

POLICY BRIEF

Viet Nam climate change contributes to unsafe migration: addressing the impacts for vulnerable children and youth

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Summary

This policy brief provides a call to action for development partners of Viet Nam and Thailand as the primary destination of choice for Vietnamese migrants, to address key drivers of distress migration in communities of origin and to make migration safer, more humane and more just for Vietnamese parents and children alike, providing more support for those who stay behind and those who go, empowering children to help shape a better future for themselves.

The policy challenge

The research finds the mounting pressures of climate change on livelihoods are contributing to migration under distress. It also finds that vulnerable low-income families who are the most reliant on natural resources, facing multiple forms of disadvantage and have the weakest safety-buffer, are by far the most exposed. Accounts from families dependent on subsistence agriculture revealed that they are resorting to migration as a last option to service debts and make ends meet. The element of distress is significant because it amplifies the risks and exacerbates the negative impacts migration can have. Families migrating in distress are more likely to do so without legal protections and move in stages that leave them physically distanced from each other and their social safety networks and placing children and youth into precarious positions with heightened risks of abuse and exploitation.

The response needed

Viet Nam has put climate adaptation plans in place that recognise the potential impact of climate change on migration. However further action is needed by Viet Nam and its development partners to support the most vulnerable communities that experience multiple forms of disadvantage and are most exposed to climate change induced natural disasters to adapt their livelihoods in order to build resilience and reduce financial hardship. These actions could include improving the resilience and reliability of rural infrastructure, supporting communities to adapt livelihoods for shock resilience, and providing timely targeted relief to allow faster livelihood recovery post-disaster and to protect against the adoption of negative coping mechanisms such as harmful debt that further traps families into poverty and financial distress. There is also need for collaboration between Viet Nam and Thailand to make migration pathways safer, especially for children migrating (among whom girls are over represented) through irregular migration and exposed to significant risks.

This policy brief outlines recommended actions necessary to create the right enabling environment for safe, orderly and dignified migration that upholds the rights, well-being and opportunities of migrants, particularly vulnerable groups such as children. It draws on insights from field research and interviews conducted with dozens of children, young people, parents and leaders across two vulnerable communities of **Thuong Xuan district** in Thanh Hoa province of Viet Nam, as well as an in-depth review of national and international research, policy-oriented reports and insights from experts.¹

Context

Vietnam has experienced rapid economic growth since the 1990s, driven by significant investments in national infrastructure aimed at improving connectivity and diversifying away from agriculture into sectors such as manufacturing and tourism. This economic progress has led to significant improvements in living standards and notable declines in poverty from 58% in the early 1990s to around 17% by 2018.² Despite these advancements, development has not been equitable across ethnic groups or geographies.³ A significant urban-rural divide has developed, with poverty eight times more prevalent in rural than urban areas.⁴ Many of those living rurally rely on

¹ The findings set out in this report draw from research conducted across three countries during 2023-2024 through a partnership between World Vision East Asia and Stockholm Environment Institute. For further reading and methods refer to the full findings report: Vigil, S., Steiner, C., Kim, D., Flores, D., & Davis, M. (2024). Climate change, vulnerability and migration: Impacts on children and youth in Southeast Asia: <https://www.wvi.org/eastasia/research-climate-change-vulnerability-migration>

² World Bank database: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.DDAY?locations=VN>

³ ADB, 2022, Agriculture, natural resources and rural development sector assessment strategy and road map: Viet Nam 2021-2025.

⁴ Ibid.

subsistence farming or informal employment, lacking access to formal social protections and highly vulnerable to economic and environmental shocks.⁵ Climate change exacerbates these challenges, deepening existing inequalities and pushing more people into poverty.⁶ Viet Nam is particularly vulnerable to climate change and faces daunting climate hazards, including extreme heat and major flood risks linked to sea-level rise and coastal storms, which have led the World Bank to identify northern Viet Nam as a likely climate migration “hotspot” by 2050. Vietnam has a youthful and ethnically diverse population, with approximately 25% of its people under 15 years old and over 50 ethnic groups.⁷ Educational attainment remains a barrier for skilled employment, with just 39% of adults over age 25 having completed secondary education.

