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Internal Displacement in the Context of the Slow-Onset Adverse Effects of Climate Change

Submitted by

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# Background

In March 2019, the authors participated in the Knowledge Networks of Transdisciplinary Studies (KNOTS) project[[1]](#footnote-1) as doctoral researchers from Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, Thailand. The project was co-funded by the European Union’s Erasmus+ program and included collaboration between universities in Europe and Southeast Asia. As participants in KNOTS, the authors undertook group fieldwork related to slow-onset climate change impacts and internal migration from Tra Vinh and Soc Trang Provinces in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. Fieldwork was arranged and coordinated by Ho Chi Minh City Open University in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

In November 2019, the authors presented portions of their fieldwork data and analysis related to labour migration, slow-onset adverse effects of climate change, and international trade mechanisms at the 6th International Conference on International Relations and Development (ICIRD), entitled A New Global Network: What’s Next in “The Turns” in International Relations and Development.[[2]](#footnote-2) The conference was held at Mae Fah Luang University in Chiang Rai, Thailand, with proceedings later published online.

This submission is based on the above described KNOTS fieldwork and ICIRD conference proceedings publication, which has been attached as ANNEX I. Relevant KNOTS fieldwork reports are attached as ANNEX II (“Vulnerability and Saline Intrusion Adaptation in Tra Cu District, Tra Vinh Province, Vietnam”) and ANNEX III (“The Role of Migration in Attaining a Better Life for Bang Lang Villagers in Soc Trang Province”).[[3]](#footnote-3)

## Disclaimer

The views, observations, and analyses expressed in this submission are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the KNOTS program, Chulalongkorn University, Ho Chi Minh City Open University, or any other affiliated or referenced entity, including organizations, governments, companies, and individuals.

# Questionnaire

## A note on terminology: internally displaced persons and internal migration

Our research in the Mekong Delta indicated that internal migration was not a wholly voluntary endeavour, but resulted from a combination of factors, most notably changes in the environment due to slow-onset climate change impacts such as sea level rise, salinity intrusion, and soil degradation. We note that in these circumstances although there remains an element of choice, migration is utilized as a common coping strategy in relation to climate change-related environmental stress. In the case of the Mekong Delta, many people are considered internal migrants, not internally displaced persons, due to the strategies employed to reduce vulnerability and enhance socio-economic opportunity. However, it is likely that over time should these individuals choose to remain in their communities, they would eventually be forced to leave due to the inability to sustain livelihoods or from other adverse environmental factors. Thus, for the purposes of this submission, we discuss migration in the context of displacement.

## Examples of national and/or regional laws and policies relevant to internal displacement in the context of disasters and climate change

Numerous national and regional laws and policies bear relevance to internal displacement in the context of disasters and climate change; however, we will address primarily those laws related to issues that emerged in the course of our fieldwork in the Mekong Delta. Additional insights may be found in ANNEX I. It is also important to note that while we refer here to labour migration linked to slow-onset climate impacts, causality may be impossible to determine with complete certainty. We base our analysis on insights gathered from the field and additional discussions and research undertaken thereafter.

The connections between climate change and labour law remain a relatively underexplored area of research. This is especially true in the context of slow-onset adverse effects of climate change that may directly, or at least substantially, contribute to increased movement of labour within (and across) national borders. Removing barriers to labour mobility can provide pathways for persons affected by climate change to more ably adapt to adverse climate change-related circumstances. Without baseline guarantees of labour standards, internally displaced persons may be vulnerable to decreased labour protections through informal workplace arrangements, discrimination, or even forced or compulsory labour. National labour standards that reflect, among others, those rights guaranteed by principle 22(b) of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement as well as those fundamental rights found in the International Labour Organization’s (ILO) 1998 Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work and its Follow-up, can provide additional social safety nets to persons most at risk to the adverse effects of climate change.

