

# Current Status, Causes and Developmental Impacts of Migration in VietNam

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Received on 1 November 2022. Accepted on 17 January 2023.

**Abstract:** Migration is a natural law of population development and is an objective of the socio-economic phenomenon that affects the development level of a country. Population mobility is a positive factor promoting socio-economic development, contributing to labor restructuring, job creation, and sustainable poverty reduction. This article evaluates the results of research into internal migration in Vietnam during the period 2011-2020 in order to clarify the current status, as well as the causes and impacts of internal migration on development in the country. Migration flow is mainly from rural to urban areas, or between urban areas. The trend of moving from urban to rural localities is modest, and similar to the migration process of rural to rural. The main cause of migration is economics, and young people nowadays seem overly eager to migrate. The decision to migrate is made by individuals in most cases, and female migrants appear to depend more on others when moving. The income of male migrants is higher than that of their female counterparts. From reviewing migration patterns, assessing the causes and impacts of migration, this article raises a number of policy issues in its conclusion.

**Keywords:** Internal migration, causes, impacts, migration policy, Vietnam.

**Subject classification:** Sociology.

## 1. Introduction

Migration is an objective socio-economic phenomenon that occurs regularly in the development process in all countries. It is an integral component of the labor market and economic growth, contributing to population redistribution, restructuring, job creation, income generation, and improvement of living standards. In particular, it contributes to solving the problem of surplus labor in the place of departure, and at the same time meeting the labor and human resource needs in the destination. For numerous rural households, migration is an important strategy in livelihood improvement. In many

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localities, migrant workers not only carry out jobs that local people do not want to do, but they also participate in work that require skills that the local people do not have.

The relationship between migration and development is two-way, in which migration is both a driving force and a result of socio-economic development (Skeldon, 1997). Together with the process of opening up and integration, large-scale domestic migration in Vietnam has increasingly been taking place, together with the country's renewal and development. Different types of migration flow increase rapidly, expanding in size and geographical space. The migration pattern in recent years shows a marked change in size and trend, reflecting its link with Vietnam's development.

Unlike one-off biological events in a person's life, such as birth or death, migration is socio-economic in nature, occurring many times in the circle life of an individual or household. It is a phenomenon difficult to measure and identify, so research into this area applies many concepts and definitions. Depending on the approach taken and the goal, studies can investigate the concept of migration in different ways. In 1958, the United Nations defined migration as a form of movement of residence over a certain period of time and location; it is the movement of people from one administrative/territorial unit or division to another, accompanied by a temporary or permanent change of residence (Đặng Nguyên Anh, 2010).

This article summarizes and evaluates the results of a number of research projects on internal migration in Vietnam over a 10-year period (from 2011 to 2020) to understand the current state of play, its causes, and the impact it has, thereby raising a number of policy issues that need to be taken into account. The migration data used in this research comes from the 2019 Vietnam Population and Housing Census, the 2015 National Migration Survey, and the Vietnam Household Living Standards Survey. These national surveys define migrants as those people who moved from one commune/ward to another within the last five years prior to when the particular surveys were carried out, and who resided at the address reported in the census for at least one month or more. Thus, migrants are those whose current residence is not in the same administrative unit at commune/ward level where they resided five years previously. This is quite a long time period, so it may miss cases of short-term movement or people who traveled a lot during the five years but who were still present at the place of residence at the time of investigation. Therefore, it is necessary to supplement data on pendulum migration and temporary seasonal migration when studying migration (Đặng Nguyên Anh, 2012). National censuses and surveys focusing on migration from province/city and region/area, migration by district, and migration between commune/ward units have received little attention in analysis results in recent years.

The research results come from two main periods: before Covid-19 and during/after the pandemic. The trend of migration was reversed during Covid-19, a phenomenon likely to happen only once in a generation. People from big cities, especially in the South, moved to rural areas because of circumstances created by Covid-19 and job loss. This is mentioned in the works of Đặng Nguyên Anh (2022) and Vũ Thúy Hiền (2020). The author also collected and analyzed research results from other empirical studies, including those of

