within An Giang, we chose Da Phuoc and Vinh Nguon communes to situate our research. Located on (Vinh Nguon) and near (Da Phuoc) the Cambodian border – and separated by only a river – these communes were chosen because they represented urban (Vinh Nguon)\(^{25}\) and rural (Da Phuoc) communes and had high rates of out-migration. They also share a number of key geographical and socioeconomic characteristics, as follows.

Both communes have a history of annual floods, which have, at times, nearly wiped them off the map. While new dikes, completed in 2011, appear to have mitigated some of this risk, housing stock remains largely ‘temporary’ and agriculture remains risky. Additionally, both communes have recently seen improvements in living standards, primarily because of infrastructure advances, but declines in local employment opportunities. ‘The daily life has been improved’, noted one respondent. Poverty rates are below the provincial average, schools and health clinics

\(^{24}\) An Giang’s poverty rate was 6.17% in 2012 and 4.97% in 2013, according to government statistics.

\(^{25}\) At the time of the research, Vinh Nguon was an urban commune and Da Phuoc was a rural commune. Given the recent re-designation of Chau Doc Town to Chau Doc City, Vinh Nguon is now a ward of Chau Doc City. Da Phuoc remains a rural commune of An Phu district.
are now conveniently located, new roads and bridges facilitate the transport of both goods and people and not only has rice production almost doubled ‘to 8 tons/hectare thanks to the agricultural promotion programme’, but also farmers are able to raise three crops per year – rather than the traditional one – thanks to the new dikes. That said, however, a constant refrain from our respondents was ‘in the past, farmers were hired to harvest rice. Now it is done by machines, so farmers lost the chance to be hired to do it’. Given that land is significantly concentrated in the hands of a few, with the entire commune of Vinh Nguon forced to share only 50 hectares of land owing to historical allocation patterns, the end of agricultural day labour has sounded a death knell for work opportunities.

**Figure 3: Riverside houses in Vinh Nguon**

Furthermore, while An Giang’s economy has relied heavily in recent years on aquaculture, one of our respondents noted that, ‘we applied electro-fishing and used too much agricultural chemical, so now we can’t find fish’. Another said, ‘in the past, about 100 households raised fish in the rafts, now only 5 at best. A decrease of up to 95%’. Commune leaders confirmed that, while agriculture continues to drive the local economy, it now employs very few people. Small trading now provides the most jobs.

Vinh Nguon’s location, directly on the border, gives it a number of unique features. In the past, the local economy was highly dependent on smuggling. Vast quantities of tobacco, consumer electronics and cosmetics were brought across the border by local middlemen, who do not need passports to cross through into Cambodia. This provided a wide range of lucrative jobs that had no educational requirements. Smuggling, however, like fishing, is nearly a thing of the past. Local officials have cracked down on the practice and cheap Chinese imports have lowered demand. On the other hand, the legality of gambling in Cambodia – and the growth of casinos right over the border – has brought Vinh Nguon some opportunities. Residents provide parking and guide services as well as running pawn shops that cater to losers.

Not surprising, given the lack of local job options, migration is prevalent in both communes. Beginning to rise in 2005, and experiencing a sharp uptick in 2011, which corresponds to the beginning of mechanised rice farming, up to half of the communes’ households have left in recent years, according to local officials. Another added that only the old and the young had stayed behind: the rest have left for jobs in Ho Chi Minh City and Binh Duong.
5 Methodological approach

We used a variety of qualitative and participatory research instruments (see Figure 4 for an example) to explore child and adolescent migration, drawing on a purposively selected sample. A summary is presented in Table 1; details of actual interview respondents, as well as the research instruments used, are provided in Appendix 2.

Table 1: Instrument type, purpose and sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instrument</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Who</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community mapping</td>
<td>To explore general community-level definitions, views and experiences of children affected by migration to identify areas of consensus and debate</td>
<td>Group of adults from Vinh Nguon, Group of adults from Da Phuoc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus group discussions (FGDs)</td>
<td>To explore group views and experiences vis-à-vis children affected by migration and what could be done from a policy and programming experience to minimise risks and facilitate safe migration</td>
<td>In-school boys, In-school girls, Mixed dropouts, Male dropouts, Female dropouts, Mothers without migrant children, Mothers with migrant children, Fathers without migrant children, Fathers with migrant children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-depth interviews (IDIs)</td>
<td>To understand individual parent’s and children’s experiences of migration and the ways in which these experiences shaped children’s broader wellbeing</td>
<td>Parents of migrants, Child migrants, Grandparents of left-behind children, Parents of left-behind children, Left-behind children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case studies</td>
<td>To explore the experiences of children in exceptional circumstances in more depth and identify the combination of drivers that shaped their life trajectories, including their experiences of related services</td>
<td>Former migrants, Trafficking victims, Street children, Child sex workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key informant interviews – provincial and local (KIs)</td>
<td>To find out about relevant policies and programmes shaping migration in general, children affected by migration specifically, and the types of services and responses available, how well these are being implemented</td>
<td>Commune level, District level, Provincial level</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 4: FGD participatory problem tree analysis about adolescent migration
Several caveats are required before we present our research findings. First, given previous research in An Giang, which suggested high rates of trafficking, the current study was initially targeted at trafficking in particular and migration in general. What we found during a pilot visit, however, was that reported cases of trafficking were quite rare, and facilities that have historically dealt with returnees had caseloads approaching zero. Instead, the dominant theme in terms of child vulnerability, despite GDP growth and dropping poverty rates, remains, in the minds of our respondents, poverty and its broader spill-over effects on children’s rights to development, protection and care. Where that economic vulnerability intersects with distress migration, children’s care is likely to be particularly compromised, regardless of whether the children themselves have migrated or have been left behind. Accordingly, for our main fieldwork, we focused on questions of inadequate care in the context of poverty-induced migration.

Also of note is that it is highly likely that the most successful migrants are not living in Vinh Nguon and Da Phuoc – and are thus not reflected in our study. While many of the parents had children who were still away, we heard about those experiences second-hand. The adolescent migrants we interviewed, with a few exceptions (those who were back in the commune to visit), were those who had moved home because their migration experiences were not successful in one way or another. While this inevitably colours our findings, it was also crucial in terms of identifying the vulnerabilities and risk patterns this research aimed to uncover.

In addition, missing – for the most part – are the children who have migrated with their parents and only return to the commune once a year. Again, while we heard their stories second-hand, we were unable to capture their voices directly, owing to resource constraints.

Finally, because we were specifically looking to highlight the needs of the most vulnerable, we interviewed adolescents living at both Open House, a home for trafficked returnees, and the Children’s Detention Centre. We acknowledge that the life experiences of these children are exceptional – and have taken care to ensure those exceptional cases are not presented as typical. Nevertheless, we do believe they offer important insights into the strengths and weaknesses of existing child protection services for children who unfortunately do fall through the cracks.
6 Life on the edge: scraping by in Da Phuoc and Vinh Nguon

6.1 Employment – or the lack thereof

Box 8: Jobs and wages (per day)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job Description</th>
<th>Wage (VND)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Washing clothes</td>
<td>30,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Picking vegetables or weeding</td>
<td>50-60,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Driving a motorbike</td>
<td>10-30,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sewing</td>
<td>20-50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making or selling food</td>
<td>35-45,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carrying rice or sugar</td>
<td>60,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sorting waste</td>
<td>50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Processing swim bladders</td>
<td>65-80,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masonry</td>
<td>100,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: $1 = approximately VND 21,100

As was mentioned above, the prevailing theme from our respondents, regardless of age, gender or migration status, was that jobs in the commune are both hard to find and largely poorly paid. One mother said, ‘There are no jobs, even if we are working it’s still not enough for a living’. While our respondents tended to still see themselves as farmers – and often still had the large families that farming demanded – most were from families that had been wage labourers for generations because of land concentration. ‘Since the time of my husband’s grandfather, they all worked as labourers for others’, said another mother. This worked well enough while agricultural jobs were still plentiful. The mechanisation of the past two years, however, has forced families to rely on cobbled-together, poorly paid, erratic jobs (see Box 8). ‘Here’, said one 20-year-old former migrant, ‘I can work one day and five days without jobs’. Many other respondents said they worked at best one day in three. Another mother concluded, ‘We still can survive […] but we spend as we can earn here’. While other areas of Viet Nam have seen an influx of new forms of work, such as tourism or companies, our respondents did not hold out much hope for such opportunities. As their communes are located in a border region, where surveillance is high, most adults remained quite pessimistic about the development of local labour markets.

The experiences of the families we interviewed confirmed both the key importance of rural income diversification as a ‘pathway out of poverty’ (Barrett et al., 2001) and UN Viet Nam’s (2010: 32) observation that ‘there is a stronger expectation that children should contribute to household income than in Western industrialized countries’ (see also Bourdillion et al., 2010). Indeed, our respondents noted that, because wages are so low – and work so irregular – they often must rely on children’s wages to supplement adult earnings, though they said that children
today were far less likely to work than they were in the past. Children in our research reported that they began working very young, with nine year olds ‘often selling lottery tickets and serving as sale assistants in shops to make extra income for their families’ (commune-level KI A). They also reported that their jobs were often quite hazardous. Lottery ticket sellers, for example, are often at risk of opportunist assault, especially from local drug addicts in need of ready cash. Similarly, several boys said they regularly sprayed pesticides. An 18-year-old girl, who had never been to school and whose most regular work was sorting scrap, commented, ‘Sometimes I cut my hands. Sometimes the nails cut me while I’m sorting’. However, while children’s wages are low – even lower than those of adults – our respondents often considered every extra dong important as it helps smooth cash flow problems and enable families to avoid taking out loans to meet their consumption needs.

As has been noted by Scott et al. (2006), this is particularly the case when families are already in debt. Several adolescents mentioned that their parents’ incomes were used to pay down debt and that their own was used for daily living. For example, one girl, who first migrated at 14, said, ‘He worked to repay the debt, my mother also worked to repay the debt and I worked to buy rice’. A few respondents noted that they had got into debt through well-intentioned anti-poverty programmes that had offered them credit in order to purchase livestock. A commune-level KI explained that ‘in recent years, the credit programme has not been good. Some borrowers can’t pay the loans as they have lost in husbandry activities. Those raised pigs in the year of pig diseases infection. Pigs died and the owners can’t pay the debt’ (KI M). The debt situation has been further complicated by widespread misunderstanding about the mechanics of the loan programme. Many recipients viewed the loans as grants – rather than loans – and were unprepared to pay them back. Indeed, default rates in Vinh Nguon have been so high the commune has been barred from further programme participation.

**Figure 5: Net fishing near Da Phuoc**

Echoing Krishna (2010), who found in his sample of 35,000 people in five countries (not including Vietnam), that poverty was only ‘one illness away’, children’s incomes were also particularly important when families were burdened by ill-health, which was quite common among those who were struggling the hardest. Several families had chronically ill or disabled children, and many parents were not well enough to work regularly. While few respondents said health care was unavailable, it was common for families to go into debt in order to access care. One mother said of her son, ‘Since Tet, he has been to the hospital twice. It takes up to several million dong even with the health insurance. Last time, it cost 6 million dong for 10 days. This time, 4 million dong for five days’. These are not inconsequential sums, given that daily wages only rarely reach VND 100,000. The only option for most was noted by one 17-year-old out-of-school girl, who explained, ‘He got sick […] there was no money so my mum had to take a loan. That was when we got in debt’.

Evidencing the power of filial piety, children – and their parents – reported that children’s wages were universally turned over to adults, who often then give them some small sum back for their own use. One out-of-school boy

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26 We have anonymised KI responses where we feel the information they provided might be sensitive.

27 While microcredit has been much criticised recently, owing to concerns that profit making is trumping anti-poverty efforts, the situation in Viet Nam is somewhat different, as loans are issued not through NGOs or banks but through the government.
reported, ‘I give all to my mother. I earn 1.5 million and I give her exactly 1.5 million’. Parents noted that girls, who are carefully socialised to the Three Obediences (to father, to husband and to son) (Locke, 2012) require less money for their own use, as they usually sacrifice more for their parents than boys, and ‘spend little and give much money to their families’. A local high school teacher confirmed this observation, saying girls were particularly obedient and hardworking and would do whatever they had to in order to help their parents.

As is discussed more below, a few adolescents said they had to work to help pay their siblings’ school fees. For example, one girl, who had left school after eighth grade and was the only adolescent to mention a monthly, rather than daily, salary, said that, while her parents were each earning VND 1.7 million a month (roughly $81), making rice noodles, their entire incomes were required to support her brother’s university studies, leaving her own small income to cover daily living costs. Other children, typically the oldest in their families, said they worked so their younger siblings could attend school.

### 6.2 Poverty programming

The poverty situation in Da Phuoc and Vinh Nguon looks good on paper. Not only are poverty rates low – under 1% in Vinh Nguon in 2013 – but also there are a plethora of support programmes, including free food, housing renovation, subsidised medical care, low-interest loans and schooling support, mentioned by KIs. That said, although most of the families in our study mentioned time and time again their poor economic conditions, few were on the poor list – or even the near-poor list. One mother of 13-year-old twins said her family had been on the poor list but had lost their status when she and her husband left the commune temporarily for work. Several other families said they had previously received support and wished they still did. ‘Back then’, said the girl whose parents were working to keep her brother in university, ‘we were a poor household. I was happy because at that time the commune supported us with money’. However, similar to the situation reported by the World Bank (2012), most of our respondents did not appear ever to have received support, despite their obvious vulnerability. A few children, for example, mentioned irregular meals and hunger; many more told of low-quality meals that consisted solely of noodles and rice. The mother of the twins mentioned above, now back in the commune after unsuccessfully trying to increase her income through migration, sobbed, ‘If we have money, we eat much, otherwise, we eat little. Sometimes, we give up foods to each other, no one eat anything’.

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28This pattern is not uncommon. Rushing (2006), in her work with sexually exploited migrant girls in Viet Nam, found they often began working to make money for siblings’ education. Young migrants in Ghana and Ethiopia can share this motivation (Whitehead et al., 2007).
The few families who gave specifics about their experiences with poverty relief programmes largely felt that such programmes did not go far enough in terms of helping people escape poverty. For example, one elderly woman, raising her great-niece while the child’s parents worked in Ho Chi Minh City, said the parents received support from the commune for only one year – not long enough to alter their long-term prospects: ‘they issued a poor household certificate that is valid for a year. Then it was withdrawn. It should be issued for a few years for them to overcome the poverty’. Provincial-level KIs (KIs C) attributed this type of short-term support to the poverty targets decided at central government level mentioned above. They noted that each commune had a target of 1.5% a year for poverty reduction and that that target did not account for the risk of people slipping back into poverty.

Another mother, a former migrant who had raised all four of her children, aged 14-19, while living on a boat, complained that, while she would like to get onto dry land, and had been promised support from the commune to do so, she was yet to receive any help. She explained, ‘They said they would give us help; they would support us as a poor household to move us to that residential area. They gave us the paper already, but we don’t know when we’ll have a house. It’s been two or three years, but we haven’t heard any news.’ KIs at provincial and commune levels agreed that itinerant families had been left out of programming more than others (Provincial KI D) and acknowledged that that poverty programming in general did not go far enough (Commune KI E). However, because funding is so tight, there is little else the commune can do: ‘The policies of support for poor families including those with children are still too superficial’.

As mentioned previously, perceptions are important when discussing poverty (Collinson, 2009). An Giang is not a poor province. Unlike Ha Giang, where poverty is endemic, most families in An Giang – and most respondents in our study – are doing significantly better than they were a decade ago. Furthermore, while economic inequality is rising in An Giang, it is still substantially lower than the national average.29 However, the general improvement felt by most means that those whose lives are not improving – or even those whose lives are generally better but often still suffer short-term cash flow problems – may feel poorer than they actually are because their relative poverty is deepening. This may be particularly the case for those families that have lost their livelihoods through mechanisation or better border control. One mother certainly understood this tension: ‘The more civilized our life is, the more miserable we are’.