Our research revealed that barriers to labour mobility, such as household registration systems, functioned to undermine social networks and leave internal labour migrants without access to essential services, such as healthcare and education. In the Mekong Delta, we found that Vietnam’s ho khau system for household registration often had negative impacts on families of internal labour migrants.[[4]](#footnote-4) For example, working age parents who migrated to urban centers for employment opportunities frequently left children with grandparents or other family members in order to guarantee the children’s continued access to education and social services. These findings were congruent with a 2016 report by the World Bank and the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences that indicated that while internal labour migrants may become temporary registrants under the ho khau system, these individuals may still face obstacles in obtaining credit, registering vehicles, accessing health insurance, and more.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The importance of national labour laws to the protections of internally displaced persons should not be underestimated. Labour laws have the ability to enhance the human rights of displaced persons by ensuring access to employment opportunities and other essential social services. However, overly restrictive labour laws or policies and practices that function to violate those fundamental rights identified by the ILO and other sources of law, including international trade deals and recognized good practices, can leave internally displaced persons with added vulnerabilities and without the foundational rights framework necessary to thrive despite the adversity of climate change impacts.

## Available data and evidence on internal displacement linked to slow-onset natural hazards in the context of the adverse effects of climate change (globally or in a specific region or country), trends and/or challenges, and gaps with regards to data collection, analysis and use

The nexus of slow-onset natural hazards and displacement are complex as compared to rapid-onset events, where hazards can be directly identified as the reason for displacement. Concurrent factors that contribute, but cannot be differentiated from, the causation for displacement means that data regarding the push-pull factors of migration may at times be difficult to attribute to slow-onset events. In the Mekong Delta, for example, the construction of upstream dams and the resultant negative effects on downstream communities may coexist with climate change-related factors.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Our research, based on data collected from Tra Vinh and Soc Trang Provinces in the Mekong Delta, indicated that communities faced threats from both rapid-onset and slow-onset natural hazards. In our site studies, saline intrusion, soil degradation, and drought were identified as the primary slow-onset climate events, which had widespread consequences for millions of people throughout the region. These slow-onset natural hazards produced additional challenges to communities as they were unable to maintain traditional livelihoods due to environmental change. Slow-onset hazards also impacted the ability of residents to remain in their homes due to reduced food security, loss of biodiversity, diminished agriculture and aquaculture production, and increased socio-economic vulnerabilities. Such vulnerabilities created even greater financial instability for community members, including increased indebtedness.

Villagers from the site studies attempted to adapt to the adverse impacts caused from climatic changes and made efforts to secure their livelihoods. Those community members who remained in the villages have undertaken efforts to shift from rice to shrimp farming (in response to increased salinity), established small, local businesses, or began to raise cattle livestock. Despite these efforts, most villagers expressed a belief that they would be unable to sustain their livelihoods over the long term.

The data demonstrated that people who moved from the villages were likely to become internal migrants. Migration became a crucial adaptation strategy for those persons unable to remain in their homes. Our research indicated that there were many reasons members of a community migrated, but the most frequently cited were linked to socio-economic factors connected to slow-onset natural hazards. These natural hazards were identified as the main trigger, or push factor, for migration.

Loss of livelihoods, indebtedness, landlessness and land scarcity, lack of employment opportunities, and decreased labor demand in the Mekong Delta were identified as the main factors that shaped decision-making processes regarding mobilization. Labor demand in the destination place (here, primarily urban centers) was the primary pull factor leading to migration. As stated, the push factors were triggered by slow-onset events, especially saline intrusion. For example, in 2016, drought led to heavy saline intrusion resulting in widespread losses of rice crops and shrimp farms across the region. Devastating damage to fresh water and soil resources led to many being forced to sell their land in order to pay for loans and meet basic needs. Indebtedness increased as did regional migration away from the Mekong Delta.[[7]](#footnote-7)

## The impact of climate change-related internal displacement on the enjoyment of human rights by specific groups, such as indigenous peoples, minorities, children, older persons and persons with disabilities