Income disparities within Viet Nam and across Southeast Asia have driven internal and regional migration within and from Vietnam. Internal and external migration trends have varied considerably and have continued to grow again since 2020. As of 2020, over 3 million Vietnamese lived abroad, with a growing proportion male. Internal migration is also significant, comprising about 16% of the population.⁸ Thailand, being the most developed country in the Greater Mekong Subregion and offering wages twice as high as those in Vietnam, attracts a substantial number of Vietnamese labour migrants, far exceeding the numbers going to other destinations.

In Thuong Xuan district villages are buffeted by monsoon rains, severe flooding and typhoons, which are significantly disrupting livelihoods. The area has developed industrial and service sectors which support viable alternatives to farming. However many families still rely on agriculture, especially rice, acacia and vegetables and buffalo. Local dam construction has reduced water shortages but increased severity of flooding, with devastating impact on livelihoods. When floods increasingly hit, villages are cutoff from transportation or access. Amid economic struggles, many people have migrated. Viet Nam has high rates of internal mobility, and Thuong Xuan district is just about 200 km from Hanoi.

Findings

Climate pressures are contributing to the financial stress driving distress migration among vulnerable Vietnamese families

- The diversity of geographies, ethnicities, infrastructure, and degree of reliance on natural resources for livelihoods mean the increasingly frequent climate induced disasters have significantly different impacts across Thanh Hoa province. The coastline is particularly exposed to damaging impacts of sea level rise, typhoons, coastal erosion and saltwater intrusion on housing, infrastructure, crops and other livelihoods.
- The negative impacts of climate change on livelihoods leading to financial distress were most notable among villages and families facing multiple disadvantages and reliance on natural resources for food and income.
- Physical isolation due to the lack of reliable roads or bridges severely limits livelihood options for people in the villages studied, forcing them to choose between abject poverty at home or migration to an urban area or to Thailand.
- Viet Nam’s largest hydropower and irrigation project on the Chu River has helped strengthen resilience by assisting flood management and providing irrigation for agricultural land.
- Among the communities interviewed, distress migration was common, particularly as a result of climate-disrupted livelihoods leading to debt and food insecurity. Some were struggling to feed their family due to low crop yields, crop failures, and/or a lack of stable work. Many households faced crushing debts, often linked to floods, droughts or storms.
- Each participant had unique circumstances but all shared the same reason for migration - to earn more than they could at home.
- Migration is viewed as a last resort. Many adults and children said they did not wish to migrate, particularly if it meant risky border crossings and long-term separation from their families. Most said they would happily stay if

⁵ <https://www.ifad.org/en/web/operations/w/country/vietnam#:~:text=About%2070%20per%20cent%20of,close%20to%20the%20poverty%20line.>

⁶ World Bank Group. (2022). *Vietnam Country Climate and Development Report*. <https://hdl.handle.net/10986/37618>

⁷ World Bank Group. (2022). *Vietnam Country Climate and Development Report*. <https://hdl.handle.net/10986/37618>

⁸ World Bank Group. (2021). *Groundswell: Acting on Internal Climate Migration*. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/37966>

they could have decent work (and/or a viable farm) and not have to worry about going hungry, being unable to cover health costs or other basic needs, or taking on unsustainable debt.

Children and young people were active participants in the decision to migrate, reflecting their needs and aspirations for a better future and better socio-economic conditions

- The child migrants interviewed said they had made the decision to migrate, many focused on helping their household cover basic needs or pay off debts.
- Children are aware of many of the risks of migration. They recognized that migration was not the best pathway out of poverty, even if it was their only option at the time. They were aware of the precarity of the journeys and the exploitative conditions that were common at their destination. Sometimes one sibling worked so that others could stay home and attend school.