6.3 Education – or the lack thereof

Even within the context of An Giang’s poor educational track record, respondents’ stories of children’s school leaving were quite surprising – because a considerable number of children had had very limited schooling. One adolescent boy explained that he had left after only a few weeks of first grade ‘because they asked us to pay the school fees, my mum didn’t have money; we were poor, we didn’t have money to pay’. An adolescent girl commented, ‘My family is so poor so when I finished Grade 2, I decided to drop out of the school. I stayed at home to help my parents’. These were not, unfortunately, isolated experiences. The analysis suggests it is not uncommon for children in Da Phuoc and Vinh Nguon to attend school for only short periods of time. This is despite the fact that primary education has been compulsory since 2005, that there is no national-level ‘poverty of aspiration’ among Vietnamese children or their caregivers (Dercon and Singh, 2013; Pells, 2011) and that returns on education in Viet Nam are increasing (Boyden, 2013).

29 The VHLSS 2010 reports that the ratio of monthly income/capita between the bottom and the top quintile is 9.2 nationally and 7.2 in An Giang (GSO, 2010b: 271). It further notes that, while inequality in An Giang has risen since its low in 2006, it remains lower than in 2002.
Another group of children had left school after they completed primary school but before they matriculated to sixth grade. This, as is discussed in more detail later, appears to be a common transition point at which whole families migrate, pulling their children out of school.

The third – and largest – group of children had left school while they were in lower-secondary school, most often after Grade 7.\(^{30}\) Given the late school entry that many children mentioned, and the regularity with which the poorest children appear to repeat grades,\(^{31}\) this would correspond roughly to mid-adolescence, an age at which community FGDs suggested children were ‘old enough’ to be useful in terms of work. Some lower-secondary dropouts said they were the youngest children and their labour was needed in order to support the educational aspirations of their older siblings. Others said they were the oldest and were expected to help supplement the family income so younger siblings could stay in school. One adolescent girl, who had left school in sixth grade, said, ‘I dropped out because I was the oldest child, so I had to work’. All but one mentioned their family’s poverty.

Some cases of school leaving were clearly driven by children’s – mostly boys’ – needs and interests. One father, whose son left after ninth grade, despite winning many awards and prizes, had tried desperately to keep him in school. He explained, ‘I tried my best to persuade him. I told him about the poor situation of the family and studying was the only way for him to have better life than me. I tried hard to be able to send him to school. But he did not like’. Another father, whose son also left school at 14, reported that his son refused to go back to school. ‘He did not want to study, he is keen on playing, playing some game. He said no, he would not go back to school even if I hit him to dead’. Community leaders noted that, since the introduction of the internet in 2007, it had become harder to keep boys interested in school and away from games. ‘Since the internet shops were opened’, explained one, ‘they go there and drop out of school’. Given, as mentioned earlier, that girls’ educational trajectories are already higher than boys’, it will be interesting to see how the impact of gaming on boys’ schooling plays out in coming years.

Other children have other reasons for school leaving. Some clearly lack motivation; a common refrain from out-of-school boys was they were ‘fed up with studying’. UNICEF (2012: 98) notes that this ‘may be due to a range of underlying causes, including weak academic performance, language barriers, a lack of good role models, or negative peer pressures’. While language barriers cannot explain our respondents’ lack of motivation, given that almost all were Kinh,\(^{32}\) none of the parents we interviewed said they had gone to school beyond primary school, and many were illiterate, which may indicate their children lack good role models, as well as providing evidence of the strength of the link between parents’ and children’s human capital (see Behrman et al., 2013).

Other children left – apparently of their ‘own’, highly constrained, volition – owing to filial piety and a willingness to sacrifice their own futures for their families’ short-term needs. One girl, who left school in seventh grade, was expelled because she continually skipped school to visit her mother and her new baby sister, who had no one else to take care of them as her parents were separated. She explained that, while she lived with her paternal grandmother and her father was paying for her education, ‘I skipped classes, so I did worse than other people in class. I was moved to another school […] but I didn’t listen to my teachers and so I was expelled’. Another girl,

\(^{30}\) This is clearly a broader pattern: Nguyen (2013) reports that the rural school dropout rate in Vietnam jumps from 10.8% at age 12 to 20% at age 13.

\(^{31}\) Children in Vietnam typically start first grade when they are six years old, although Nguyen (2013) reports that in rural areas it is not until age eight that 95% of children are actually enrolled.

\(^{32}\) While 15% of the commune’s population is Cham, all of the adolescents and most of the adults in our research were Kinh.
mentioned above, left school after eighth grade. ‘I dropped out; I had to sacrifice so that my brother could go to university’, she explained. Her parents were initially opposed to the idea, as was her brother, who wanted to drop out himself so that she could stay in school. Eventually, however, she managed to convince them that her brother’s degree was more important than her entry into upper-secondary school.

Commune officials and teachers, however, noted that school leaving was almost always precipitated by parents’ demands – which fall more heavily on girls, who are, as mentioned earlier, more committed than boys to helping their parents. One commune-level informant explained, ‘The children may want to go to school, but parents don’t allow them to do it’ (KI H). Children’s stories confirmed how common this was. An adolescent girl, who very much wanted to go to university, was forced by her father to leave school after ninth grade, so she could migrate with her sister to bolster the family income. She reported, ‘I also want to pursue higher education but my dad told me to leave school this year because I have so many younger siblings’. Another had a similar story: ‘My dad told me to leave school. I prefer going to school but there’re too many kids in the family and my dad is ill, we don’t earn enough to maintain our lives’. These demands are often placed even on very young oldest children. One mother, for example, said of her oldest, now 19, ‘He competed the second grade; when he was about to enter the third grade we made him drop out, to work to help us raise the two little brothers’.

Even where children are clearly leaving school because of their parents, they often reframe the decision as their own. One boy, who later admitted his parents had told him to leave school, initially said he had left school voluntarily. He said, ‘I’d rather work to make money for my family; if I had continued going to school, I would have been part of the burden to my family’. Other adolescents explained that parents often resorted to emotional manipulation to encourage children to ‘choose’ a path that was contrary to their own personal interests. ‘Parents talk about the family economy, complaining about difficulties and often criticising grown-up children for their inability to make money to help parents’, said one girl. Children’s lack of voice, however, was highlighted by one girl, who was told to drop out in seventh grade by her grandmother and given only one day to say goodbye to her friends. Furious at her father, whose debt-driven migration had left the family both poor and labour constrained, she was unable to speak up for herself. ‘God I was so angry then. I thought, if it wasn’t for you, I wouldn’t have dropped out. I didn’t say it, I just kept quiet, and so I stopped going to school since.’

Children, parents and commune officials reported that short-term thinking – largely bound by families’ intergenerational economic situations – drove parents’ decision-making regarding their children’s schooling, though a Department of Education official also noted the importance of family dissolution. One boy said, ‘My family was very poor. We have to work for other people. We even don’t have enough money for living, not to mention money for studying’. Some children spoke of the direct expenses of school – primarily uniforms and the myriad user fees that are required, particularly for secondary school (London, 2012; Nguyen, 2013). Most, however, saw the opportunity costs inherent in continued education as the most onerous. As one girl explained, ‘Only one or two family members work and they can’t make enough money, so I have to drop out of school halfway’. Oddly, parents often focused on the costs of food for school. One mother said, ‘My husband also earns VND 100,000 per day but has to spend VND 30,000 on schooling’. When pressed, she, like several other parents, admitted that not only was that VND 30,000 for food but also the child would have to eat regardless of whether he went to school.
While children said they were leaving school largely so they could work, few were able, given the local job situation, to find gainful employment. As one adolescent noted, ‘Jobs are few and available after a long time. So if they wait for local jobs, it is not enough’. Some, mostly girls, drop out to help with household duties. One 17-year-old girl, who left school after sixth grade, said, ‘My grandma was old; there was no one to look after the house. I dropped out’. Other adolescents reported that they had dropped out to mind their younger siblings, who, as mentioned above, are often multitudinous. An 18-year-old boy, who had been the third best student in his class, said, ‘I dropped out and helped my parents take care of the kids’. Most adolescents – particularly the older ones – supplement their domestic responsibilities with work that mirrors that of their parents – poorly paid and sporadic. Few reported working more than half time or for more than the equivalent of $3/day, which suggests that education’s opportunity costs may be bearable if families’ short-term cash flow problems can be mitigated – and awareness-raising efforts can support parents to understand the value of investing in their children’s education.

Parental short-term thinking, according to local officials in Vinh Nguon, has been exacerbated by the presence of Ta Mau Market, just over the Cambodian border. Relating the proverb, ‘He who keeps company with the wolf will learn to howl’, one father noted that the smuggling opportunities that had grown out of that market since it was built 20 years ago had damaged ‘a whole human generation’. ‘They see that they can make money in the immediate future’, another explained. While, as noted above, smuggling opportunities are now far rarer, meaning fewer adolescents have access to ‘easy money’, KIs in Vinh Nguon largely felt the ‘personality’ of many families had been permanently altered. Given the stories that parents and children told – and the way they highlighted poverty as a driver of school leaving and child work – there is good reason to suspect local leaders are correct. By national standards, Da Phuoc and Vinh Nguon do not suffer from extreme income poverty. Comparisons between these communes and others in which we have undertaken research are quite striking. As mentioned above, in Hmong communities in Ha Giang, poverty is genuinely hand-to-mouth (Jones et al., 2013a). Even more notable, however, are the differences between these communes and Dinh Hoa, a commune a mere 150 km away, in neighbouring Kien Giang province (Jones et al., 2013b). While the livelihood strategies, poverty rates, landlessness and geography are roughly analogous between the two research sites, in the latter, children – and their parents – hold a near reverence for education and its transformative power. Parents there are willing to ‘plough harder’ to keep their children in school – an attitude that was much less common in the current sample and is difficult to explain except by noting that proverbs often contain more than a kernel of truth (Jones et al., 2013b: 46).
Given this, teachers and officials were largely scathing of parents’ decisions about school leaving. As one commune-level KI explained, ‘Despite our persuasion efforts, they say that education is a waste and useless and they’d better let their children to work for income’ (KI J). Another continued, ‘Many parents […] don’t attach importance to education, they raise the children and when the children can work they send them to work’ (commune-level KI H). In-school adolescents are very aware of this tension. One 14-year-old boy, in ninth grade, said of his out-of-school peers, ‘Parents don’t think of the possibility that, in the future, their children will be ignorant and unemployed. They think that making money is more important than studying at the moment’.

Not all of our respondents were prone to the short-term thinking that so demoralises local officials. One girl, for example, clearly understood the cycle of poverty. She said, ‘Those who didn’t go to school will end up with heavy labour work, and when they have kids, their lives will forever be in hardships and trapped in poverty’. An 18-year-old boy, in Grade 12, expressed a similar opinion. He was planning on going to university because, ‘I see that my parents are very miserable, so I think that education is the only way to get rid of poverty’. Because he also wanted his Grade 11 sister to go to university, and knew his parents could not support two children’s studies at once, he planned on supporting his own university education. ‘If my younger sister passes the entrance exam, I will work to pay my university fees. My parents will provide for my sister’, he explained. A mother, whose two oldest children dropped out while still in primary school, wanted her younger sons, 13-year-old twins, to stay in school as long as possible. She said, ‘Let them study for good. I will feed myself and them with anything. I will try to provide for them to go to school’. These sentiments, unfortunately, were quite rare among our respondents.

Furthermore, even where families value education and work to ensure their children attend school regularly, poor children are often left behind. One great-aunt, for example, noted that they did not have access to the supplemental classes that are increasingly important in Vietnamese education. She explained, ‘Children with rich parents can have extra lessons so that they will not be ill-treated at school’. Similarly, a grandmother, who made sure she always attended school meetings for her grandson, felt their poverty was a constant source of embarrassment at school. ‘I saw other parents contributing 500,000–600,000 or up to over a million. Seeing that, I felt ashamed for my grandson’, she said, noting that, while other children ate together, he could only rarely afford to join in because ‘he should remember that he didn’t have money’.

A very real concern, held by both children and parents in our research and also reported by UNICEF (2012), is that schooling, especially through the lower-secondary level, but often through the upper-secondary level, does not necessarily translate into employment. Teachers noted that this made it even harder for struggling families to invest in education. One father in Vinh Nguon said, ‘Even my daughter, when she was in school, she won scholarships every year, and she graduated as an excellent student, but since she graduated, she hasn’t found a job yet’. In addition to the reality that the local job scene is bleak, many adults spoke of the sums of money required to secure a well-paying job. One, for example, said, ‘In the health sector, if a person wants to apply for a job in a hospital, he will have to pay VND 30–50 million’. Another commented that he had ‘heard that it would cost hundreds of millions dong to get in a bank’.

6.4 Educational programming

There are a plethora of educational policies and programmes in Da Phuoc and Vinh Nguon – and KIs indicated that, for the most part, they were fairly successful. The transition rate from lower-secondary to upper-secondary school, as reported by commune-level KI H, is now over 80% – up, according to commune-level KI F, from less than 50% a few years ago. Poor, near-poor and ethnic students are exempted from all fees, which, as mentioned earlier, can be considerable. Supplies, including notebooks and uniforms, are provided, by the schools and the
Women’s Union to children who need them. Furthermore, since last year, all children in Vinh Nguon,33 because it is a border commune, receive a monthly stipend of VND 70,000 to support their studies. In addition, excellent students have access to a wide variety of scholarships, some of which, according to our respondents, are quite large. For example, the mother of the 13-year-old twins said one of her sons received VND 1.5 million every year.

Working in tandem with these incentives are a variety of carefully constructed disincentives. The School Persuasion Board, for example, visits all truant children and attempts to encourage them to return to school, at times levying the VND 100,000 fine that is permissible by law. Furthermore, parents who do not send their children back to school are publicly shamed in community announcements that are broadcast via both loudspeaker and radio. Community officials indicated that they were beginning to see the results of this programming, as the dropout rate has dropped significantly over the past several years.

However, it is clear that, despite these efforts, programming continues to fail many children. While the transition rates from lower to upper secondary have improved significantly, this statistic entirely misses the children who leave school before lower-secondary school graduation – not to mention those who never complete primary school. A new pilot programme, placing professionally trained counsellors in six lower-secondary schools across An Giang (not including Da Phuoc and Vinh Nguon), aims to reduce the numbers of these early dropouts but, as efforts are nascent, this will take time to scale up.

Stories from our respondents also indicated gaps. For example, one grandmother reported that, when her grandson was in Grade 10, ‘The then head teacher was a bit difficult and he didn’t accept my short payment. He said that if the boy couldn’t pay in Grade 10, he wouldn’t be able to complete whole upper-secondary level and he would let my grandson drop out if he didn’t pay’. While this action was in clear violation of school rules, it is unlikely to be reported, as provincial-level KIs G noted that the only time schools were monitored was if they requested it themselves – which none had ever done.

A girl, who dropped out after ninth grade, despite being the ‘best in the system’, told a similar story. She said, ‘After I took the exams [...] and was ready to go to Grade 10, I heard some older girls who studied here before me say that it cost a lot for Grade 10 so I dropped out’. School and commune officials did not intervene or offer the support that would have facilitated her enrolment in upper-secondary school. Finally, truancy fines are not always enforced because, as one headmaster noted, ‘You can’t fine people who don’t have any money’.