Climate change does not treat everyone equally. Socio-economic conditions are often determinative of a person’s or community’s ability to adapt successfully to changing conditions. The Mekong Delta is home to the Khmer, a minority ethnic group of Vietnam. Our research indicated that as an ethnic minority, the Khmer were more at risk to suffer adverse effects related to slow-onset climate change impacts. This included a reduced ability to adapt due to a lack of capital resources (economic and social). In general, the Khmer population experienced increased vulnerabilities as compared to the ethnic majority Kinh. Many Khmers are unable to read and write Vietnamese, which correlated to an early school dropout rate and decreased levels of education. Illiteracy and a lack of education increases the challenges Khmer migrants face in the destination place as they may be unable to find stable employment and are more likely to remain low wage workers.

Most Khmer labour migrants from the villages where we collected data were employed in what are known as 3D jobs – dirty, degrading, and dangerous – in the destination place of migration. Khmer workers were thus more susceptible to exploitation, particularly in terms of fair and equitable wages. The Khmer were also subject to stigmatization and stereotyping. A 2014 United Nations report on migration, resettlement, and climate change in Vietnam further explains that state policies and practices in Vietnam tend to favour the ethnic majority Kinh,[[8]](#footnote-8) leading to additional forms of disadvantage for the Khmer.

Internal migrants (or as we would posit, environmentally forced migrants) face numerous challenges in the destination place. The interviews we conducted with returning migrants revealed that many people worked in unhealthy and harmful conditions. Lack of access to important services, including education and healthcare, and familial separation created additional vulnerabilities for migrating labourers when they reached the destination place. Addressing vulnerabilities, inequalities, and biases linked to the minority status of migrating peoples and prioritizing those groups most susceptible to harm would work towards alleviating many of the adverse impacts caused by slow-onset climate change events.

## 7. Examples of mechanisms used to hold States, companies or other actors accountable for climate change-related displacement, and to provide effective remedy to those affected

Accountability mechanisms and access to legal remedies are oftentimes most effective when promulgated at the national level, via domestic legal frameworks. However, the capacity of internally displaced persons to pursue such remedies may be limited due to financial restraints, social vulnerabilities, and access to resources, generally. There may also exist barriers to access to justice and deficiencies in the rule of law that make accountability and remedy difficult to achieve on the part of displaced persons. To this end, substantive domestic legal reform efforts can be an effective route through which accountability measures may be strengthened.

In November 2019 at the ICIRD in Chiang Rai, Thailand, we presented our hypothesis that international trade mechanisms were one pathway through which accountability related to labour protections could be strengthened. Building on the connections between migration linked to slow-onset adverse effects of climate change and barriers to labour mobility, we hypothesized that commitments found in international trade deals, such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) – to which Vietnam is a ratifying member – could work to drive domestic legal reforms and bolster labour rights in the Mekong Delta. As a ratifying member of the CPTPP,[[9]](#footnote-9) Vietnam affirmed its commitment to implement labour reform measures that would bring its domestic legal framework into compliance with the abovementioned labour standards, specifically the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work and its Follow-up. While we note that it may take several years for the country to achieve full compliance, there is a clear pathway for improved labour protections. Indeed, in 2019 Vietnam ratified ILO Convention 98, the Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949[[10]](#footnote-10) and also passed new labour reforms which are set to take effect in January of 2021.

We do not here assert that international trade deals offer a comprehensive solution to the challenges faced by internally displaced persons; however, the ability of such mechanisms to enhance labour protections at the national level is a frequently overlooked area of study. With the advent of new international trade deals that include measures relating to labour, human rights, and climate change, the domestic legal reforms to which states agree can function to bolster protections relevant to the slow-onset adverse effects of climate change.