Đặng Đình Long and Nguyễn Thị Minh Phương (2013), Đinh Quang Hà (2014), Hồ Ngọc Châm (2019), Lê Văn Sơn (2014), Nguyen Viet Cuong, M Van den Berg, and R Lensink (2011), Nguyễn Ngọc Diễm, Nguyễn Thị Minh Châu (2005), Nguyễn Nữ Đoàn Vy (2018), Nguyễn Văn Hùng (2019). These studies cover a wide range of samples, for example, the trend and institutions of rural-to-urban migration in Vietnam (Dang Nguyen Anh, 2017); pendulum migration and seasonal migration in Vietnam (Đặng Nguyên Anh, 2012); migration and resettlement in hydropower projects (Đặng Nguyên Anh, 2008); economic aspect of migration workers from rural to urban (Đặng Đình Long and Nguyễn Thị Minh Phương, 2013); social order of rural-urban free migration in Hanoi (Đinh Quang Hà, 2014); social security of workers in the informal sector in Hanoi (Hồ Ngọc Châm, 2019); impact of work and non-work migration on household welfare, poverty and inequality in Vietnam (Nguyen Viet Cuong, M Van den Berg, and R Lensink, 2011); economic scope (increased household income) in Hà Nam (Nguyễn Ngọc Diễm, Nguyễn Thị Minh Châu, 2005); impact of immigrants on socio-economic development in Đà Nẵng (Nguyễn Nữ Đoàn Vy, 2018); and access to reproductive health care services of young workers migrating to industrial zones (Nguyễn Văn Hùng, 2019).

Nowadays there is an increasing trend of many types of international migration. The author addresses this in another article given it is not applicable to the content of this particular paper.

## **2. Current domestic migration patterns**

Data from the 2019 Vietnam Population and Housing Census shows that the national migration rate increased from 6.5% in 1999 to 8.5% in 2009, decreasing to 7.3% in 2019 (GSO, 2019). However, these figures are lower than the reality because temporary, short-term, and seasonal migration patterns were not considered and recorded in the census as mentioned above. The results of the 2015 National Internal Migration Survey show that a larger proportion (13.5%) of the Vietnamese population had migrated (UNFPA and GSO, 2016). Also, according to this data source, migrants were mostly in the 15 to 39 age bracket (accounting for 84% of the total number of migrants surveyed). Women accounted for 55.4%, continuing to confirm the trend of feminization of migration in the period 2011-2020, in both migration flows to rural and urban areas in all socio-economic regions (GSO, 2020).

In addition, migration among the young population, those educated above secondary education level, households having a large number of laborers, and those living in poor rural areas tended to be higher. Nearly 62% of migrants traveled alone in their last move. The rest move with family members such as spouses, children, or parents (31.4%); almost 7% of migrants moved with relatives, friends, compatriots, or others, reflecting the reality that migration is first and foremost a decision of an individual and the household (UNFPA and GSO, 2016).

Among migration flows that took place in the five years prior to the 2019 census, rural areas received 36% of all migrants, while urban migration flows dominated (64%). The results also show that rural-to-rural migration rates decreased faster than expected. Although rural-to-urban and urban-to-urban migration rates have increased over the years, migration to urban areas in general took place on the largest scale (GSO, 2019). This shows that urban areas have many advantages and life-changing opportunities for rural people, increasing the attractiveness of big cities and thereby encouraging migration. Over the past 10 years, migration from rural to urban areas in Vietnam has always accounted for a large proportion of domestic migration flow. The Southeast continues to be the region that attracts the most people, with 1.3 million migrants arriving between 2014 and 2019. This is more than two-thirds of the total number between the regions (GSO, 2019). The 2019 census also shows that the majority of migrants to the Southeast, mainly to Hồ Chí Minh City, came from the Mekong Delta (710,000 people, accounting for 53.2%). The close proximity between the areas and convenient traffic conditions makes travel easy between the departure and destination localities. The provinces showing high negative net migration rates are among the largest rice granaries of Vietnam, especially those in the Mekong Delta region such as: Sóc Trăng (-75.0‰), An Giang (-72.1‰), Cà Mau (-62.7‰), Hậu Giang (-61.2‰), Đồng Tháp (-6.1‰) and Bạc Liêu (-52.2‰). The Northern midlands and mountainous region are the starting points of migration flow to the Red River Delta region, mainly to Hanoi (209,300 people, accounting for 61.2%).

However, migration flows to urban centers, especially to big cities, is a complicated issue today, requiring attention, and comprehensive, synchronous policies with an innovative vision. Most of the urban migrants belong to the young age group, which mainly participates in the labor force. Driven by a desire to improve the quality of life for themselves and their families, they tend to travel greater distances, willing to accept challenges/hardships in return for better employment and income opportunities. The rapid urbanization process, and the limited management mechanism of land, housing, and roads have created many difficulties in terms of technical and social infrastructure (transport, schools, hospitals, housing) in big cities, especially for people without a permanent residence and the low-income workers. Due to lack of determination, and inexperience in planning, the development progress of satellite towns around Hanoi and Hồ Chí Minh City is very slow, leading to a large concentration of population, and increased population density, which overloads the infrastructure and living environment in Vietnam's two largest cities (Vũ Thúy Hiền, 2022; Nguyễn Nữ Đoàn Vy, 2018).