Furthermore, educational programming aimed at out-of-school children largely misses the mark, according to our KIs. For example, while the commune offers continuation classes for children who have dropped out of regular school but are now interested in continuing their education, uptake is very poor. A commune-level informant noted, ‘In the beginning of the school year pupils came to study, but they gradually dropped out. They said that they were too tired after a hardworking day and they were unable to study’ (KI H). Similar comments were made about vocational education: ‘The vocational training also faces problems. For example, the children must study for three months in a row, during which they cannot work while the government doesn’t support them with any stipend’ (Commune-level KI E). This, the KI said, explained why they could teach only a few vocational classes each year: they must have 30 students to run a class and interest is comparatively low. Furthermore, in Vinh Nguon, of the 30 students who had signed up to take the last several classes, officials noted, only 2 to 4 had actually completed the curriculum. According to a commune-level informant, this was in part because, since people lack the capital to actually start their own businesses after training, few think the continued opportunity costs are justifiable (KI J). Oddly, while most KIs mentioned the availability of training programmes on hairdressing and nail art, only one (provincial-level KIs C) seemed to recognise the potential mismatch between such skills and local job openings. He stressed that it would be better to teach young people more relevant skills – like mobile phone repair.

33Children in Da Phuoc, because it is not directly on the border, but across the river, do not qualify for this stipend.
7 Migration: going where the jobs are

7.1 Incidence and drivers

Given the lack of local job opportunities, as well as An Giang’s high migration outflows, it is not surprising migration is an increasingly common path in Da Phuoc and Vinh Nguon. While migration is not recognised as a major policy issue at the provincial level (KI K, for example, reported that ‘there are almost no migrants’), commune leaders noted that, ‘Many people began moving in 2005. In 2011-2012, the movement was so strong. In 2013, it is much stronger’. Indeed, despite Viet Nam’s sedentarist policies, commune-level KI M reported that over half of her commune’s population had migrated, almost all to Ho Chi Minh City and Binh Duong; ‘About 50%-60% of them have gone away for jobs’. Noting that ‘This village is very empty now’, participants in one FGD were concerned Vinh Nguon had passed the tipping point at which the local economy could be revived. ‘The problem’, said one respondent, ‘is that people have moved away, so there aren’t enough workers left’.

As mentioned early, migration in Viet Nam is increasingly feminised, with females more likely than males not only to migrate but also to do so at younger ages (GSO, 2011b). Our respondents reported this was also the case in Vinh Nguon and Da Phuoc. For example, one mother of an adolescent girl migrant said, ‘Women can’t find a job and have to migrate’. While provincial-level data indicate that girls are more likely to complete their schooling than their brothers, a 13-year-old in-school boy disagreed: ‘Girls migrate earlier because the girls don’t go to higher grades in school’.

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 excitement to better access to consumer goods to independence, KIs and migrant families were very clear that there was only one pertinent driver: to find a job. As one provincial-level official noted, for example, ‘Migration is connected to poverty. In recent years, the availability of work in rural areas has become more limited while that in the cities has expanded. In urban areas, there are more industrial parks, more jobs, so most people who are poor and in difficulty want to go there’ (KI Y). A commune-level informant confirmed this: ‘There are no jobs for them in the commune, no cash income, if they continue to live here, they don’t have income, so they have no other choices than migration to survive’ (KIs J). These comments closely echo Le et al.’s (2011) conclusion that in Viet Nam migration has become a de facto poverty alleviation programme; they also dovetail with the findings of Nguyen-Hoang and McPeak (2010), who conclude that Vietnamese migrants, compared with migrants in other countries, are particularly sensitive to unemployment rates in their home communities.

Families agreed with KIs and were able to offer a variety of specific reasons for migration. Poverty alleviation, rather than economic mobility, was the primary reason given by most, although this could be, as noted earlier, an artefact of who we were able to interview – as the most successful migrants were not living at ‘home’. One grandmother, now raising her 18-year-old grandson, said of her son, ‘He said that if he continued to stay here, all of us would die, so he and his wife had better go there to see if they could make money there’. As noted in the larger literature, stories about debt featured heavily in reasons for migration, as did those about illness, landlessness and large families. While Huijsmans and Baker (2012: 942) observe that, ‘reducing young people’s involvement in migration to absolute poverty or the absolute lack of employment would be an over simplification which falsely
reduces the young people concerned to mere pawns in structurally determined games’, we found very little evidence among our respondents that other factors even entered the picture.

Not surprising, given the communes’ migration rates, respondents indicated that migration was seen as not just normal but almost expected. Migrants and their families noted that no one looked down on them for leaving the commune – or for returning. Several did, however, note that, if families left because they had debts, they were usually unable to return until they had been paid off, largely because of shame. One young woman, now 21, explained, ‘My dad has to work away from home and doesn’t have any money, so he feels inferior and doesn’t like coming back to his home village’.

Increasing rates of migration have ramifications beyond the local economy; they also impact social cohesion. The research team noted that residents of Da Phuoc and Vinh Nguon appeared to have limited social capital on which they could rely, particularly the poorest families that live in ‘temporary’ houses on the reclaimed river banks. Many of our respondents seemed less willing to invest not only in their houses as homes, but also in their co-Residents as neighbours and their communes as communities. Weak social cohesion has perhaps grown out of the history of flooding, which uprooted some families on an annual basis (until the recent mitigation) and forced others out of their communities into more secure housing on government-subsidised land, and is now fed by high rates of out-migration. This poorly developed social capital has ramifications for children’s safety and wellbeing, as well as for the development of their human capital, as families seemed uncomfortable with the notion of asking for help – and, as mentioned above, shamed by their continuing poverty.

7.2 Migration and children

Figure 8: Left behind girl in Vinh Nguon

There are three groups of children that migration has an impact on: those left behind while their parents migrate, those who migrate with their parents and those who migrate on their own. As noted above, the latter have received the most attention, primarily because independent child migration has long been conflated with trafficking, is thought to signal family rupture and disturbs notions that under-18s ought to be cared for and supervised by their parents. The migration literature has tended to ignore left-behind children and there has been little recognition that ‘children who migrate with their families are not necessarily safe from harm’ (Davidson and Farrow, 2007: 11; see also de la Garza, 2010; Toyota et al., 2007; Whitehead, 2013). Based on the experiences of our respondents, all three groups of children are vulnerable in different ways – but, as is clear from the number of out-of-school, working children living in Da Phuoc and Vinh Nguon, many of the vulnerabilities that might be attributed to migration are perhaps more closely tied to poverty, which colours everything from school leaving to job choice to loneliness.

34 Boyden (2013); Boyden and Howard (2013); Davidson and Farrow (2007); Huijsmans and Baker (2012); Orgocka (2012); Whitehead (2013); Whitehead and Hashim (2005); Whitehead et al. (2007).
In Da Phuoc and Vinh Nguon, left-behind children are usually school-aged and most often specifically left in order to facilitate school attendance. While there are now provincial-level efforts to estimate numbers, these are not well known at the local level, with guestimates of the number of left-behind children ranging from ‘about 10’ to ‘very common’. As is discussed in greater detail below, most left-behind children live with their grandparents, though a few live with older siblings or other relatives. Children who migrate with their parents are also poorly counted. While official, provincial-level data indicate that in 2012 1,459 children, in all of An Giang, migrated with their parents (KI Y), commune leaders indicated that actual numbers were far higher. According to our respondents, children who migrate with their parents are usually young adolescents who have recently competed primary school—and are dropping out permanently. Some pre-school children also migrate with their parents. As crèches are both relatively rare and expensive, it is not unusual for young families to take along a grandmother to care for them. Independent child migrants are also poorly tracked – and the mismatch between official data and families’ stories is large.

Most KIs, and many parents, indicate that independent migrants are almost always over the age of 18, which is the minimum age at which jobs at larger companies are available. One mother explained, ‘People don’t feel secured when letting their teenage children to work far from home. They don’t want children at the age of 15 or 16 years to go; they must be older’. That said, however, even in our small sample we heard numerous exceptions to this ‘rule’, with children as young as 11 informally migrating to Ho Chi Minh City without their parents and older adolescents apparently quite facile with forging identity documents to obtain commune permission. However, most of these children, as noted previously, are ‘not necessarily leaving the supportive familial network that transcends’ home (Boyden and Howard, 2013: 365). One community leader explained, ‘Even if they go on their own, actually they’re not totally alone, they still have acquaintances, for example relatives or neighbours’. For example, the 11-year-old boy whose story is told in Box 9 later on went with his older brother.

Among our respondents, independent adolescent migrants can be roughly categorised in two ways. There are children who are allowed to migrate versus those who were pushed into migration and there are those who migrate formally, with papers, versus those who migrate informally, without papers. While some adolescents indicated that migration was their idea, and that they then had to talk their parents into it, most felt that migration, like school leaving, was parent-driven – albeit under highly constrained circumstances that included both financial pressure and a limited ability to imagine a different future. One 16-year-old girl, for example, said, ‘My dad told me to go to work in the city with my sister’. Another, who left home at 14 to live and work with an aunt in the mountains, reported, ‘My mother told me, “Please go, honey. There is nothing here for you to work”’. KIs also indicated that parents usually made migration decisions for their children, and that girls in Da Phuoc and Vinh Nguon, like those in Lao PDR (Huijsmans, 2011), tend to be more likely than boys to go along with these decisions.

Parents’ control over those decisions, like those over school leaving, was often couched less in terms of demands than as reminders of generational obligation. One adolescent girl noted that her peers had migrated because ‘People in the families kept saying that they didn’t do anything to help and that they only played’. A mother, whose younger polio-stricken son quit school in fourth grade to sell lottery tickets and whose older son received permission from the commune to migrate at the age of 17, told the latter that he should work in the city in order to save money for his own eventual marriage. She admitted to the research team, however, that she had only told him this because ‘If he is interested in marriage matters, he will work’. In seven months of work he has managed to send home VND 5-6 million, all of which his parents have spent on things such as improved food and home improvements.

In sharp contrast with the typical pattern, a handful of children said they would like to migrate to make money for their families but had been denied permission by their parents to do so – primarily because of concerns about ‘social evils’ and gender-based violence. A girl in a FGD said, ‘My father won’t allow me. I rarely go outside as he is scared that something may happen to me’. A boy added, ‘If I go alone, my dad is afraid that I will be tempted by bad friends, so he doesn’t let me go’.

35 Recall that Vietnamese 18 year olds are 17 based on international standards.
Official migration papers are rarely available to adolescents under the age of 18 and, according to commune-level KIs R, are unneeded for seasonal migration, which is popular with adolescents. However, as mentioned above, this does not seem to slow most adolescents down. Many simply go without papers. One boy, for example, who had never been to school, began working at the age of nine and migrated for the first time at fourteen. He went to Long Xuyen, lived with an uncle and worked as a ball boy, making about VND 150,000 – enough to help purchase medication for his widowed mother and his grandfather. Other younger adolescents simply rely on forged papers. A girl explained how easy this is: ‘You only have borrow someone’s identity card, attach your photograph into it, have it copied and the People’s Committee will notarise it’. Parents do not seem discomfited by this chicanery. One mother reported, in a very matter-of-fact way, ‘My child is only 16 years old. So she has to borrow another person’s documents’. While there are protective arguments to be made in favour of preventing children from migrating by themselves when they are too young, household registration laws that preclude freedom of movement are widely seen as in need of abolition – by both citizens and NGOs (UN Viet Nam, 2010). This can be coupled with a longstanding tradition, most common in southern provinces including An Giang, of ‘fence breaking’, a term classically used by ‘Vietnam scholars to describe the violation of central government rules and regulations’ during the central planning era but also useful for understanding the myriad small ways in which people circumvent overly strict rules in order to get by (Malesky, 2004: 308).

It should be noted that, while recent research on independent migration has emphasised how it can position children to avoid ‘suffering in the mud’ or facilitate ‘passage through the life-course by increasing their autonomy and opening up their social and economic horizons’ (Boyden, 2013: 595), we see little evidence of this future seeking in Da Phuoc and Vinh Nguon. Indeed, as discussed above in the context of school leaving, the adolescents we interviewed were focused almost exclusively on the short-term needs of their families. Constrained by filial piety and an ethic of sacrifice, the agency of adolescent migrants in our study appears to have been considerably muted by cultural factors absent in Africa and Latin America. Particularly for girls, who are ironically seen as more obedient and more helpful, despite being less valued in terms of their long-term family role,36 there is little sense of positioning for tomorrow – merely a feeling they are paying back yesterday.

### 7.3 Migrant children’s work experiences

Migrant children do a wide variety of jobs, which largely depend more on their age than on whether they are migrating independently or with their parents. Younger adolescents, for example, can work at ‘small jobs’. One mother explained, ‘They still can work as housemaids at the age of 15, 16, without evidence of identity card or they can sell something or work in common restaurants’. A provincial-level KI confirmed that these were common jobs for adolescents – as is selling lottery tickets37 (KI Y). Adolescents can also work for their relatives – which some do, as in the case of the girl who had moved to the mountains to work in a hostel run by her aunt, and some pretend to do, as in the case of a 13-year-old girl who worked at a private garment factory in Binh Duong. Our respondents indicated that it was rare for younger adolescents to make more than VND 60,000/day or more than VND 1 million/month. Those who migrate with their families, like their non-migratory counterparts, are also likely to spend their days minding younger siblings and tending to domestic chores.

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36 Sons are seen as crucial to continue the family line and to provide support in old age; their birth improves the status of their mothers within the family and their fathers within the community (Nanda et al., 2012; Plan International, 2008).

37 Official provincial-level data indicate that in 2012 there were 350 children selling lottery tickets on a ‘permanent’ basis. Another 950 sold tickets over the summer.
Older adolescents, particularly those with papers, have more options. Our respondents indicated that most work for companies that manufacture clothing or footwear or process food, wood or rubber. Wages at these companies are typically paid monthly and, for our respondents, all of whom were working overtime, ranged from VND 2 million for entry-level work at garment companies to VND 5 million for more experienced workers at footwear companies. Adolescents reported that unofficial work – without papers – was far less lucrative. Several girls, who had migrated at 16 to work in small sewing workshops, reported that they were paid piecework rates and did not make more than VND 1.5 million.

Similar to other studies of migrants in Viet Nam and around the world, independent adolescents in our sample found their jobs through social networks – and usually through extended family members. One girl, who had migrated to Binh Duong at 16, explained, ‘The son of Auntie Bay went to Binh Duong to work. They came here and took me with them. They said that we should go to Binh Duong since it’s easy to work there. I was very interested so I decided to join them’. When she was unable to work with her cousin, because the company hired only literate workers, her aunt took her around to four other companies to help her find work. Another girl, who had migrated to Ho Chi Minh City at 16, found her job through ‘a girl who was my brother’s friend; she introduced me’. The friend not only set the girl up with a job and housing, but also loaned her money for transportation. Similar to what Heissler (2013) observed in Bangladesh, this friend took her protective role quite seriously. When the girl’s job did not work out the friend also loaned her money to get home.

This return migration is quite common, as the migration experiences of many adolescents are dynamic – and often circular. Some change jobs regularly, trying to increase their salaries; others return home on a regular basis, work in the commune for a period of time and then migrate again. For example, one boy who migrated to Kien Giang with his parents was there for two months before returning to the commune. The ball boy mentioned earlier lived in Long Xuyen for six months and is now back home and thinking of moving to Ho Chi Minh City. A girl who had migrated to Ho Chi Minh City with forged documents at 17 reported that she worked in a shoe factory for VND 1.3 million/month. Eight months later, when she turned 18, she returned to the commune for her papers and then moved to Binh Duong, where she spent another eight months cutting threads in a garment factory, for VND 2 million. Now back in the commune, she has no plans to migrate again.