The paragraphs above present a brief overview of the potentially positive contributions that international trade can make towards strengthening the rights of labour migrants in the Mekong Delta. We have focused primarily on labour rights and labour reform measures; however, we note that trade deals remain an area of contention in the context of international development. For example, the CPTPP has been criticized for not adequately protecting the rights of Indigenous Peoples. While certain intellectual property protections have been extended to ancestral knowledge of Indigenous Peoples, such protections extend only insofar as they are already recognized by national law.[[11]](#footnote-11) Furthermore, there may exist risks to Indigenous Peoples’ land and resource rights, and also exclusionary practices in trade negotiations.[[12]](#footnote-12) These are but a few examples of the ways in which trade deals can be improved in process and practice. It is worth additional scrutiny then to examine the relationship between those aspects of trade that may have potential positive impacts in light of already identified areas of weaker protections. Such research can work towards a critical evaluation of the multiple impacts that modern trade deals have for member states and their populations, guide states’ negotiations of future trade deals, as well as inform renegotiation efforts, if found to be warranted.

# ANNEX I

## Addressing Climate Change Adaptation Through International Trade Mechanisms: Labour Migration and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership in Vietnam

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**Abstract**

This paper examines the connections between international trade mechanisms and climate change adaptation, with a focus on internal, domestic labour migration. The paper considers labour migration in Vietnam’s Mekong Delta and how the newly promulgated Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership has the potential to affect the governance of Vietnam’s internal migration and influence domestic climate change adaptation approaches. Drawing from information and narratives gathered during fieldwork conducted as part of the Knowledge Networks of Transdisciplinary Studies program, the paper explores trends in labour migration as climate change adaptation strategies, including the effects of the *ho khau* household registration system on the region’s most vulnerable populations. The paper concludes with an analysis of how Vietnam’s status as a member party of a major international trade deal could affect the country’s future labour protections and thus, potentially benefit internal migrant labourers.

**Keywords**: international trade; climate change; labour migration; adaptation; CPTPP.

1. **Introduction and Background**

The Mekong River Delta of Vietnam is one of the world’s most vulnerable regions to climate change (Chaudhry & Ruysschaert, 2007). Sea level rise (Dasgupta et al., 2007), flooding, and saline intrusion (Eastham et al., 2008) all threaten to displace already vulnerable populations, with negative impacts on livelihoods and security (United Nations in Viet Nam, 2014). As Tuan and Chinvanno (2011) explain, the impacts of climate change are complex and will lead to increased challenges to rural production and significant declines in freshwater supply. Drought-related threats to food security and biodiversity may also be accompanied by the spread of weather-related illnesses, including mosquito-borne infectious diseases (Tuan & Chinvanno, 2011). For those persons vulnerable to climate change and environmental stresses, migration may be an adaptation strategy that can be used to diversify sources of income and improve resilience (United Nations in Viet Nam, 2014). In other cases, migration is a “survival strategy” and may “lead to new and greater vulnerabilities” for those communities most at risk (United Nations in Viet Nam, 2014, p. 10). This may be due to a variety of factors, including government policies that do not provide adequate protections for migrant labourers and at-risk populations.

On 12 November 2018, Vietnam ratified the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP; see Burke & Nguyen, 2018), signifying the country’s agreement to undertake certain legal reforms intended to harmonize trade provisions among CPTPP member states. These reforms include labour protection standards that, if successfully implemented, could function to extend several social benefits that are currently unavailable to Vietnam’s internal migrant workers. Such benefits could strengthen the resilience and adaptability of Vietnam’s most vulnerable populations in terms of their ability to cope with the stresses of climate change.

This paper presents a preliminary hypothesis that there exist beneficial linkages between domestic climate change adaptation strategies and international trade mechanisms, with a particular view to the potential of the CPTPP to enhance labour protections for migrant workers from Soc Trang and Tra Vinh, two of Vietnam’s most rural and impoverished provinces in the Mekong Delta region. These labour protections may, in turn, work to address shortcomings of Vietnam’s *ho khau* system, which provides social welfare benefits based on an individual’s place of permanent residence. The *ho khau’s* residency restrictions can leave many migrant labourers and their families without the ability to access basic social services, such as education and healthcare. If the CPTPP functions to strengthen Vietnam’s labour standards, we hypothesize that there may occur a cascading effect in regard to other social benefits, such as the ability to access public services in the location of temporary residence. Our analysis of these linkages is informed by the notion of human security in the context of climate change as defined by Adger et al. (2014, p. 759): “a condition that exists when the vital core of human lives is protected, and when people have the freedom and capacity to live with dignity.”