Industrial parks and export processing zones attract young rural and agricultural workers, creating labor flows from rural areas to industrial zones within and outside the provinces. Notably, migration flows to industrial parks and export processing zones continue on a largescale. This reflects the increase in the speed and level of foreign direct investment in Vietnam in recent years (Lê Văn Sơn, 2014; Đặng Đình Long và Nguyễn

Thị Minh Phương, 2013), and shows that migration to industrial zones has grown faster with increasing increasing revitalization (mainly in the group of young migrants aged 18 to 30 years old). This is an objective trend that plays a positive role in meeting the needs of the labor market and economic growth.

However, compared to urban migration, migration flows in rural areas are quieter and subtler. Before the 2000s, rural-to-rural migration was mainly in the form of organized migration by the state moving people to new economic zones, while in the 2001-2010 period, the format changed to migration based on the plan on population arrangement and rearrangement in rural project areas. Migration in this period did not create separate communities but instead the local people and the migrants intermingled, and the latter often brought their families. Migration and resettlement due to construction of large hydropower projects is a fairly common form of rural-to-rural migration. During the 2001-2010 period, the resettlement and relocation of villages in the traditional way was based on building houses for people and just leaving them there. This resulted in migrants having no land to cultivate, and no access to water for daily life and production. They fell into poverty, and some some had to returned to their previous places, now lake beds, to settle temporarily, resulting in long-term post-settlement problem (Đặng Nguyễn Anh, 2008).

Entering the period of 2011-2020, rural-to-rural migration flows included many ethnic minorities in the Northern midlands and mountains spontaneously migrating to the Central Highlands provinces. However, in this 10-year period, and compared with the previous period, the Central Highlands has gradually been transformed into an out-migration region with a negative net migration rate because the number of in-migrants is smaller than the number of out-migrants. Census data shows that this ratio for the Central Highlands has decreased from 76 immigrants/1,000 people in 1999 to 9 immigrants/1,000 people in 2009, and changed to 12 emigrants/1,000 people in 2019 (GSO, 2019). Most notably, there is the predominance of women migrants from the Northern midlands and mountains - statistically more than twice as high as male migrants (GSO, 2020).

For many decades, migration from urban to rural areas has always been the lowest proportion of migration flows in Vietnam, accounting for less than 10% of the total number of migrants. This type of migration flow is quite stable and has not fluctuated over the years (GSO, 2019). However, due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, migrant workers moved back in their droves to their hometowns from Hồ Chí Minh City, Bình Dương, Đồng Nai, and other localities. The prolonged and complicated pandemic, along with the implementation of large-scale social distancing, forced tens of thousands of migrant workers to return to their hometowns due to loss of jobs and income. The impact of Covid-19 also pushed people into a vulnerable state because of loss of income, poor health from infections, and they could not remain in the cities and industrial parks (Đặng Nguyễn Anh, 2022). The flow of migration back to the countryside took place mainly in the first six months of 2021. Once the pandemic was brought under control in early 2022, many who had sought sanctuary in their hometowns returned to the big cities and industrial zones urgently needing to work and earn money.

### **3. Migration causes and motivations**

There are various factors that motivate people to move from their places of residence in favor of new locations. Over the past 10 years, increasing disparities in income level and wages, living standards, employment, educational opportunities, as well as marriage are the reasons behind decisions to migrate (Coxhead et al., 2015; Đặng Nguyễn Anh, 2016; Nguyễn Văn Hùng, 2019). At the macro level, migration occurs due to disparities in levels of development and differences in opportunities between origin and destination. However, from a micro perspective, it depends not only on the migrants themselves and their households, but also on economic, cultural, social and network factors, settlement between origin and destination, and between first- and late-comers (Đặng Nguyễn Anh, 1998). The social network factor needs to be considered in the development of effective migration policies, in line with reality.

The decision to migrate is due more to attractions at the destination than a dislike of the place of departure (Coxhead et al., 2015; Đặng Nguyễn Anh, 2010). The identified attractions include “finding a job in a new place”, “going to school”, or “living near relatives”. Meanwhile, as to why they wanted to leave the place of departure, migrants hardly mention some of the reasons, which include “being unable to find a job”, or “having no relatives there”.