7.4 Risky business: threats facing young migrants

Similar to other studies, we found that young migrants, regardless of whether they live with their families or on their own, face a number of risks. Key among these appears to be filial piety inspired ‘voluntary’ overtime, or what Huijsmans and Baker (2012) call ‘self-exploitation’, which leaves most working all day, every day, with no breaks. Without exception, our respondents indicated that migrants chose to work overtime as a way of maximising their salaries and off-setting their fixed costs. One mother explained, ‘Thanks to working overtime, they may be

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38 Fern (2006); Heissler (2013); Huijsmans (2012); SERC (2008); Whitehead (2013).
39 Cameron (2012); Fern (2006); Locke et al. (2008); Scott et al. (2006); SERC (2008); UN Viet Nam (2010); Whitehead (2013); Yoddumnern-Attig et al. (2007).
paid VND 4 or 5 million per month. But on average, each one gets VND 2.5 million only. Water bill and rental would cost up to VDN 3 million’. Another mother observed that, while overtime is voluntary, it is hardly without costs, as her children are ‘very sick because of overtime work’. A girl who had first migrated to Ho Chi Minh City at 16 explained that many adolescents felt these costs were bearable because they were so focused on sending money home. When asked why she worked so late she replied, ‘I was worried that if I didn’t work well, I wouldn’t make money to send my mum’.

**Figure 10: Making handicrafts in a factory**

Skimping on consumption expenses is another significant threat facing most young migrants in our study – and is again one that is both ‘voluntary’ and driven by a need to send home as much money as possible (see UN Viet Nam, 2010). Adolescent migrants reported that they frequently ate inadequate food and went without health care in order to save on their expenses. One girl who had migrated to HCMC at 16 said, ‘A lot of things were expensive there, while I didn’t have money to buy them, and so I shared vegetarian food with this lady to save money’. Another commented, ‘I ate noodles only once, when there was no money left I did not ask for more’. While parents often know what their children were sacrificing they did not, with a few exceptions, indicate that they found the sacrifice particularly problematic. One mother of a 17-year-old migrant reported, ‘She really tried to save; she didn’t dare spend on food. Every day she ate instant noodles and went to work; she didn’t dare eat anything’. Although not insensitive to her daughter’s plight, this mother, seeing no other options given the need for cash, found her daughter’s inadequate diet to be a bearable burden – at least in the short term.

Adolescents are generally healthy and most do not require regular health care; a few of our respondents, however, mentioned skimping on medical care to avoid ‘wasting’ money. For example, one 17-year-old girl cut her arm very badly on a fan soon after she arrived in Ho Chi Minh City. ‘Some people took me to a doctor to get stitches’, she reported, ‘but I didn’t have money so I didn’t get the stitches. It was more than VND 100,000. I didn’t want to waste the money’. Several other teens reported being ill while they were away from home and taking traditional medicine, rather than going to the doctor, because of cost differentials.

Echoing the larger literature, most KIs and some parents reported that adolescent migrants’ ‘accommodation is cheap, not stable and not safe’ (Cameron, 2012; Le et al., 2011; UN Viet Nam, 2010). Most adolescents, on the other hand, were more or less satisfied with their living conditions. In part this is because our respondents largely lived, as mentioned above, with their relatives, suggesting that the youngest migrants may in many cases have better accommodations than their slightly older peers, who are more likely to be living independently of not only their parents but also their extended family.

Young respondents who were living outside of family networks universally commented on the cost of rental accommodation – but very rarely said it was unsatisfactory. In part this may owe to their extremely low standards. While some migrants described small rooms and shared toilets, and usually many roommates, one girl said of her childhood home, ‘Our house was already a wreck; it was like a hut’. There were, of course, exceptions. One 17-year-old girl lived in a storeroom at the company where she worked – to save money. She explained, ‘There was no toilet. And it was dirty; there was nothing to sleep on. I was also worried because the room had no door. I was afraid people with bad thoughts would abuse me’. Another young woman, now 21, who lived in a dorm in Binh
Duong at the age of 18, found her accommodation perfectly acceptable except for one roommate – who, in violation of not only company policy but also Vietnamese social norms, invited her boyfriend to move in. She said, ‘That woman and that man slept right at the bottom of my bunk bed. I was afraid of going down and up; they were holding each other in their sleep’.

While previous research in Viet Nam has found that young migrants, and particularly the youngest, are often exploited and abused by their employers, most of our respondents thought their working conditions were fundamentally fine – and often better than those they had experienced back in the commune.40 For example, one boy who had gone to Ho Chi Minh City at 16 said, ‘My employer was very kind. My co-workers treated me well because we all worked together’. A 17-year-old girl, echoing her peers in Lao PDR (Huijsmans, 2011), commented that waiting tables all day every day was still preferable to working in their fields, ‘because it’s indoors, it’s cooler’. A father of three migrant boys said that, in general, migrant work was easier than work in the commune, which, if even available, was ‘very hard – farming, porter work etc. in hot weather. If you work in the city the work is easier as you work in house’. While some adolescents reported that they were yelled at and threatened by their employers, and found it very hard to take, children who were working in the commune reported similar experiences, suggesting that Viet Nam’s strict age hierarchies – and inexperience – are likely triggers for this emotional abuse. One girl who worked in Ho Chi Minh City at 16 related that, ‘When I first worked there, he scolded me very harshly’. However, when pressed about what training might be provided to new migrants, so they could avoid such scolding, she replied that, since no work is similar to any other work, people would just have to figure their jobs out on their own – scoldings or not.

While work experiences were generally positive, some migrant adolescents reported significant exploitation. This was again more related to age and legal status than whether children were migrating independently or with their parents. A girl in a FGD, for example, mentioned that her 15-year-old brother lived in Binh Duong doing electrical work – for cut-rate wages. She said, ‘He didn’t meet the age requirement, so his salary was much lower than other people working in the same company’. Another girl, living in Ho Chi Minh City at 16, reported, ‘At first, they said they would pay me VND 2-3 million per month. After that they changed their mind, and said [they would pay me] by number of products, I agreed; but after working for about one month, I saw that I made a lot of clothes, but they only paid me more than VND 200,000. They said after deducting the expenses for accommodation etc. there was no money left for me’. KIs indicated that this was a common issue. A Youth Union secretary in Vinh Nguon, for example, said migrant children often encountered ‘ghost companies and they won’t get any payment after several months of working’. Scott et al. (2006) note that the explosion of cottage industries over the past decade has far outstripped the availability of workplace inspectors, making it almost impossible to monitor businesses for violations such as hiring underage children or withholding wages.

Female adolescent migrants, who live under strict expectations of chastity, face the added risk of sexual harassment, which concerns their parents significantly. A father commented, ‘I think girls face more risks – must be harder when not old enough – they are very innocent’. A 16-year-old girl working in Ho Chi Minh City, for example, reported that a male co-worker consistently got too close to her. Another reported that a married male co-worker was excessively friendly. Similarly, several participants in FGDs reported that they had been ‘involuntarily hugged’. What is surprising about these stories is not their content, given that similar stories emerged from girls who had not migrated, but the consistency with which non-related adults helped girls face them. For example, in the first instance, an older female co-worker scared off the offending man and took care to guard the girl in the future. In the latter, the girls’ manager took her under wing and helped her negotiate safer boundaries. These experiences again show that independent adolescent migrants are not really ‘on their own’.

Minority adolescents can face extra risks. For example, Cham mothers reported that they were concerned about their children’s diets, as their Muslim dietary requirements are strict and their migrant children often went hungry

40 Fern (2006); ILSSA et al. (2009); Le et al. (2011); Scott et al. (2006); UN Viet Nam (2010).
rather than break the rules. One explained, ‘In the companies, they serve a lot of meat. We ethnic people don’t eat pork and other kinds of meat. We are vegetarians’.

Another risk, primarily facing independent migrants, though also a significant concern for children migrating with their parents, is the threat of ‘social evil’. Given intensive community education, adolescents and their parents reported extreme worry about whether they or their children would be pulled into a decadent lifestyle by urban living. A mother, for example, was concerned that, if her children had money, they might ‘lead a fast life or become drug addicts’. A father, mentioned above, went so far as to interview company owners to make sure his 16-year-old son would be prohibited from drinking. With few exceptions, adolescents reported just as much worry as their parents. A boy related that he had ‘an older friend who got caught in social evils. He was tempted by his bad friends’. Many children seem to think a decadent lifestyle will simply sneak up on them – and that they must be on guard against ‘becoming bad’ at all times. A common response to this fear, made, as Yoddumnern-Attig et al. (2007) note, more intense by homesickness, is to simply never go out other than for work. ‘Saigon is a stranger’s land’, explained one 16-year-old girl, ‘I didn’t dare go out anywhere’. Adolescents reported that even children who migrated with their parents were at risk of falling into social evils, since ‘Their parents usually have to work all the day, and have little time to spend with their families’.

Box 9: 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’.
While, as noted earlier, Boyden (2013) concludes that continuing education is a primary reason many children migrate, none of the respondents in our study saw migration and education as compatible. Interestingly, however, migration itself was seen as a threat to education only for children who migrated with their parents, as independent migrants were universally understood to be out of school already. Family migration, however, was believed to mark the end of children’s school going. A commune-level informant, for example, said, ‘I see that once kids gone there, they do not go to school’ (KI M). Another commented, ‘I see that if parents bring children to the city, they rarely go to school there’ (KI T). Adolescents and parents were even more strident – at times almost appearing to be shocked at the notion that migratory children might attend school.

This is not, according to our commune-level informants, necessarily because parents are not interested in their children’s education – or even because children’s labour is seen as vital. In fact, KI T explained that parents ‘often run to enrol their children in school but it is very hard to enrol in the school near their houses. Also, it is very expensive to enrol a child in the lower secondary school’. Similarly, KI B noted that residency permits, which are difficult for parents to secure, complicate the enrolment process considerably, with secondary school enrolment often impossible without the correct papers. Provincial-level KIP observed that a further complication is that, while children can move their school records between schools within province during the school year, it is impossible to move records in a timely fashion outside of the An Giang educational jurisdiction.

Finally, even if parents are engaging in seasonal migration, and return to Da Phuoc and Vinh Nguon after a few months absence, their children frequently must forgo a year’s worth of schooling. A commune-level informant reported that, while the commune is occasionally flexible, for the best students, attendance regulations clearly state that children who have been out of school for more than 45 days must sit out the year (KI F).

Although migration is detrimental to the educations of children who migrate with their parents, young independent migrants reported that the risk they felt the most acutely was emotional. Loneliness – and skimping on the calls and trips home that would help relieve it – is extremely difficult to bear (see Yoddumnern-Attig et al., 2007). Most young migrants, girls and boys, spoke of how much they missed their families when they were away – and how hard they had worked to keep their parents from knowing how sad they were. For example, a 17-year-old boy said, ‘I was homesick but kept it in my heart. I rarely called my family’. Another added, ‘I don’t have my family. I miss them. You can earn money more easily in the city, easier to look for jobs. But there is nothing else that can compare with my parents’.

Parents and commune officials reported that children who had successfully migrated, those who did not change jobs regularly, often came home only once a year, for Tet. One mother explained, ‘Each time they come home, it takes VND 4-500,000 already. It’s not cheap at all. She wants to come home but she doesn’t have money. She can’t afford the bus tickets. She receives a basic salary but she has to send it home, pay for food, rent, water and electricity etc. She is short of money all the time. She is very upset’. A father added, ‘My son has been gone for half a year and has not come back’. In cultures with a history of fosterage, where migrant children are not only leaving their parents but also occupying a well-defined position in the household of an extended family member,

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41 As noted earlier, the 2009 Census found that migrant children were significantly less likely to attend school than non-migrants (GSO, 2011b). Among those aged 6-10, primary attendance rates were 97% for non-migrants and only 91% for inter-provincial migrants. Among those aged 11-18, the difference was even larger: 75% for non-migrants and 44% for inter-provincial migrants.
this long-term separation may cause little emotional distress. Among our respondents, however, it was overwhelmingly viewed as yet another point of sacrifice for children, who would far rather be with their parents.

Evidencing the power of filial piety and the ethic of sacrifice, although they regularly work as many hours a day as possible, voluntarily skimp on food and health care and are regularly lonely, our respondents reported that migrant young people rarely complained, because they remain so tightly focused on their parents’ needs. For example, the injured 17-year-old girl mentioned above did not tell her mother about her migration-related difficulties. She said, ‘I didn’t want my mum to be bothered, so I didn’t tell her’. Similarly, a widowed mother of a 16-year-old daughter and three older sons, all of whom had migrated, explained that, when her children called they told her ‘Don’t worry, just go to bed, you are worried and your blood pressure goes down and you will die’.

Parents had very different reactions to their children’s independent migration. Some stayed in close touch, calling – and even visiting – on a regular basis. A father of 19- and 17-year-old sons reported, ‘I went there many times. I would like to see how did they live. I miss them, I wanted to see whether they are OK’. A mother of an adolescent daughter said, ‘I go to visit her from time to time. We can’t take risks. We have to keep our eyes on our daughters’. Other parents, however, seemed not only unaware of their children’s experiences, not surprising given how hard children reported working to shelter their parents from worry, but unconcerned about their unawareness. Several mentioned, for example, that they did not know how to contact their children, but instead waited for their children to call them. Others said that they did not know where their children lived or worked.

Almost all of our parent respondents, however, knew their children’s salaries, and most knew how much their children were netting after rent and other expenses. Of those who specified how they were using the extra money, all but one reported that their children’s remittances were being used for regular expenses such as improving nutrition, fixing leaky roofs, paying down debt etc. Only one father, the one who checked in with the mill owner to ensure his son was not drinking, reported that he was saving his son’s money for his son’s future. He explained, ‘For example if he earns VND 2 million per month, I advise him to send home about VND 1 million and only spend VND 1 million there. That money I will save for him. I hope he can save more money for getting married or difficult situations such as sickness. I am doing it to save money for him to get married’.

7.5 Left-behind children

As mentioned above, left-behind children have, until very recently, been ignored by the migration literature, even though there are over a hundred million in Southeast Asia alone. In China alone they are thought to number over 61 million (All-China Women’s Federation, in Liu, 2013). Left for a variety of reasons, including both the restrictive ho khau system, which makes it difficult – or impossible – for children to attend school, as well as practical realities such as poor housing and inadequate supervision, the left-behind children of Da Phuoc and Vinh Nguon are largely invisible to social protection programming, despite their obvious vulnerability.
Poverty is a key threat facing left-behind children. While 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 caregivers in our study indicated that parents’ remittances were not, as was mentioned above, facilitating upward mobility – only survival. A great-aunt, who has cared for her 13-year-old niece since she was six, reported that the girl’s parents were rarely able to send much money home for her care. She explained, ‘When she has some money to put aside, she can send for her daughter. But she does not send any. I can only buy food for her every day, I cannot afford to buy clothes for her. If she has minor disease, I can afford to take care of her, but if she is badly sick, I inform her mother. I cannot afford to support her when she is badly sick. For my life, I can earn only VND 50-60,000 a day, I cannot make any savings at all’. Similarly, a grandfather, caring for his daughters’ four school-aged children, said, ‘The most difficult fact is that both the money we got from our own income and the money our daughters sent home isn’t enough for our spending and for the kids to school’. Finances were particularly tight when grandparents were caring for multiple sets of grandchildren; their situation was further complicated by the competition they felt between their children and grandchildren for limited resources. These stories are troubling given that de la Garza (2010: 20) concluded that ‘children left behind by migrating parents who are not able to financially support them over a long period of time experience particularly negative outcomes’.