In March of 2019, the authors participated in group fieldwork in Vietnam’s Mekong River Delta as part of the Knowledge Networks of Transdisciplinary Studies (KNOTS) program, hosted by Ho Chi Minh City Open University. Over the course of a five-day period, issues related to migration, vulnerability, and salinity intrusion were studied using transdisciplinary research methodologies. Field site arrangements were made by Ho Chi Minh City Open University and included the Tran De District of Soc Trang Province and the Tra Cu District of Tra Vinh Province. The data and results below are based on information gathered from interviews, participant observation, and focus group discussions. Field reports were composed based on data collection and analysis, which were presented to KNOTS participants in April 2019 at Ho Chi Minh City Open University. The analysis herein is also based on the content of those reports and additional data provided in the KNOTS program guidebook. Research findings from Soc Trang and Tra Vinh Provinces have been combined due to the parallel and overlapping conditions found in each case study.

At the time of our fieldwork with the KNOTS program, no data was collected that relates directly to the CPTPP. The connections we draw between international trade and the stories of labour migration that are described below originated several months later, as we continued to analyse our fieldwork results and consider the broader implications of the information gathered. We present our fieldwork findings and our hypothesis in the following pages; however, we note that additional time (perhaps several years) will be needed before the influence and effects of the CPTPP in Vietnam can be better understood. Our primary goal in this paper is to present an idea, a hypothesis, of how international trade interacts with domestic labourers and what potential benefits can be gleaned for those persons most vulnerable to climate change in Vietnam’s Mekong Delta.

Following the introduction and background of section one, we provide a synopsis of climate change impacts in Vietnam’s Mekong Delta region and present a narrative analysis of fieldwork results gathered in March 2019. Section three then draws connections between climate-related labour migration and the CPTPP, emphasizing how the CPTPP may be able to address existing gaps in governance that increase migrant workers’ vulnerabilities. Section four is our conclusion, where we identify opportunities for future research on this topic.

1. **Climate Change in Vietnam’s Mekong Delta: Vulnerability and Migration**
	1. Salinity Intrusion in Soc Trang and Tra Vinh Provinces

Vietnam is expected to be one of the world’s most severely impacted countries as a result of climate change (Mekong River Commission, 2009). There are 13 provinces in the country’s Mekong Delta, and Soc Trang and Tra Vinh Provinces are two of the most vulnerable. Climate change impacts are made more acute by the high levels of poverty within the region. Of a population of more than one million, approximately 30 percent of Soc Trang’s inhabitants are of the Khmer ethnic group. Most (roughly 70 percent) of the province’s population live in rural areas, with livelihoods based on agriculture and aquaculture. The Khmer people are also an ethnic minority in Tra Vinh Province, where they are among the highest risk segment of the population. Like Soc Trang, the people of Tra Vinh live in rural areas (90 percent) with agricultural-based livelihoods. Regionally, livelihoods are threatened by saline intrusion, drought, and rising sea levels (including flooding).

In a 2013 assessment of Vietnam’s environment and climate change, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) identified negative impacts to the agricultural sector as one of the growing challenges faced by the country. In particular, the ADB’s report linked rising sea levels to increased salinization, crop damage, and a significant reduction in rice production (Asian Development Bank, 2013), discussed further below. Approximately 70 percent of the land now under cultivation in Vietnam is vulnerable to saltwater intrusion (Asian Development Bank, 2013), with ethnic minorities and impoverished populations being among those most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change (Nhat, 2015). Rising sea levels also threaten freshwater sources for human consumption, with shortages expected as demand for water rises alongside escalating global temperatures (Asian Development Bank, 2013). By the year 2100, Vietnam’s densely populated Mekong River Delta is expected to be severely inundated by seawater, with an increase in migration expected as the region becomes progressively uninhabitable (Mekong River Commission, 2009; Asian Development Bank, 2013).