The results of the 2015 National Internal Migration Survey show that economy remains the leading factor in migration decisions. In particular, about 30% of migrants surveyed said the reason was “finding a job in a new place”; 11.5% migrated for “better working conditions”; 12% migrated for “convenience to work”; and 12.6% migrated to “improve their living standards”. In addition, “living near relatives”, “going to school”, and “getting married” were other reasons (23.5%, 18.8%, and 12.9%, respectively). Only 4.5% said that they wanted to move as they were attracted by the destination’s much nicer natural environment (UNFPA and GSO, 2016).

Migration for work, or labor migration, is still popular today. According to the results of the census (GSO, 2019), the Red River Delta and the Southeast are the two regions with the highest percentages of migrant workers moving for employment purposes and higher income, with 45.6% and 42.4% respectively. For migrants to Hanoi and Hồ Chí Minh City looking for work account for the highest proportion of why people move to these two cities (40.2% and 32.6% respectively). In contrast, the North Central and the Central Coast regions, which experience slow economic development, are less attractive to migrants. Only 14.3% come to these regions for “finding a job in the new place”. The reasons many migrants choose to come to these areas is mainly for “going to school” (23.0%) and “living near relatives” (26.5%). Meanwhile, for migrants to the Central Highlands the reason of “living near relatives” accounted for the highest proportion (39%). Thus, the regional migration model also shows the economy to be the leading factor in migration decision making.

Although the unemployment rate in the Vietnamese countryside is not high, people still do agriculture, forestry and fishery work, the income from cultivation and husbandry sectors is very low and unstable, which makes rural life challenging. Staying put in the countryside or moving to the city to work are important decisions, motivating many, especially young workers. The desire to get rich and earn a lot of money for themselves and their families prompts the decision to relocate.

Most migrants make their own migration decisions. Although the decision-making process always involves family members, or friends, the migrants are still those making the ultimate decisions. However, the results of the 2015 National Internal Migration Survey (UNFPA and GSO, 2016) show a difference between men and women in the migration decision making process (92.2% and 87.9% respectively). Compared to men, women seemed more dependant on others in their migration decisions. Also, according to the survey results, migrants knew about their current place of residence through unofficial information sources. Over 46% of migrants knew through relatives and friends, while 64% of migrants said they have blood relatives at the destination. This percentage differs little between men and women (66.5% and 62.2% respectively), indicating that during the migration process, people created social relationships and formed a network to facilitate their integration into society, while reducing risks that may occur during migration and stabilizing life in the destination.

#### **4. Developmental impact of migration**

Migration reflects the objective law of development, creates better opportunities for people, and contributes to improving the lives of migrants and their families. The majority feel satisfied with their jobs and income levels at their new place of residence. Nearly 54% said that their current job is better or much better than before moving, while only about 10% reflected that their post-migration job was not as good as the previous one at their old residence. There is no difference in these rates between male and female migrants. In terms of income, nearly two-thirds of workers self-assessed their post-migration income to be higher or much higher than before. This figure for women is 62% while that of men is 55%. However, the average income of male migrants is about VND 1 million per month higher than their female counterparts, a disparity observed across regions of the country (UNFPA and GSO, 2016).

Despite these positive impacts, migrant workers face many difficulties in accessing social services, housing, and security due to the lack of social assistance, insurance, and employment contracts, especially for casual sector workers. Complicated social insurance procedures and low insurance benefits are still major barriers in accessing welfare policies for migrant workers (Hồ Ngọc Châu, 2019; Nguyễn Văn Hùng, 2019; Lê Bạch Dương & Nguyễn Thanh Liêm, 2011). Compared with non-migrants, migrant workers are still more disadvantaged in terms of job stability. The proportion of migrants who are salaried

workers with long-term (indefinite-term) labor contracts is only two-thirds of the rate of non-migrants (30.9% versus 54.4%). Meanwhile, the proportion of migrants working without a labor contract is 32.2%, higher than 27.2% of non-migrants (UNFPA and GSO, 2016). This shows that migrant workers are more exposed to risks than non-migrants when they lose their jobs and income. This is long-standing problem but it has not received enough attention or been resolved.