As mentioned earlier, education is a primary reason children are left behind. Most caregivers reported that they – and the children for whom they are responsible – took schooling seriously. A grandmother, caring for her 18-year-old grandson, explained, ‘I teach him try to study, not to migrate like his miserable parents. If you drop out like some other children, your life will be miserable’. Fortunately for the boy, although his own parents only rarely sent money because they struggled to keep their younger sister fed and in school, his oldest uncle had migrated to Ho Chi Minh City and was married to a teacher, who made sure they not only sent money but also books and supplies. Similarly, the mother of the twins, while acknowledging that her migration was not successful, was proud that she was able to keep them in school and had not, like many other families, taken them along to Binh Duong. ‘I let them go to school’, she said, ‘I didn’t let them drop out from school so I left them behind with their older sister to go to school’. The great-aunt was even taking on the girl’s parents – and was determined to keep the girl in school through ninth grade, even though the parents wanted her to move to Ho Chi Minh City in order to mind her younger sibling.

Despite parental good intentions, even left-behind children face a variety of threats to their education. Some, like the adolescent girl in Box 10, are forced to leave school by their grandparents in order to assume ‘the responsibilities left unfulfilled by the migrating parent’ (de la Garza, 2010: 23; see also Bakker et al., 2009; Siddiqui, 2012). This is particularly common for oldest children – and girls.

Others, FGD respondents indicated, cannot afford to go to school, particular if their parents’ wages are low and remittances are irregular. Transportation can also be an issue. For example, because the twins had moved in with their sister, one village over, but continued to attend their ‘home’ school, they had to ride almost an hour each way to school, which was very tiring for them.
Box 10: The importance of early intervention

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 that, ‘There was no one else to help. At that time, in the house, my two younger siblings were still too little; I was in the eighth grade, only 13-14 years old, I couldn’t even cook properly, but I stayed home so that I would do whatever I could to help; my grandma wouldn’t have managed on her own with the two kids, plus cooking, and running the shop’.

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’.

Mai explained that, because she was still small back then, she sometimes talked back to her grandmother when she was scolded, which made her grandmother even angrier. ‘I remember a day, my grandma said something to me which I can’t remember now, but I talked back to her. And so she was so angry that she phoned my father’. While her parents normally only came back at Tet, her father was so angry with her for speaking rudely to her grandmother that ‘He came home at midnight and questioned me. He slapped my face, and he was about to hit me in the head with a glass bottle, but luckily he was still able to curb his anger so he smashed the bottle onto the ground, it broke into pieces’.

When Mai was 18, she was engaged, by her grandmother, to a boy who treated her well – and who, she admitted, may have loved her despite the fact she did not love him. Her parents did not return for her engagement party, which she found very painful. Soon after the engagement, the boy’s family began making disparaging comments about Mai’s 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 her inner turmoil by deciding to move abroad to find a foreign husband. While KIs indicated that it is almost always girls’ parents who made this decision, Mai was very clear that the decision was her own. ‘You’ve forced me once’, she told her grandmother, speaking about her cancelled engagement, ‘this time I’m going to decide for my life’. Helped by her grandmother’s good friend, whom she describes as ‘as close as a family sibling’, Mai spent all of the money she had saved from her years working – some VND 10 million – on a visa and plane tickets. When they arrived in Malaysia, however, her grandmother’s friend ‘took me straight to the place and sold me right away’.

The ‘Cavern’ to which she was sold was run by a Malaysian man and his Vietnamese wife. Unlike many other ‘owners’, who used starvation and physical abuse to control the girls they bought, Mai reports that her owners were kind and fed them well, despite the horror of the situation. Every day, ‘People came to “see the eyes”. If a client liked a girl, she would be married to him if she agreed. They asked if we agreed or not, but actually it didn’t matter’. Initially embarrassed she was never chosen, Mai, over the three months she lived in the Cavern, became more and more incensed at her predicament. ‘Whenever a girl was sold into the Cavern, the mistress would tell us how much she was worth. We’re human, but they treated us like fish or shrimp in the market’, she explained. Her relief at not being chosen grew exponentially when another girl, who belonged to a different owner, was brought to the Cavern after being brutally raped – to the point of requiring hospitalisation – by the man ‘previewing’ her.

Eventually rescued by the Malaysian police, after one girl escaped and alerted the authorities, Mai spent another four months living in a Malaysian rescue facility, where she reported being poorly fed and treated badly by staff. When she and the other seven Vietnamese girls were sent home they were simply put on a plane with no money and no phone, so that when they arrived back in Ho Chi Minh City they were forced to borrow a stranger’s phone to even alert their families that they were home. ‘That gentleman’, she explained, ‘also lent us some Vietnamese money. We shared the money to buy food’.
Reflecting on her childhood, Mai felt she had learnt a lot about herself. She said, ‘My personality is that I can endure things easily. When I grew up and became more conscious, I began to realise, gosh, I was starved of so many things. In my family there was no joy, I always heard scolding words’. About Open House she commented, ‘In this programme I feel “every cloud has a silver lining”. I was trafficked, but now I’ve received a lot of directions. I’ve learnt so many things’.

The largest issue, however, is that left-behind children’s education frequently suffers from a lack of adult attention. For example, the 18-year-old boy now living with his grandmother used to live with his uncle. However, after his uncle got married, his new wife continually harassed the boy about how much electricity he was using. The grandmother, who took her grandson and moved with him into her sister’s house so that he could finish secondary school in peace, said, ‘When my grandchild lived with his uncle and his wife, she forced him to turn off the light, asking why he did homework at 10 or 11 pm and didn’t go to bed’. Similarly, the mother of the twins reported that, while she was away, her daughter was unable to supervise the boys’ studies closely enough. ‘The principal called me’, she explained, ‘and said if I didn’t return his scholarship would be cut. I came home and he restored high marks and was qualified for scholarship. Living with parents, they get more attention’. Children agreed with this sentiment. One girl in an FGD commented, ‘If there’s something they don’t understand or face any difficulty, there’s no one there to help them’.

Some left-behind children get very little care at all. One mother, for example, reported that when she, her husband and her oldest son first migrated, they left the two younger boys – then both in primary school – living alone on their boat, which was moored next to her mother’s boat. While the grandmother theoretically cared for the boys, the mother explained, ‘We saw that my mother was old, she was sick all the time. I was afraid of them being sick often. I was afraid that they got sick in the middle of the night without me there. I was afraid they might have accidents on the way to and from school’. Unable to deal with her fears, which, based on research about accident rates in left-behind Chinese children, are quite realistic (Shen et al., 2009), the mother returned home and left her 19-year-old son in charge while she returned with her husband to Ho Chi Minh City. A grandfather who had previously cared for his young grandson while the child’s parents worked elsewhere reported that the boy’s maternal grandmother had now taken him to live with her, as he had to work long hours and, ‘She saw that I worked very hard and had to take care of him so she decide to look after him’.

Left-behind children, particularly the youngest, also struggle to maintain good nutrition. The mother who left her children alone on their boat, for example, said that, ‘No one cooked for the kids’. The 18-year-old boy living with his grandmother explained that money was a real issue when it came to food; ‘Parents usually love children and give enough food to children, meanwhile grandmother is old and can’t make money, so she always cuts spending’. The largest threat, however, is for babies. Community leaders noted that it was increasingly common for young mothers to leave even infants in the care of their grandparents. One noted, ‘After the maternity leave, the mother comes back to work. The baby doesn’t have breast milk to drink. He has to drink evaporated milk’. As well as formula being inferior to breast milk from a nutritional standpoint, this grandfather also pointed out that it was very expensive, costing ‘more than VND 100-200,000 per can’, further straining available resources.

As noted by de la Garza (2010), adolescent FGD participants felt that being raised by grandparents made open communication more difficult. Adolescents felt their grandparents were often unemotional and unable to see situations through the eyes of the younger generation. They wanted to be teenagers – and play internet games and hang around with their friends. Parents, they thought, were more open to this idea. ‘The society is more developed and the way of thinking is more open’, one girl explained, ‘but grandparents’ thoughts are old’. A story told by the grandmother raising her 18-year-old grandson suggests the children are likely correct in this regard. She commented that, when a girl called her grandson, she managed to scare her off, leaving her grandson none the
wiser. ‘The girl called him on the phone [...] but he didn’t know. I picked up the phone and [...] scolded her, saying, “You are in school and he is in school, you are just in Grade 11; if you fall in love, how you can study? If you phone him once again, I will tell your parents”’. Girls noted that they bore the brunt of grandparents’ restrictions because grandparents are often particularly old-fashioned when it comes to gender and ‘often like and love the boys more the girls’.

The largest threat to left-behind children, from their perspective, mirrored that felt most dearly by independent migrants: their hearts hurt because they miss their parents so much. One of the 13-year-old twins explained, ‘I was staying with my older sister. I was very sad. My parents loved me more than my sister did. She loved her family more’. Similarly, the 19 year old who had now been left in charge of his two younger brothers, when asked which he preferred – migrating with his parents or staying in the commune to mind his siblings – replied, ‘I prefer going with my parents. Because I love my mother, I want to go to work with her. I feel sad whenever my parents are not around’. A girl in an FGD said parents were simply less harsh: ‘If we live with grandparents, when we make mistakes, even minor ones, they scold us and criticise us. Our parents would speak gentle words and remind us only’.

7.6 The most vulnerable child migrants

The migration experiences of most adolescents in our research are shaped primarily by their economic vulnerability, and the associated risks of school leaving and labour market participation. While young migrants face long working hours and loneliness and are at risk of being exploited, poorly fed and living in bad housing, most seem to have the emotional resources and family connections they need to keep them fundamentally safe – albeit with few opportunities to develop their human capital. On the other hand, a subset of independent migrants, identified through Open House and the Social Protection Centre, highlight the extreme vulnerability of children who are both poor and lack stable home lives. We do not, as noted earlier, present these stories as typical. We do, however, note that, taken together, they point to gaps in current programming and suggest changes that may reduce future risk.

Child sex workers are not uncommon in Viet Nam. Indeed, Dang Bich (2012) estimates that about 15% of the female sex workers in Viet Nam are under the age of 18, and MOLISA and UNICEF (2011) found, in their sample, that nearly half of young sex workers had begun work before the age of 15. KIs in our study agreed with MOLISA and UNICEF’s (2011: 15) observation that ‘family dysfunction and individual experiences have a significant influence on children’s entry into commercial sex’. They indicated that local adolescent sex workers were almost always poor and desperate to help their families. They further noted the role, in Vinh Nguon, of parental gambling in the family dissolution – and high debt ratio – that leaves young girls particularly vulnerable to sex work. As one provincial KI explained, their ‘income is not stable and their life is really sad’. Parents, he claimed, particularly mothers, often encourage their daughters to become prostitutes as a way of making comparatively large sums of money in a relatively small amount of time, He said, ‘I mean they can say “things are so hard now, you should go there for a few days”’ (KI W).

Because prostitution is an illegal ‘social evil’ in Viet Nam, sex workers, even if they are children, are treated as perpetrators rather than victims. This leaves adolescents further isolated and, as they get older and penalties become more severe, afraid of the police who ought to be working to protect them.

Child trafficking, on the other hand, appears to be far less common than it once was, primarily because of better coordination with Cambodian officials and better trafficking education in the commune. A high school teacher noted, ‘We have good cooperation with the Women’s Union to give awareness on trafficking for female students because here is a frontier area’. An official at the An Giang Department of Social Evil Prevention said, ‘In 2009-2010 there were a lot of trafficking victims but in 2012 there were only a few. This year there are almost no victims’.
 Trafficking now, our respondents explained, is almost entirely confined to young women who are being married to foreign men, usually from China, Singapore and Malaysia (see also Box 10). Most of these marriages are arranged by parents, who can be paid as little as VND 10 million for their daughter, but who hope that if she marries a wealthy man then she will be able to send money home on a regular basis. While Women’s Union informants noted that this sum could be seen as large, as the vast majority of the young women involved are from poor families and ‘think that they would sacrifice their lives to help their families’, an officer at the An Giang Police Department asked, ‘Is your life worth VND 10 million only?’ Officials also noted that, while customs workers attempt to identify young women who appear to be victims, it is difficult to prosecute this type of trafficking, as it falls under the rubric of illegal matchmaking and is subject to only a VND 2 million fine.

That said, child trafficking does still occur; KIs acknowledged that official numbers were likely to be conservative. ‘It’s difficult for us to get hold of actual numbers’, explained one, ‘because trafficked persons feel extremely miserable and ashamed so they don’t want to report to the local authorities’ (provincial-level KI W). However, an FGD with fathers highlighted that, while shame does tend to keep people quiet, even speaking up often fails to get results. A father of a 15-year-old daughter reported that she had been taken away in the middle of the night by a young man who had promised her a good job but was known to be dishonest. Having not heard from her for several months, and suspicious that a 15-year-old child with no papers could be offered a good job, he went to the police for help, only to be told there was ‘no proof’ and without proof there could be no help. He lamented, ‘It is a case of a missing girl but to the police it seemed to be like missing goods or toys’. Illiterate and unsure what to do next, he enlisted help to write a letter to the People’s Committee. They never responded. Other fathers in the FGD agreed that this case was very likely, given the young man involved and his troubled family background, a case of trafficking. However, illustrating the importance of shame – and the paucity of camaraderie – before the FGD the girl’s father had never told his neighbours what had become of his daughter and his neighbours, who nonetheless knew, had never openly discussed it.

**Box 11: Filial piety – one step too far**

Nguyen Ngoc Lan is an 18-year-old prostitute who has been working in Can Tho for more than two years. She reported that she began sex work to pay off her mother’s debts. ‘My mum led a life of self-indulgence’, she explained, ‘she followed her friends and started gambling; she didn’t have enough money to pay them, and they lent her money, and then debts were heaped up and now she can’t pay them all back’. Lan’s mother ‘cried, and said I should just do it until we paid back all the debts’.

When Lan first started working, at 16, she worked out of a brothel that was staffed entirely by ‘teenagers like me’. It’s like they bought me full-time. On a monthly basis. I work for them full-time, I stay at their house, I work for them and they pay me monthly’, she explained. She continued, ‘They made me serve all the customers. But they paid me little by little. I didn’t want that’. Because Lan’s ‘main purpose was to earn money to pay back my mum’s loan’, she quit after only one month.

Since then, Lan has been working for herself out of a coffee shop. On a good day she said that she can make VND 700,000, most of which she gives to her mother, who has continued to gamble it away. On a bad day she has no customers at all. ‘When I can’t make money’, she said, ‘I feel very discouraged; I feel fed up and don’t want to do it anymore. But I have to think again, that if I don’t work, I won’t have money to pay back. I must try to work to pay off all the debts, and then when I have some extra money, I will quit and then I will get married’.

In addition to worrying about her mother’s debts, Lan is also concerned about her six-year-old sister, who is not enrolled in school because she does not have a birth certificate. She tries hard to make her sister happy, which is difficult given the situation. ‘I bought a pair of earrings for my little sibling’, she said, but ‘my mum couldn’t stand it so she pawned my little sibling’s pair of earrings. I don’t say anything anymore […] because she’s old already. She can’t live much longer, now she does whatever she wants’.
Lan’s other main concern is her own safety. While she insists her clients use condoms – and refuses to serve those who will not – she worries about both HIV and gender-based violence. ‘Some people think’, she explained, ‘that they spend their money and so they can do whatever they want’. She works hard to use ‘sweet words’ to protect herself – as she is afraid of the police, who would merely see her as the perpetrator of a social evil.

When asked what about her life made her happy, Lan replied, ‘I don’t have anything to be happy about; the only thing that makes me happy is making money from my work to pay back my mum’s debt’.

(Note that Lan’s mother is 40 years old.)