Migrating in distress put children, youth and their families into situations where they were vulnerable to abuse and exploitation and reduced access to support

- Migrants interviewed had crossed the border through irregular channels and worked mainly in agriculture and in construction, opting for longer stays due to the risks associated with moving.
- Those who had engaged in irregular migration were the most vulnerable to exploitation, forced labour and potential violence. However, those who migrated through regular channels still reported being abused and feeling they could not complain without jeopardizing work permits. Internal migration also carried some risks, like wage theft and difficulty accessing services.
- Migration disrupted and inhibited children's formal education. Children who migrated often did not participate in education or healthcare, and many did not return to school once home. In Thailand, while schools allow non-residents, parents fear revealing their status to authorities.
- Instead, migrated children of low-income earners typically work. Children's work conditions at the destination were particularly hazardous, precarious and exploitative. Lack of legal employment channels means migrant children work in poorly regulated sectors with lax labour law enforcement. Like migrant parents, child migrants often said they had been exploited, forced to work long hours, and sometimes cheated out of their wages.

Migration did not always pay off, it often failed to provide the expected economic returns and left families overall no better or potentially worse-off

- Whether they stayed in their country or crossed the border, many migrants found the financial benefits fell short of their expectations. Remittances might just cover debt payments or basic expenses and did not significantly improve their family's socio-economic situation or enhance their resilience to climate change.

Migration reshapes and disrupts family relationships and social safety nets, impacting the children who remain behind

- Because low-wage migrant workers have no legal way to take their dependents to another country, and irregular migration is risky and stressful, migrants often leave their children behind, especially the youngest.
- After parents or siblings left, the stress and burden on the children left behind increased. The caregivers, usually grandparents or single parents, often struggled to meet children's basic needs, including at times not having enough to eat.
- Children who remained took up more work, sometimes physically dangerous, and at times left school to maintain subsistence livelihoods, food production, and domestic chores. Children's mental and physical health were often affected. Some feared debt collectors would hurt them.

Gender norms profoundly shaped migration patterns as well as the characteristics, distribution and risk profile of work for both those who left and those who stayed behind

- Mothers often stayed behind and cared for the children if they could find jobs locally, while men undertook longer-distance migration. However, many mothers and fathers migrated together, particularly in the poorest families, and several women migrated on their own, reflecting the growing feminization of migration in Southeast Asia.

- Often girls took on substantial household and caregiving responsibilities and boys might take on physically dangerous farm and household tasks. Reflecting established gender roles, boys were particularly likely to feel a duty to help provide for the family and repay debts.

Implications

Viet Nam has made significant efforts to integrate climate adaptation into its national policies, including the National Adaptation Plan (NAP) and Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC).⁹ These documents highlight the increasing threat of climate-induced displacement, particularly in vulnerable regions like the Mekong Delta, where rising sea levels and extreme weather events are already causing substantial disruptions. The NAP explicitly mentions and plans for migration as both a likely outcome of climate change and a factor that exacerbates vulnerability, and seeks to contribute towards improving social justice by focusing on disadvantaged groups. Viet Nam is also ahead of its neighbours in advancing child protection, including around disaster risks and pollution. However, the implementation of these policies has been limited and uneven addressing the complex needs of the most disadvantaged communities, including ethnic minorities, women, and rural populations.¹⁰

The most vulnerable communities exposed to recurring disasters need access to robust interventions and climate finance, such as improving rural infrastructure, supporting livelihood diversification for shock resilience, and providing timely disaster relief to prevent harmful financial coping strategies like accumulating unsustainable debt. Policy implementation has also been limited in addressing gender-specific vulnerabilities in climate adaptation efforts, which undermines the resilience of women and children in particular. To strengthen climate resilience, Viet Nam and its development partners must prioritize targeted support for these vulnerable groups, focusing on both immediate disaster recovery and long-term livelihood adaptation. This approach would build greater resilience to the ongoing impacts of climate change and reduce the risk of entrenching poverty.¹¹

As the impacts of climate change intensify, migration could with the right support help rural children and their families become more resilient, rise out of poverty and improve their living conditions. That is only possible, however, if they can migrate safely – not in distress – and avoid exploitation and abuse. Those who stay behind also need stronger support and opportunities to thrive in their home communities and to avoid harm. Making migration safer requires policy work not only in Viet Nam but in destination countries, especially Thailand. Current migration policies that ignore the realities of families in distress, even those that aim to make migration and services more accessible, have unintended negative impacts by channelling children and youth into riskier employment situations and inhibiting their participation in school and services.