From the perspective of households in the place of departure, migrants make a remarkable contribution to poverty reduction in their homeland. Studies using data from the Vietnam Household Living Standards Survey show that remittances from migrants have helped their families and relatives live more comfortably, although they may not have escaped poverty (Nguyễn Việt Cường et al., 2011; Coxhead et al., 2015). Data from the 2015 National Internal Migration Survey shows that 36.6% of migrant workers sent money back to their families in the 12 months prior to when the survey was done. The rate of women is slightly higher than that of men (38.3% and 34.6% respectively). This trend is the same for both rural and urban migration flows (UNFPA & GSO, 2016).

A remittance is part of a migrant worker's income that they transfer to their families in their homeland. Most of the money is used for daily expenses, helping to pay off debts, and contributing to educational and medical costs. When combined with cash income from other non-farming activities, remittances can help fund development, construct houses, and buy household goods. The impact of migration is not only an increase in income but it contributes to changing the face of a locality (Đoàn Văn Trường, 2019; Nguyễn Ngọc Diễm & Nguyễn Minh Châu, 2016). Migration contributes to promoting structural transformation and meeting the requirements of industrialization and modernization of the country. However, it also has a negative impact on the development of households in particular and localities in general. When young rural laborers relocate to work far away, they leave behind the elderly and children who may be faced with work difficulties (Đoàn Văn Trường, 2014). The migration of women can affect the family structure impacting on areas that they normally take care of and are responsible for in the family unit. The situation of rural laborers flocking to cities and industrial zones also raises some social problems and affects security, social order, and safety of destinations, especially in urban areas. Migrant workers can make a living by selling goods, shining shoes, driving motorbike taxis, street trading, and selling goods in public places such as on beaches, at schools, and in parks. Such activity may cause disorder and negatively impact on the urban beauty, as well as encouraging many social evils such as usury, debt foreclosure, gambling, and prostitution (Vũ Thúy Hiền, 2020; Đinh Quang Hà, 2014).

## **5. Conclusion and some policy issues**

This article analyzes the characteristics and current state of play of migration in Vietnam based on data and research results from the past 10 years. Like many others, the



country is experiencing a rapid increase in internal migration flows. The constitution, laws and ordinances of Vietnam create conditions for people to travel, reside freely, job hunt, and increase their incomes. This is an advantage when creating a legal and policy framework, as well as supporting migrants to participate economically, and in political and cultural life, contributing to equality and social progress in the country's development. However, there are still many negative opinions and views on migration (Vũ Thúy Hiền, 2020; Đinh Quang Hà, 2014), despite its important contributions. Migrants themselves still face many difficulties in accessing and enjoying social security services. The awareness and implementation of policies for this population group remain difficult and inadequate, with no effective support groups to help them exercise their rights and obligations. It is time to unify views and policy direction on migration in order to promote its positive aspects, limit the negatives, and continuously improve the material and spiritual life of people, including migrants.

Migration makes important contributions to socio-economic development in both rural and urban areas. Therefore, restricting this movement and discriminating against migrant workers, needs to change. To date, there is a lack of macro policies on migration to urban areas and big cities; there is not even a national policy document for urban migration. At the same time, it is necessary to amend and abolish unreasonable regulations on the exercise of the rights and obligations of migrants to ensure this group will be treated equally as citizens of the destination locality. It is advisable to apply policies as leverage to encourage oriented migration, in line with the socio-economic development strategy of each region and each locality. It is necessary to integrate the migration factor into long-term and annual master plans, into plans on socio-economic development, on land use, in key industries, and building areas of origin and destination, between rural and urban areas.

The state needs to simplify administrative procedures and regulations on residence, and quickly deploy an effective population management system using citizen code technology. In this way, the size and structure of the population will regularly be updated allowing timely corrective measures to be taken. It is necessary to support and create conditions for migrants to access basic services to stabilize their lives at the destination. Policies should ensure they have access to healthcare, education, housing, loans, etc., regardless of residency status. Currently, in Vietnam, job opportunities and income have reduced for many workers due to the global economic recession, and the business community faces many difficulties. Feasible solutions are needed to ensure social security, to stabilize income and wages, and social services thereby creating resilience for migrant workers in times of crisis.

At the macro level, no ministry has yet been assigned responsibility for managing and coordinating the migration process, hence a lack of overall strategy and a synchronous policy system for migration today. In the long term, it is necessary to create livelihoods and sources of income outside of the agricultural sector. People have a right to expect a job

with a livable income, decent livelihood, and an opportunity to get rich in their homeland. When people have more choices, they will consider the decision to migrate. Promoting sustainable development goals, investing in infrastructure, creating jobs, improving the living environment and lifestyle, especially in rural areas, will contribute to narrowing the differences in living standards and decrease migration pressure, especially for young workers in rural areas.

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