Street children are also highly vulnerable. Most come, according to our KIs, from families that are not only poor, but also ‘broken’ though divorce, substance abuse or violence. Street children are also, unfortunately, apparently largely invisible to provincial-level programming. For example, KI Z said, ‘We don’t know about street children. Maybe it’s under the management of DOLISA’. KI K added, ‘The Department of Justice is not assigned with the function and task to handle it’. KI N commented that such children were few. ‘When they are picked up for begging, or small theft cases, the Police Department takes children to rehabilitation schools – which are only temporary solutions because the children just relax and do nothing and wait for their day out’. The futility of their incarceration is further underscored, in his mind, by the fact that the province sets targets – by district – for the number of children sent for rehabilitation. ‘I don’t feel it was appropriate, because the increasing or decreasing of the number of subjects is something very normal, how can a target be applied?’, he asked. But whichever district ‘has more means higher achievement. If they only have a few, they won’t meet the target’.

Box 12: Life on the streets

Le Van Thang is a 13-year-old boy currently living, for the third time in the past year, at the An Giang Social Protection Centre – because he was caught stealing.

He said he had been living on his own for over a year now. ‘My mum is crazy’, he explained. ‘When dad cooks, she throws the food tray, she doesn’t eat; she only gets back to normal when my dad gets angry; she’s crazy for a long time before she turns back to normal’. Back when he lived with his parents he was frequently hungry, and had to ask other people for food. His father regularly beat him and he was not allowed to attend school. ‘I went to the first grade’, he said, ‘but then my mum asked me to drop out’.

About a year ago Thang moved to Long Xuyen. He took the bus into the city to play computer games, with an older cousin. At the end of the evening he simply decided to stay. To make money for food he sells lottery tickets, for about VND 50,000/day, and occasionally begs but only, he said, ‘when I don’t have money for the lottery tickets’. He works in a group of about 10 children, who help support him on days when his tickets do not sell well. In exchange, ‘When they don’t have money, I give them in return’.

Thang has two ‘foster mothers’, one who sells pork and one who is a masseuse. He reported that when he ‘was begging people for money, they felt sorry for me, and they asked me to become their child’. One mother, he explained, ‘gave me clothes; she told me to take a shower and put the clothes on’. The other, he said, ‘buys noodles for me; she rents a room for me to sleep in’. Thang reported that, over the past year, he had ‘saved more than VND 400,000. I ask my pork seller mother to keep it for me’.
Thang likes his life. He does not want to go back to school. He does not want to take vocational training. He is worried about only two things: older children who chase him and make him steal and policemen, because ‘They caught me and brought me here’.

Sentenced for this last offence to three months, Thang is currently living a grim life for a 13-year-old child. He is locked in a room with nothing to pass the time and only a slot in the door for food. ‘I can’t go out to play’, he explained, and ‘They beat me when I’m stubborn’.

While the Social Protection Centre provides Thang with a roof over his head and three meals each day, rehabilitation is clearly lacking. As Thang noted, when his time is up ‘They will just give me a paper and release me’.

7.7 Migration programming

Figure 13: Downtown Long Xuyen

Given that accurate numbers are a necessary foundation for successful programming, the lack of data about migration is alarming. Commune officials freely admitted that, since adolescents are legally too young to work, they usually leave, uncounted, without papers – or, more rarely, with forged papers indicating they are adults. Commune-level KIs J explained, ‘The data on them are not much, it is impossible to count all of them. The number that we know is based on what their families report’. Similarly, there appears to be no attempt to track the number of children left behind, or even to develop a mechanism to do so, beyond the informal eyes and ears of teachers. Finally, while informants noted that seasonal migration was quite common, and involved both children who migrated with their parents and those who went independently, they observed that it too was largely hidden, as papers are not required for those types of jobs. These gaps combine to render the most vulnerable the least visible.

Respondents over the age of 18 reported no difficulty obtaining papers. Indeed, recognising that ‘Because the local situation is bad it’s good to leave and seek a job elsewhere’, commune officials facilitate migration as much as possible. That said, however, they freely admitted the papers they could provide were often not sufficient to help migrants obtain social services – particularly education: ‘If they only hire a guesthouse or rent a house, they can’t access social security services’ (provincial-level KI Y). Given the new laws being considered in Ha Noi, access to services may soon be even more restricted, making migrants’ lives more difficult and underscoring the notion that migration costs are often a result of legislation and not migration itself (Deshingkar and Akter, 2009).

KIs mentioned a range of initiatives, from transportation allowances to job fairs, aimed at improving migration experiences. Parents and adolescents were aware of these initiatives to varying degrees and had mixed views on their utility. For example, Da Phuoc and Vinh Nguon, like other communes in An Giang, specifically ‘introduce’ jobs to migrants. Commune-level KI S said that, in 2012, the commune listed 809 jobs and placed 300 workers in
Ho Chi Minh City and Binh Duong. ‘That was’, he explained, ‘161% of the expected plan’. However, commune-level KI E said that people rarely ‘trust the commune; they look for jobs mainly through their network instead, because the companies who advertise through the commune often make false advertisements about the jobs, salaries and working conditions’. She further noted that, while there is a policy to provide a one-time VND 500,000 transportation allowance to poor and ethnic out-migrants, in 2012 only 20 households in Da Phuoc qualified. A 21-year-old former migrant thought a better plan was for companies to send busses to An Giang to pick up new workers.

Provincial-level officials reported some safe migration programming, funded by UNICEF, The Asia Foundation (KI G) and IOM (KI W). The latter, which started in 2008 and is implemented by DOLISA, has provided training courses to nearly 1,000 officers and uses theatre and community meetings to inform likely migrants of their rights. It also runs a hotline that has taken thousands of calls and has printed tens of thousands of brochures. That said, adolescents and parents in Da Phuoc and Vinh Nguon were aware of little of this programming, suggesting that taking the programme to scale remains a challenge. Indeed, ascertaining how and where to deliver such programming struck several officials as difficult. Commune-level KI V, for example, thought perhaps information could be made available to migrants when they requested their papers – but this would clearly miss most adolescents, who migrate unofficially. Provincial-level KI N noted that employment centres were not a good venue, as ‘They only introduce employment vacancies’ but find it ‘difficult to care about children’s lives’. Adding that, ‘If children want to work or something, they can talk directly with teachers in the school’, the same informant missed the fact that the most vulnerable young migrants were not in school. The lack of consensus about how to help children migrate safely was made clear by a mother of a young migrant, who said, ‘No one has ever talked to me about migration before’.

Other than teachers, who volunteer to serve as school counsellors and who report high demand for those services, there is very little provision for identifying the most vulnerable – much less meeting their needs. There are only, according to a provincial-level informant, 160 social workers in all of An Giang, of whom less than 20% have had any training in child protection issues (KIs P). Furthermore, while there are child protection officers in each commune, they tend to be responsible for not just children but also labour rights, women’s issues and the disabled, all with little training and few resources. Budget cuts have left even the Centre for Social Work, located in Long Xuyen, which provides drop-in services for children who are abused, living on the streets, HIV positive etc. with only one counsellor, who is male, to meet the needs of over 100 children. An informant there reported that most children who come to the centre would like to stay, usually because their parents have left home. However, given inadequate facilities, children can stay for no more than a month (and usually just a few nights), at which time they can be transferred to the Social Protection Centre.

The Social Protection Centre, also in Long Xuyen,44 is better resourced than the Centre for Social Work. However, as the lens it uses to address children’s needs is one of policing, rather than protection, the most vulnerable children, those living on the streets or engaged in sex work, view it not as a haven but a prison (see Box 12). While centre staff indicated that orphans were welcome to stay for the duration of childhood, and street children usually stayed one to three months, depending on the type of their ‘violation’, they also noted that even taking children to the park once a month required volunteers, as the centre is not set up to provide children with either education or recreation. Even though staff recognised that many street children had been forced into begging by their parents, or had no parents to go home to, the focus remains on family reunification – and social evil prevention.45

Programming directed at trafficking, as mentioned above, is comparatively strong. ‘An Giang’s Intersectoral Working Group on Human Trafficking Prevention and Fighting meets regularly for reporting and collaboration to implement human trafficking prevention and fighting activities. We organise a lot of communication campaigns’, said a KI at the An Giang Women’s Union, adding that ‘People’s awareness has been considerably

44There are three other facilities that are similar to the Social Protection Centre in Long Xuyen. Chau Doc Town (now Chau Doc City) has its own Social Protection City. There is also a Care Centre for the Elderly and Orphans in Long Xuyen and one in Chau Doc. Both report to the provincial Red Cross.

45 During our pilot visit there was only one street child, a drug addict, in residence at the Social Protection Centre. However, during the larger fieldwork, which corresponded with a major national holiday, the streets had been ‘cleaned up’ and there were many street children in residence there.
raised’. In addition to messages helping children avoid deception, and better coordination with Cambodian authorities, there are a variety of reintegration measures aimed at reducing recidivism. Open House, for example, houses victims and offers them education and training (see Box 13). Loans are also available to help returnees set up new livelihoods. There is, however, considerable space for improvement. For example, while victims’ practical needs are being met, there is no provision for the psychological support that girls might need. Furthermore, for the most vulnerable there is no way to ensure their safety after they ‘graduate’ from Open House.

Local officials offered conflicting reports about what programming was available for left-behind children. On the one hand, commune-level KIs T said, ‘We hold meetings and put them into the list of near poor, so they are exempted from school fees, and enjoy health insurance’. On the other hand, the same staff members were clear there was no specific budget for left-behind children. One commented, ‘I see nothing, no mechanism. As I said, there are some difficult cases, we advise local leadership to ask for resources, there is no budget specifically allocated for the part’. Despite the commune’s attempts, caregivers for left-behind children were clear they were left out. The great-aunt caring for her niece explained she had tried several times to get a poor certificate for the child; ‘I requested for this grandniece, why this little girl left behind by her mother could not get any assistance and subsidies from the government. They said it was because her mother was not home, I said she left home because she was too poor. I see that they do not care about what I said, no matter how many times I request’.

**Box 13: Where do we go from here?**

Le Thu Thuy is a 15-year-old girl living at Open House, a home for trafficked returnees in Long Xuyen. Thuy’s life, unlike those of typical child migrants, does reflect ‘the horror stories prevalent within the trafficking narrative’ (Boyden and Howard, 2013: 355). When she was very small, her mother, who ‘sells balloons that turn into big bears, for the kids to play with’, used to lock her inside all day and beat her with an iron rod every time she disobeyed.

Soon after her 10th birthday, her mother sold her to a Frenchman for $50,000, to help cover her gambling debts. ‘I thought I was too little’, Thuy explained, ‘but my mother, she thought that I had grown up already’. After her ‘marriage’, Thuy was raped daily, ‘I couldn’t sleep much; he got mad all the time when having sex. After he had sex with me, he lay down, and then he had sex again, and lay down again. He often did it five to six times a night’.

‘The neighbours knew’, she continued, ‘but they didn’t report it to the police. They lived next to us, that man was 50-something years old, while I was only 10-something years old – but my mother told everyone in the neighbourhood that this was her son-in-law’. Thuy’s sister, 12 years older and married to a Frenchman as well (and likely trafficked like her sister), also failed to alert the authorities.

With both her mother and her ‘husband’ beating her regularly, Thuy endured her situation for two years. She said, ‘I couldn’t ask anyone for help. My life was over. I had reached the dead end’. Eventually rescued by the police, and taken to a string of shelters for sexually abused children, Thuy learnt that the man who had ‘bought’ her had purchased 13 other girls in previous years. He is now in jail in Cambodia.

Open House is meant to be a short-term solution, but workers there indicated that they did not know what to do with Thuy, who had been there for over a year. Because she refused to testify against her mother, the authorities have been unable to convict the latter. The mother still attempts to communicate with Thuy and Open House is concerned that when Thuy leaves the shelter her mother will again assume control of her life and place her in harm’s way. A staff member at Open House explained that, while the shelter can provide a temporary place to live, vocational training and the tools and loans that help returnees set up new lives for themselves, it has no capacity to help girls process the trauma through which they have lived. She said, ‘Some girls have big psychological problems, but here there are no expert counsellors or such who we can refer these cases to. I don’t have a background in social work. I’m even less of a psychological specialist.”

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46Ho khau regulations specifically state that minor children are officially registered with their parents. Therefore, if parents are not registered in the commune, and granted poor household status there, the child also has no access to that status.
8 Conclusion and future directions

8.1 Conclusions

Despite Viet Nam’s laudable progress, we find that economic vulnerability – and its broader spill-over impacts on children’s rights to development, protection and care – continue to limit the lives of many Vietnamese children. An overemphasis on politically based poverty targets, combined with the recent evaporation of the low-skilled agricultural jobs that have supported the poorest for generations, has forced many families to rely on cobbled-together, sporadic employment that often precludes secondary education and leads to distress migration. While the threats facing independent migrants are different from those facing children who migrate with their parents and left-behind children, we find that, for the economically vulnerable, those who are not able to secure a good life but can merely maintain a tenuous hold on one that is ‘good enough’, migration contributes significantly to the inadequate care of children.

Independent migrants in our study, with few exceptions, are bound like Boyden and Howard’s girls – in a web of ‘social expectations’, defined by filial piety and sacrifice, that allow ‘collective interests […] to trump individual ambition’ (2013: 364). While the majority, out of school and working for several years by the time of their migration, face working conditions that are no worse than those they faced in the commune, ‘voluntary’ overtime, coupled with deliberate under-consumption of food and health care, jeopardises the development of many young migrants. Exacerbated by the emotional distress of unwanted familial separation, which is buffered by neither a history of fosterage nor a cultural drive for personal success, adolescent migrants in our sample radiated resignation and most often felt there was nothing in their lives except for their work – and the money they were able to make for their parents. This was particularly the case for the youngest migrants, who are legally prohibited from work and thus more likely to be trapped in ‘under-the-table’, exploitive jobs. While laws regulating child labour are an undeniable good – at least from a child rights perspective – more care needs to be taken to ensure the laws meant to protect the vulnerable do not inadvertently jeopardise those most in need of protection. Children who migrate with their parents, according to our respondents, experience significant disruptions to their education. Owing to an undersupply of schools in migrant destinations, as well as a registration system that frequently precludes legal access to social services such as schooling, even those children who are not employed or minding their younger siblings can have no choice but to drop out when they migrate with their parents. As high debt loads, often brought on by health care costs and agricultural loans gone bad, shame many families into migration – and make it difficult for them to return to their communes until they can pay off their loans – too many children are losing out on the educations that are, in Viet Nam’s diversifying middle-class economy, a ‘prerequisite for economic opportunity’ (Whitehead et al., 2007: 28).

Left-behind children have been largely left out of discussions about migration, which have focused almost exclusively on destinations rather than origins. As they are typically left in the care of their grandparents, who can find themselves unexpectedly – given Vietnamese culture – raising a house full of children at once if all of their own children have migrated, inadequate resources – a result of parents’ low salaries and the high cost of living – coupled with the growing frailty of ageing grandparents, can result in a situation where children forfeit not only parental care but also adequate supervision, educational support and nutrition. With no mechanism to even identity left-behind children, much less a budget to help support them, we found the skip-generation households in our sample to be among the most desperate. Given, however, that their needs are not only relatively concrete, revolving largely around education, health care and nutrition, but also well-placed for both commune-level identification
and amelioration, providing better services to left-behind children could be a programming ‘quick-win’ if budget space could be made.

Families in our study wanted to be together. Residency regulations that mean parents must choose between educating their children and parenting them are fundamentally counterproductive. To that end, both children who migrate with their parents and those who are left behind would benefit from further reform – or elimination – of the ho khau system. Currently, migrant children are too often excluded from educational opportunities, as their parents are unable to cover the fees needed to get non-resident children into local schools. Greater recognition that ‘migrants are a fundamental building block of Viet Nam’s economic and social development’ should result in an easing of restrictions that not only discourage transparency – and thus hinder data collection efforts – but also jeopardise the wellbeing of today’s children and, by extension, tomorrow’s economy (UN Viet Nam, 2010:10).