Recommendations

An effective and coordinated response to these risks is needed by governments and development partners to address the key drivers of distress migration from Viet Nam, make migration safer, more humane and more just, provide support for those who stay behind, and empower children and youth to shape a better future for themselves, whether they choose to migrate or stay home. Specific areas to focus action:

Reduce financial distress as a trigger for unsafe migration by enhancing the resilience of rural livelihoods, especially for those most reliant on natural resources

⁹ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2021). *Viet Nam National Adaptation Plan for 2021–2030 with a vision to 2050*. <https://www.undp.org/vietnam/publications/viet-nam-nap-2021-2030-vision-2050>; UNFCCC. (2020). *Viet Nam Nationally Determined Contribution 2020*. https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/NDC/2022-06/Viet%20Nam_NDC_2020_Eng.pdf

¹⁰ UN Women. (2021). *The State of Gender Equality and Climate Change in Viet Nam*. <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org>

¹¹ International Organization for Migration (IOM). (2021). *Climate Change Related Migration in Viet Nam*. <https://vietnam.iom.int>

1. Update national climate change and disaster preparedness policies and policy reach to most vulnerable communities and enhance community resilience through robust infrastructure and disaster preparedness at the village level

- **Update the NDC and NAP** to reflect capacity building needs for vulnerable communities as below.
- **Close the adaptation finance gap and invest in resilient infrastructure of priority to vulnerable communities.** Prioritize local infrastructure that will eliminate or reduce the disruption of flooding and droughts on wellbeing, income and production for those reliant on natural resources e.g. climate-resilient transportation infrastructure, schools and health care facilities at the village level, water, production technology and electricity.
- **Address structural inequalities** faced by women, youth, children, people with disabilities, displaced persons, Indigenous Peoples and marginalized ethnic groups, particularly with regards to building resilient livelihoods and access to markets through resilient and accessible rural infrastructure.
- **Prepare and respond to disasters with timely livelihood support** enabling the most vulnerable families to restore income and protect against taking on harmful or excessive debt.
- **Strengthen effective shock-responsive and gender and child-sensitive social protection mechanisms** for families in crisis targeting those most reliant on natural resources. For example, consider crop insurance schemes or other forms of social protection for families dependant on natural resources.

2. Provide flexible and fair support for sustainable livelihoods

- **Scale up support for livelihood adaptation** reaching all vulnerable families, especially those reliant on natural resources, to ensure families can achieve sufficient income stability as weather extremes intensify, taking into account the differentiated needs of women and men.
- **Make relocation a viable and realistic option** for villages in flood-prone zones by providing comprehensive support for transitioning and establishing alternative livelihoods at sufficient levels to meet family needs at new site and support diversification away from natural resource dependency.

3. Make migration safer and more just for both parents and children

Take coordinated action across governments and development partners to make migration channels more accessible, flexible and just:

- Create safe legal channels for migration of children alongside unskilled migrant parents, and access to education and healthcare at destination. Update short and long-stay migration policies for unskilled workers, recognising the need for children to contribute towards household income is a reality for the poorest and can be positive where safe channels, monitoring and service access are provided for.
- Improve oversight of industries that employ migrants, with migrant-sensitive approaches to reporting abuse and exploitation.
- Explore ways to make known irregular migration routes safer, such as establishing mobile units providing assistance.
- Raise awareness among the most vulnerable about how to identify and mitigate the risks.

4. Care for caregivers – and the children who stay with them

Meet development needs of migrant children and those who stay behind:

- Monitor children’s school participation at home and at destination locations and enhance emotional and social learning support available for migrant children
- Support the caregivers at home to meet the needs of children who remain behind
- Tailor child and food security programmes to meet needs of older caregivers/young mothers, especially for elderly living with disabilities with childcare responsibilities.
- Promote “intergenerational dialogues” to help reduce risks to children from changing caregiving roles and help families stay connected like access to free video calls.

5. Empower children and youth to be able to build a better future for themselves

Create spaces for migrant children and youth to meaningfully engage in national, regional and global debates and policy-making at the intersection of children’s rights, migration and climate change, including integrating climate change into school curricula.