During our investigation of salinity intrusion in the region, the primary study site in Soc Trang Province was Bang Lang Village. Prior to 1990, rice had been the main agricultural product, and the majority of the village’s land was used for rice cultivation. It was around 1990 that saline intrusion began to cause issues for rice production and by the early 2000s, the transition to shrimp farming had begun. Shrimp thrive in the brackish water caused by salinity intrusion and as fresh water sources became increasingly scarce, rice farming was no longer tenable. The transition from rice to shrimp farming was supported by the Vietnamese government, primarily in the form of infrastructural support, such as constructing canals to aid the flow of brackish water to shrimp farms. Similar shifts in production were found in Tra Vinh Province, where those farmers financially capable of adapting to changing environmental conditions turned to shrimp cultivation.

As Dun (2012, p. 85) describes, changes to salinity levels have had both positive and negative effects for Vietnam’s Mekong Delta, with “mixed outcomes on human security, generating some benefits and creating new vulnerabilities.” In both Tra Vinh and Soc Trang Provinces, shrimp farming is considered to be economically intensive and thus, many farmers are unable to make this shift in livelihood. The struggle to adapt is often most challenging for Khmer farmers as they may lack the financial resources required to establish shrimp farming operations[[13]](#footnote-13) or the technical knowledge to maintain them.

Landlessness is one of the primary consequences of the Khmer struggle to maintain shrimp farming operations. Many sold their land or shrimp farms in order to survive, which has resulted in increased labour migration among the Khmer populations of the region. The impacts of salinity intrusion also extend to other aspects of life, including food sources. Khmer villagers in Bang Lang witnessed a decrease in the area’s biodiversity and a reduction in the number of freshwater fish in nearby rivers and canals. Salinity intrusion has thus affected not only the livelihoods of the Khmer people, but also their ability to subsist off the land. These findings indicate that climate change adaptation strategies in the Mekong Delta are likely to be determined by capacities, including knowledge of technical farming operations and the financial resources necessary to maintain livelihoods and meet basic needs.

* 1. Labour Migration as a Climate Change Adaptation Strategy

The authors note that there are several causes of labour migration that may or may not be directly linked to climate change; however, our narrative analysis of fieldwork results revealed that, especially in Tra Vinh Province, participants expressed direct links between their decision to migrate and salinity intrusion, with several interviewees referring specifically to climate change as the primary cause of their economic hardship. The fieldwork was framed around the effects of salinity intrusion, which our research found to be a direct result of changing climate conditions. This assertion is based on interviews with government officials, agricultural officers, nongovernmental representatives, local farmers, labourers, and reports cited in this paper. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that the push-pull factors of labour migration are likely more complex than what our fieldwork results indicate. In this context, causality may be impossible to determine with complete certainty.

The narratives that emerged from the field were illustrative of the use of labour migration as an adaptation strategy to changing environmental, and subsequent changing economic, conditions in Soc Trang and Tra Vinh Provinces. Many individuals and families were landless or had sold their land after economic hardships left them with no viable alternatives. Other persons laboured seasonally, migrating between farms and urban areas, where they would work on construction sites during times of salinity intrusion when no harvesting or planting occurred. Migration often meant that families would be separated for a given period of time, with grandparents becoming the primary caregivers to children while parents worked in urban areas (discussed further below).

The trend toward urban migration was not consigned to those families facing economic hardships. Our research indicated that even for those more affluent members of the community with successful farming operations, there was an increase in migration of the younger generations from rural regions to urban ones. Most residents viewed these changes as positive. There was a general perception that an urban lifestyle offered more financial stability and opportunity, as compared to the labour-intensive work of farming and unpredictable climate conditions. However, there was also a sense of “loyalty to the land,” as characterized by one interviewee, with most families expressing the belief that those who had migrated for work would eventually return.