More generally, given the key role of poverty in exacerbating children’s vulnerability, regardless of their migration status, we also wish to join the World Bank (2012) in reiterating that there is a widening gap between those families that have been able to diversify and grow their incomes – and can consolidate those gains in their children via education – and those that cannot. While Viet Nam’s Gini index remains comparatively low, care needs to be taken, as the economy shifts away from agriculture, to ensure intergenerational mobility becomes an attainable goal for all. To that end, de facto user fees for education need to be abolished, and this move needs to be coupled with programming that helps less educated, rural parents understand the importance of investing in education.

More attention also needs to be directed at socially vulnerable children. Where children – migrants as well as those left behind – lack both financial resources and familial stability, they are at grave risk of extreme exploitation, such as being forced into sex work or trafficking. While rates of the latter have gone down sharply over the past few years, attempts to provide the sort of safety nets that might keep the socially vulnerable safer are thus far nascent. With a budget directed more at policing – rather than counselling – many children first encounter the ‘system’ only after they have crossed the invisible line that separates victims from perpetrators. Development of a social work system would not only be a significant step towards keeping children on the right side of that line, but also could do much to prevent their victimisation.

Strengthening rural economies is also critical. While most of our respondents wished there were better services in destination areas, key for nearly all was that migration was only Plan B; the first choice of the vast majority was greater provision of local jobs that pay a living wage. As agricultural labourers and smallholders have left agriculture, the absorptive capacity of the local manufacturing and services sectors needs the same level of care and attention that has been lavished on increasing agricultural yields (UNRISD, 2013). Given that Viet Nam managed, in only a few decades, to move from famine to becoming one of the world’s largest exporters of rice, it is clear that where there is a will there is a way.

8.2 Programming and policy recommendations

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 interviews with young migrants and their parents, left-behind children and their carers and a wide variety of KIs, we suggest the following types of policies and programme interventions would do much to ameliorate the complex vulnerabilities facing children in Da Phuoc and Vinh Nguon.
8.2.1 Poverty alleviation

1. Local employment that pays a consistent living wage:
   - Respondents noted that the majority of jobs available to low-skill workers were not only poorly paid but also highly sporadic, leading to cash flow crises that resulted in a reliance on children’s labour and distress migration. Accordingly, the development of local employment options that address these deficits was considered by all respondents to be the highest priority.
   - Local community leaders suggested the development of niche markets.
   - Cham respondents noted that the development of ethnic employment options, such as those that capitalise on Cham traditions such as weaving, would allow not only for income stability, but also for cultural protection.
   - Employment development needs to take into account An Giang’s growing environmental threats as well as the political realities of border regions.

2. Support for the poor that prioritises economic need rather than quotas:
   - Families need a more effective buffer against health care costs so illness or injury cannot permanently alter the life trajectories of the next generation.
   - Poverty reduction support needs to last long enough – and be multifaceted enough – for families to actually ‘get their feet under them’.
   - Where families have a solid business plan that would facilitate their economic mobility, they need access to the credit that would allow them to pursue it.
   - Left-behind children, and their carers, need to be prioritised for poverty reduction support in a way that guarantees educational access and good nutrition.

3. The legal age for work should be moved to 18 in order to reduce the temptation that families face to cut short their children’s education.

4. Vocational training needs to be tied to relevant job opportunities, as well as pay a stipend sufficient to make the opportunity costs of such training bearable for the poorest.

5. Family planning messages need to be redesigned to improve their efficacy with low-income families, which frequently remain low income because they are supporting larger families.

8.2.2 Education

1. Education – for parents – about the importance of education for children is critical. Given recent mechanisation, and the rapid end of age-old livelihoods, economic reality may provide a segue into the importance of investing in children’s education.

2. Education, given the critical role it plays in reducing intergenerational poverty and inequality, needs to be a level playing field:
   - Extra-classes requiring extra fees need to be discouraged, with all content folded into a standard curriculum that is free for all.
   - Support needs to be made available to ensure the ‘best’ students – those who are interested in school and prefer to stay until graduation – are never forced out by short-term need.
   - Continuation classes need to be made available for all students, on a schedule that accommodates those children who must work and with stipends significant enough to encourage children, and their families, to prioritise learning over earning.
3. The needs of left-behind children must be holistically addressed. This will require not only financial support for those in economically vulnerable households but also logistical support such as transport, practical support such as homework assistance and emotional support where needed.

Here, scaling up the conditional cash transfer programme, which is currently being piloted by MOLISA, the World Bank and UNICEF, would address both sides of the educational coin. ‘Paying’ children to stay in school affords the most interested leverage they can use to encourage their parents to prioritise long-term thinking.

8.2.3 Migration

1. In order to develop evidence-based policy, there is a need for better data regarding migration:
   - Children need to be counted, regardless of whether they are independent migrants, migrate with their parents or are left behind.
   - Communes need to develop a tracking system, utilising the fact that almost all migrants come ‘home’ for Tet, to enable officials to identify children who are not in school or are in need of other social services.
   - The government needs to make national-level data available, for free, to researchers. This will improve understanding of the relationship between poverty and migration and ultimately result in more appropriately targeted policies and programmes.

2. The ho khau system needs to be reformed so children’s rights to basic services are not jeopardised:
   - Migrants – and their children – need to be able to access social services in destination locations.
   - Children’s ho khau needs to be decoupled, where necessary, from that of their parents to ensure they can receive the support they need even when their parents are no longer in residence.

3. Better systems need to be established in destination communities to ensure the needs of young migrants are better met:
   - Housing needs to be decent and affordable; depending on working hours, company-based dormitories may be the most practical, especially in reducing transportation costs, time and safety issues. If these are adequately regulated, they may also be more affordable.
   - More labour inspectors are crucial to identify companies that are exploiting children by hiring those who are too young, having them work at jobs that are too dangerous or paying them unfair wages.
   - Drop-in facilities, or hotlines, are needed for young migrants in distress. Care must be taken to ensure that even those who are working overtime still have access, and services must target the wide range of needs adolescents might have.
   - Destination communities need more schools. Cognisant of the rapid increase in migration – which is overwhelming public infrastructure – appropriately incentivised private schools may be a way of delivering more services to more children in a more timely fashion.47/48
   - Destination communities need more crèche facilities so mothers can balance income-generating and care work responsibilities.

47 The NGO BRAC, for example, has over 700,000 students enrolled across six countries. Classes, which are ‘designed to give a second chance at learning to the disadvantaged students left behind’, are free to families as they rely on funding from donors and the BRAC general fund. For more information, see http://education.brac.net/

48 Bridge International Academies are for-profit, extremely low-cost private schools currently educating 30,000 students in Kenya. Classes cost parents $5/month. For more information, see www.affordable-learning.com/research-fieldwork/case-studies-stories/Bridge_international_academies.html#sthash.gbj9Z7Al.dpbs
8.2.4 Protection for the most vulnerable

The most vulnerable children need to be seen – and supported – through a lens that prioritises protection rather than policing.

- The government needs to allocate resources—above and beyond those allocated by NGOs—to children who have been victims of abuse and trafficking.
- Early identification of the most vulnerable is critical. Building on lessons learned from the ongoing pilot in An Giang, school counsellors, who work in tandem with the teachers who have daily contact with children, need to be expanded to all schools.
- A social work system, equipped to not only meet children’s emotional needs but also holistically manage the complex social needs of the fragile, is of critical importance.
- The inter-agency child protection network needs to be strengthened in terms of both financial and human resources. Staff need to have tailored training on child protection issues—and dedicated time to devote to children, supported by related incentive structures (e.g. performance assessment criteria) and informed by research-based evidence and data. In addition, the provincial-level structure needs to increase its support to district- and commune-level actors to promote an integrated approach to tackling child protection vulnerabilities, not just in extreme cases but helping raise awareness about the childhood and often life-course consequences of inadequate care.


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Appendix 1: List of interviews

Provincial-level staff
- Staff at Department of Planning and Investment
- Deputy head and two staff at Department of Education and Training
- Head, Department of Social Protection and Poverty Reduction, DOLISA
- Vice-director of Justice Department
- Head of Administrative Department, An Giang Women’s Union
- Vice-head of Department of Social Evl Prevention, DOLISA
- Vice-head and two staff of Social Protection Centre
- Head and vice-head of child protection, DOLISA
- Vice-head of Youth Union
- Head and staff at Centre for Social Work
- Staff at Reception Room for victims of trafficking, Department of Social Evil Prevention
- Deputy-head of An Giang Police Department

District-level staff
- Child protection officer, Chau Doc

Commune Level Staff
- Poverty reduction staff, Vinh Nguon
- Poverty reduction staff, Da Phuoc
- Child protection staff, Vinh Nguon
- Vice-head and one staff, Vinh Nguon Youth Union
- Child protection staff, Da Phuoc
- Headmaster, Da Phuoc Lower-secondary School
- Headmaster, Vinh Nguon Lower-secondary School
- Vice-chair, Vinh Nguon People’s Committee
- Chair, Da Phuoc People’s Committee
- Vice-head, Da Phuoc Police Department
- Vinh Nguon Women’s Union

Case studies
- Female former migrant
- Two female trafficked returnees at Open House
- Male street child at Social Protection Centre
- Female street child at Social Protection Centre
- Child sex worker
- Child sex worker
- Female former migrant
- Male former migrant
• Male migrant child

In-depth interviews
• Father of migrant
• Mother of former migrant
• Female former migrant
• Male former migrant
• Mother of former migrant, who also migrated herself and left her children behind
• Mother of migrant
• Grandmother of left-behind children
• Left-behind adolescent
• Left behind adolescent
• Mother of left-behind adolescent
• Left-behind child
• Grandmother of left-behind child
• Mother of migrant adolescents
• Father of migrant adolescents
• Left-behind child
• Great-aunt of left behind child
Appendix 2: Research instruments

2.1 Case study

The case study involved two key tools undertaken with individual survivors of the child protection violation as well as service providers involved in prevention and rehabilitation service provision.

- Life history methodology (including pits and troughs; integrating narrative practice and rapport building questions drawing on Linda Williams Pathways into and out of Sexual Exploitation) (90 minutes)
- Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats (SWOT) analysis of prevention and rehabilitation support services provided by case study respondents – using a ranking exercise
Life history tool

Need large sheet of paper; three segments of time line (7-10, 11-14; 15-17 years) in middle of page

Introduction: ‘We are talking to young people to learn about their experiences in their own words. This is a time when you can talk about your life – the good and bad and what you want for the future. Your life story and your thoughts and suggestions will be confidential but your experiences and ideas will help others learn from you so young people growing up today can have a better life – especially when they face trying circumstances. I have some questions I plan to ask but mostly want to hear your story the way you want to tell it.’

Begin with rapport building: ask about a recent good day in their lives; a recent bad day in their lives. Objective is to elicit things of importance in their lives, including sources of support.

Next, ask for key events that have had a positive or negative effect in their life in general, around:

- Family life (e.g. birth of sibling; death of a parent; limited time with parents; intra-household violence)
- School (e.g. success in exams; dropout)
- Household economic wellbeing/livelihoods (e.g. bumper crop; parent lost source of income)
- Friends
- Recreational activities
- Domestic and care work activities
- Personal/physical security and integrity: ‘So, can you tell me about any tough times you might have experienced? For instance, have you ever been in a situation where someone has tried to harm you? What happened? How did you feel? Did you tell anyone?’
- Interactions with services and service providers, e.g. vocational training
- Pre-migration, migration experience, post-migration experience
Draw negative events below line; positive events above. Note that it may not just be events in the sense of one-off happenings but rather longer-term stressors, such as persistent intra-household violence. Add in bubbles to represent sources of support around the key events.

Positive

My mother got some money from my uncle

This is when I started school

Finding boyfriend/potential husband

Positive

I was lucky to find a job in the market, but it was not paying for everything

Finding different jobs

Negative

I had to leave school for good

This is the time I had to leave school to go to work – we ran out of money for school fees

Age category 1

Age category 2

Age category 3

Here is where I met my boyfriend – he helps me with my rent and says maybe I can join him with his other wives soon
The **objective** is to understand key life events and sources of vulnerability and resilience – depict these using the pits and troughs life history diagrams.

Key to ask where they turned to for support; what coping strategies/sources of resilience they drew on when they faced difficult times; and what the limitations of that support were and why (e.g. didn’t feel able to confide in a parent or friend; no social services that they were aware of or felt comfortable accessing).

- Probing approach (drawing on work by Linda Williams (2009) regarding Pathways into and out of Sexual Exploitation): using narrative practice techniques and avoiding questions that can be answered with ‘yes’ or ‘no’. Don’t make any assumptions about behavioural motivation or sequencing of events.
  - ‘Tell me more’
  - ‘What did you do next?’
  - ‘What happened next?’
  - ‘When you say this, why is it important to you?’
  - ‘What do you mean by X?’
  - ‘So what was bad about that?’
- For interrupting a story, good to warn respondent upfront:
  - ‘I am very interested in your story and don’t want to interrupt you a lot but I may need to ask you a few questions as you go along so that I can understand fully’
  - ‘May I ask you a question now’ – do this early so as to indicate how the interview will involve a back and forth dialogue
- For wrapping up:
  - ‘Is there anything else that you think is important for me to know?’
  - ‘Is there anything I got wrong – something you want to add or correct?’

---

**SWOT institutional analysis tool**

(NB: This would need to be contextualised to be child and context friendly)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strengths – internal to support service</th>
<th>Weaknesses – internal to the support service</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Service availability and accessibility (both prevention and rehabilitation)</td>
<td>Limited awareness of service availability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service quality</td>
<td>Limited service provision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrated approach (economic empowerment, psychosocial support, life skills training, community reintegration support etc.)</td>
<td>Service quality weaknesses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes of service providers</td>
<td>Limited scope of rehabilitation or prevention services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of information systems</td>
<td>Attitudes of service providers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linkages with complementary services (schools, health professionals, justice professionals, youth workers, child- or gender-based violence professionals, psychosocial services)</td>
<td>Inadequate attention to issues of confidentiality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow-up over time</td>
<td>Limited follow-up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal environment – laws that prevent child protection violations</td>
<td>Weak linkages with complementary services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree and content of public discussion on child protection violations – is there support or a blame-the-victim approach?</td>
<td>Limited opportunities for feedback on service quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extent and type of reporting on child protection violations: is reporting of abuse something rare or is it well accepted&gt;?</td>
<td>Opportunities – external to the support service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities to share experiences with other survivors</td>
<td>Threats – external to the support service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Under-resourcing of services (e.g. limited staff; limited qualifications of staff; limited support – especially in terms of economic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For adolescent returnees who were supported with a rehabilitation service, use the SWOT exercise as follows:

- Use flip chart with different colour post-it notes for strengths (green) and weaknesses (grey), opportunities (yellow), threats (red) to discuss the rehabilitation service they had access to as returnees.
- Start with empty sheet of paper with four squares – S, W, O, T – use the coloured post-it notes to fill up the different quadrants, and to generate a conversation.

For adolescent returnees who were not supported with rehabilitation service do NOT use the SWOT – instead have a discussion:

- For those children who didn’t get support from a service, find out if they know about such rehabilitation programmes and if so why they haven’t accessed it.
- Then do a ranking exercise about eight possible programme responses – pick top three, least applicable two and why – using a starred rating.

For case study adolescents – expand list and ask them to rank top three in each quadrant and provide a reason for the ranking – likely to respond more to suggestions. Also ask them to reflect on what sort of intervention would have been most helpful – both the sort of service and how and by whom it was delivered.

Policy options for case studies

Please pick the three things you think would be most useful for improving the situation of children involved in risky migration using three stars for the most important. ***  **  *

Identify a maximum of two things that you think would not work using crosses  xx  or  x

1. Better access to vocational training opportunities close to home
2. Legal aid centres for children/adolescents to help deal with cases of abuse or violence (by family members or strangers)
3. Development of drop-in centres for child/adolescent migrants where can get information on entitlements and services as well as meet other child/adolescent migrants
4. Introduction of safe migration programmes in schools
5. Safe migration programmes provided by commune office at village level or in urban centres (e.g. at DOLISA offices)
6. More leisure activities for adolescents/youth
7. Access to educational scholarships to enable poor adolescents to stay in school
8. More radio or TV programmes on risks of migration and how to prevent these, including interviews with children/adolescents who have suffered from bad experiences during migration
9. Education for parents on risks of migration so they can provide better advice to their children and also avoid sending them to risky environments
10. Access to counselling in schools for vulnerable children/adolescents to discuss their programmes
11. Life skills programmes at school, including information about legal rights, and how to access the justice system
2.2 Key informant interviews

**Viet Nam – distress migration of children (ie under 18 years) – unsupervised by parents**  
(Province, commune)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Household factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Which children are most often involved in distress migration and why? (orphans, gender, relative age, victims of domestic violence, children from large families, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Are children in lower-income households more involved in this practice? Why? Why not? (parental level of education, divorced family, going into debt/borrowing money – can the very poorest families afford those costs, encouragement by brokers – is this a common problem? Example of successful migration?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Does the sex of the household head make a difference? If so, why? (if a female headed hh, is it boys or girls who are more vulnerable?) Is there a problem with families with step-parents? (does it affect boys or girls?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Do you think the type of livelihood a family has (e.g. subsistence agriculture vs petty trade) affects whether they are more or less vulnerable to distress migration? And what about if both parents are working outside the house (less care and protection/supervision)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Do you think economic shocks make people more at risk of distress migration?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How important do you think unemployment and/or under-employment are as a driver of distress migration?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Do you think environmental shocks make people more at risk of distress migration?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Overall, to what extent is distress migration related to poverty and non-poverty factors?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Is distress migration more common amongst specific social groups (e.g. some ethnic groups vs others)? Why?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Migration experiences</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• What types of jobs / activities are children getting involved in when they migrate?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What do you know about girls’ experiences once they migrate internally? Externally – to other countries? Where do you get your evidence from? Do you think there are evidence gaps?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Role of agents / brokers? Who are they? What do you think of their practices? How do you identify and contact girls and boys? How are they regulated? Is this effective?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What role do local community officials and leaders play in responding to distress migration? Do they try to intervene? Raise awareness about risks? Facilitate it given poverty pressures?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What has been the government’s response to the problem of distress/independent child migration? Is poverty considered a driver by the government in terms of MOLISA’s policy frameworks?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Which government units are responsible for dealing with these problems? Are there effective coordination mechanisms? (e.g. between child protection, poverty reduction depts., etc.). How could the departments work in a more joined up way? What types of incentives would help?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Has this policy response been effective? What is the balance between preventative efforts and rehabilitation services? In what ways? How could the policy response be improved? What are the challenges are doing this?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Have there been any spill-over effects from poverty reduction interventions on distress migration of children? If so, why do you think this happened?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Are there NGO/community based organisations/ private businesses supporting interventions? Has this response been effective? In what ways? If not, why not?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Is there any coordination across interventions undertaken by different actors? What is the mechanism? How effective is it?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community/ institutional responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• [Warm up question]: Who are the main people migrating from this province? Where are they migrating to? What kinds of jobs are they migrating to undertake? Since how long have people been migrating in significant numbers? What explains this?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• [Provincial level:] Which districts have the highest prevalence of distress migration in An Giang? Why?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- [Warm up question]: Who are the main people migrating from this province? Where are they migrating to? What kinds of jobs are they migrating to undertake? Since how long have people been migrating in significant numbers? What explains this? 
- [Provincial level:] Which districts have the highest prevalence of distress migration in An Giang? Why?
2.3 FGDs with adults

The focus group discussion should be facilitated through the **participatory and modified problem tree** tool outlined below.

**Tool:**

Start the session with a context-appropriate warm up exercise to make participants feel more comfortable. Once people are more relaxed, start the participatory exercise.

- Ask people to define well-being – you said ‘you are well’ – what does that mean for you? What about for a girl? For a boy?

Explain that the purpose of this exercise is to understand what people consider to be the ‘drivers’ (or causes) of an issue that we have identified to take place frequently in the locality (don’t say ‘problem, just issue, to avoid biasing it). You can ask for all to participate, and then explain the instructions as per the below:

**Facilitator:**

Using flip chart (writing and drawing to account for illiteracy): Write down the child protection issue you are focusing on in simple language and during discussion write down/draw perceptions and drivers:

- **Issue statement:** “Adolescents are increasingly migrating abroad to the Middle East and finding themselves into vulnerable situations” [short-hand = “distress migration”].
  - The **Issue** should be at the centre of the diagram
  - **Drivers or causes** to be noted as boxes on the bottom, with the size of boxes depending on perception of magnitude of the driver (i.e., bigger box for more important drivers)
  - Most common **opinions** (why is this happening?) as bubbles around issue. Size of bubble for this layer not important.
  - **Consequences/outcomes** as ‘branches’ above (bigger boxes [but different colour] for more important drivers, smaller for less important).
The diagram and probing questions below should only be the starting point for the analysis, and to facilitate the discussion to get to issues of ‘why’.

Key questions for further probing:

**Drivers**
- What do you think of this issue? Does it occur frequently in your community? (Probe: Is it seen as normal? Problematic? Why?)
- From the reasons or drivers provided, which do you think is more important? Why? What is the chain events? What is the relative importance of economic problem?
  *(If they do not mention poverty, ask specifically whether they think poverty plays a role…*)

**Possible solutions**
- Are there any interventions/measures in place (laws, government or NGO programmes, community interventions, etc) to prevent this situation from occurring? Or if it occurs, is there any programme or intervention to support the people that might be affected?
- Do you think they are working? Why/why not?
- If there aren’t any interventions, why do you think it is?
- Can the community do anything to improve the situation?
2.4 Small group discussion with children

For this exercise you will identify 3 (maximum 4) children in the age range 14 to 17.

Important to select both middling poor and extremely poor. One group with dropouts. You will have a total of 5-6 SGD in each site: 2 with girls (from better off / worse off households) / 2 with boys (from better off / worse off households)

[*Need to mark on the transcript which poverty group is the most important].

The SGD involves 3 different exercises to make it more dynamic and engaging for the participants. The total discussion should last no more than 1.5 hours.

**Begin with a warm-up exercise asking children how think about wellbeing – ie what they mean when they say ‘thank you I’m well’.**

**Part 1: Life skills analysis** to understand children’s perceptions regarding some common child protection violations in their community (This should not last more than 20 minutes)

**Part 2: Problem tree analysis** with a focus on the research problem in each country, exploring drivers facilitated through ‘problem tree’ technique, whereby we will prompt with questions and draw a tree for causes and consequences (maximum 45 minutes)

**Part 3: Intervention mapping**– open questions to find if children are aware of programmes or interventions to prevent or provide support to those victims of child protection violations in their community and how they think these could be improved (maximum 25 minutes)

**Part 1: Life skills, perceptions of child protection violations (adapted from UNICEF’s violence study tools)**

Each child is given a copy of the form below and a pen/pencil. The facilitator reads out the list to the group and supports any child who has trouble with the written format.

In the column on the right, children should say in a scale of 1 to 5 if they 1 disagree and 5 if they agree. Once the question is asked and ranked, it should be the entry point for discussion as to whether they think those situations occur in practice, and to ask why these occur.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do you think these situations happen at school:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Students hurting or threatening others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Teachers threatening or hurting students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Students using sexual language with others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Students making sexual advances or abusing other students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Teachers making sexual advances or abusing other students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do you think these situations happen at home:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Parents physically punishing children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Parents verbally abusing children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Older siblings beating or verbally abusing younger siblings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If any of these situations happened to me, I would:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Do nothing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Avoid the situation so it doesn’t happen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Seek help from a friend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Seek help from a teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Seek help from a parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Seek help from another adult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Seek help from a programme / service available in the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I wouldn’t seek help from anyone</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Do you think the following situations happen in the community:

- Girls or boys being involved in a sexual relationship before they are 18
- Girls becoming pregnant before they are 18
- Girls or boys getting married before they are 18
- Girls or boys being sexually abused by family members or friends
- Girls or boys being sexually abused by strangers

If any of these things happened to you (against your will), would you:

- Talk to your parents about it
- Talk to someone else (such as a children’s club leader) about it
- Talk to authorities about it

How much do you agree with these statements regarding your mother and father:

- Normally around in the household to take care of me
- One is away working and the other stays at home caring for children
- Both are away and children stay on their own
- Both are away and children stay with friend / neighbour
- Both are away and children go to nursery and school

- I can talk to my mother and my father, they listen to me
- I feel protected and cared for at home
- I feel unsafe / unprotected at home

Part 2: Problem tree analysis

Draw a picture of a large tree with roots, trunk and branches where leaves can be added…

Taking the ‘trunk’ of the tree to be the central ‘problem’ being researched (trafficking, distress migration, cross-generational sex), use the following questions to explore drivers (roots) and consequences (leaves) – [so what happens (good and bad) as a result of distress migration?] in the diagram:

- Can you think of some of the causes of the ‘problem’? (probe for: poverty, social pressures, common response that is accepted by peers, only livelihood option, etc.). What do you think is the most important cause and why?
- Who are more exposed to it, girls or boys? Why?
- Are some children more exposed than others? Why? (probe: those that live in poor households, disabled, orphaned, girls, etc)
- How do you feel about this situation happening in your community?
- What are some of the consequences of the ‘problem’ on children/adolescents experiencing it? On the community? (probe: education, health, happiness, family life)
- Similarities and differences between internal and external migration? Which is more risky and why?

Part 3: Programmes / interventions – with a focus on preventative measures…

- Do you receive information about how to prevent these types of things from happening to you or your friends/peers from parents, schools, children’s clubs, other programmes in the community?
- Are you aware of any programmes in the community that try to prevent these situations from occurring (including information by radio, communication campaigns, support given to children or their households, etc)
- Are you aware of any programmes in place in the community that provide support more generally for children / young people in the community? If so, what does the programme do? Do you think it works? How would you improve it?
- Do you know anyone participating in this programme? Have they benefitted? How?
• Are you aware of any laws in your country that will protect you from harm or violence – e.g. going to school, to the field? If you were harmed, what action if any would you take? If you were the local leader or district official, what programme would you put in place to improve the situation of children in your community? Why?

End by asking children to rank the interventions most likely be effective. As the above discussion is ongoing put up possible interventions on a flipchart and then ask them to rank the top 5 most effective, and the 2 least effective.

As a backup plan, we will have a list of options that they could rank if they don’t have many suggestions.
2.5 Community mapping and timeline

Objectives:

- Obtain perspectives from community members on community dynamics, experiences of poverty in the community, gender and adolescence dynamics,
- Obtain understanding of timeline for key events in the community and recent changes that have shaped coping mechanisms and future opportunities for young people
- Use as entry into the community and for exit and providing feedback to the community
- **Kebele leader will be able to provide list of names of who is better off and then poor based on participation in the safety net which will be key for sampling purposes for the FGD and the SGD

Some websites
http://www.oneworldtrust.org/apro/search/found_tools/?selection=36
http://www.fao.org/Participation/tools/PRA.html
http://www.cprc.abrc.co.uk/toolbox/Participatory.php
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approach</th>
<th>Visual tool</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>When</th>
<th>With whom</th>
<th>Running the meeting, Write-up/analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Small group discussion</td>
<td><strong>Social and vulnerability mapping</strong></td>
<td>• Overall sense of poverty and vulnerability in the community</td>
<td>Entry into community / after initial discussions with KIIs, field coordinator/set up by field coordinator prior to arrival of team</td>
<td>Key people in the community, elders, could be men/women, if many people split into male/female, older/younger groups. [having a representative from the younger generation is key], around 5-6 people. [2 groups]</td>
<td>2 facilitators – one leading, one taking notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 1</td>
<td>• Community map resources (infrastructure – schools, clinics, churches, mosques, roads, depots, etc. - , livelihood resources, etc.) and where people live</td>
<td>• Identifying key vulnerabilities in the area</td>
<td></td>
<td>Taking notes of: discussion on key change, interesting verbatim quotes, non-verbal communication, etc</td>
<td>2 facilitators – one leading, one taking notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Community map where different categories of hh live in general (with regard to resources and proximity to services), how long been in the area...</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Present time-line as annex to report</td>
<td>Taking notes of: discussion on vulnerabilities, interesting verbatim quotes, non-verbal communication, etc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Ask group what are the key vulnerabilities (economic, social, physical, environmental) in this area (how vulnerable are people &amp; to what?)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 facilitators – one leading, one taking notes</td>
<td>Taking notes of: discussion on vulnerabilities, interesting verbatim quotes, non-verbal communication, etc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Focus in on social capital and social networks – who gets included? Who excluded? If in trouble what to people do/where do they go; has this changed over time, improved/got worse, why?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 facilitators – one leading, one taking notes</td>
<td>2 facilitators – one leading, one taking notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small group discussion</td>
<td><strong>Coping strategies and resilience by age</strong></td>
<td>• Identifying how community leaders identify / define poverty and vulnerabilities</td>
<td></td>
<td>2 facilitators – one leading, one taking notes</td>
<td>2 facilitators – one leading, one taking notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 2</td>
<td>• Ask how coping mechanisms differ between adolescents/young people, adults and older people</td>
<td>• Obtaining listing for sampling purposes</td>
<td></td>
<td>2 facilitators – one leading, one taking notes</td>
<td>2 facilitators – one leading, one taking notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Ask them to categorise different types of informal sp – savings groups, borrowing, labour sharing, relying on friends, neighbours, relatives; communal soup kitchens, informal insurance groups, youth association</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2 facilitators – one leading, one taking notes</td>
<td>2 facilitators – one leading, one taking notes</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[ 15-17 yrs are now seen as children based on constitution and UNCRC… 18-29 yrs]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 facilitators – one leading, one taking notes</td>
<td>2 facilitators – one leading, one taking notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small group discussion</td>
<td>Historical time-line / trend line</td>
<td>Change in community over time and effect on community dynamics</td>
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<tr>
<td>Part 3</td>
<td></td>
<td>• History / dynamics of the community</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Change over time in terms of infrastructure, access to services, vulnerabilities, cohesion</td>
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<td>• Particular focus on adolescents, and gender differences</td>
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- at Kebele level, women’s association [15-49 yrs] etc.
  
  *Probe specifically regarding support mechanisms for younger people.*
  
  - Ask them to weight relative importance of these mechanisms and then vis-à-vis formal gov’t/ngo programmes.

  - **Historical time-line / trend line**
    
    - Start from 1991 – beginning of EPRDF…
    
    - Ask about key events in their community (services – e.g. secondary school, vocational training, out-migration, NGO/donor programmes, social protection, drought, floods, etc.)
    
    - The effects of these events (get at issues of disruption, information provision, mobile phones, radio/TV programmes – shifts in attitudes).
    
    - Key changes in the way adolescents and young people behave, opportunities and challenges they face - gender differences within these changes
    
    - Finally, ask about shifts in internal and external migration… and underlying reasons
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