* 1. The Effects of *Ho Khau* on Labour Migration

Migration from Soc Trang and Tra Vinh Provinces was primarily to Ho Chi Minh City, Dong Nai Province, Binh Duong Province, and Nha Trang in Khánh Hòa Province. In Bang Lang Village, more than half of the village’s population had migrated by the time our fieldwork was undertaken. Many villagers who remained, including children of migrant workers, did so in part as a result of the *ho khau* household registration system, which places certain limitations on the movement of people within Vietnam. Originally “an instrument of public security, economic planning,” and migration control, the *ho khau* system was instituted over 50 years ago and created a registration system whereby households could access public services based on their registered location, i.e. permanent residence (World Bank and Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 2016, p. ix). Change in permanent residence was only allowed with government permission (Anh et al., 2016).

The history, effect, and content of the *ho khau* system are much more complex than what can be presented in this paper, suffice to say that *ho khau* works to disadvantage migrant workers to some degree. In their 2018 book on migration and flooding in Southeast Asia, Elmhirst et al. (2018, p. 6) explain that reducing vulnerabilities through migration is dependent on several factors, including government policies that “either facilitate or inhibit mobility,” such as household registration systems. A 2016 report by the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences and the World Bank stated that under the *ho khau* system, “temporary registrants continue to face limitations in social service access, particularly with regard to public schools, health insurance for young children, access to credit, and basic procedures like registering a motorcycle” (Anh et al., 2016, p. 1). As a result of these limitations, temporary registrants, like migrant labourers, often choose to leave their children in the location of permanent residency to ensure the children’s continued access to healthcare and education, among other services. This may lead to the indefinite separation of families, with some interviewees indicating they had been apart for as long as 15 years.

As addressed further in section three below, the CPTPP may have potential, albeit perhaps unintentional, consequences for the *ho khau* system and the vulnerabilities that ensue as a result of the system’s inability to accommodate migrant labourers in their temporary place of residence. The connections between *ho khau* and the CPTPP stem from the agreement’s provisions on labour standards, which include the right to establish labour unions and to engage in collective bargaining. As labour rights in Vietnam are strengthened, we posit that the demand for access to public services and other benefits may also increase. This may be especially pertinent in light of the data presented above, which anticipates substantial increases in labour migration as climate change conditions worsen in Vietnam.

1. **Intersections Between International Trade and Labour Migration: A Brief Assessment of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership**

The CPTPP is a free trade agreement between the countries of Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, and Vietnam. The CPTPP, a revised version of the former Trans-Pacific Partnership, is comprised of 30 chapters and is one of the world’s largest free trade agreements (Goodman, 2018). Heralded as setting “a new standard for global trade,” the CPTPP is intended to, *inter alia*,eliminate tariffs and other barriers to trade and facilitate the development and production of supply chains among member states (Hoang & Hoan, 2019, p. 2). The agreement covers not just trade in goods, but services as well. Ratifying states must commit to reforms in labour standards, environmental practices and protections, and intellectual property regimes, among other requirements (see e.g., chapter summaries at Government of Canada, 2018).

For Vietnam, the CPTPP is projected to boost foreign trade by 30.1 percent and foreign investment by 14.4 percent by the year 2030 (Hoang & Hoan, 2019). Approximately 20,000 to 26,000 jobs are expected to be created per year on average, particularly in the manufacturing sector (Hoang & Hoan, 2019). However, in order to achieve these gains, member states are required to adopt core labour standards delineated in the International Labour Organization’s 1998 *ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work and its Follow-up* (see CPTPP, ch. 19.3.1 at New Zealand Foreign Affairs and Trade, n.d.; see also, art. 2, International Labour Organization, June 1998). These standards include freedom of association, the ability to engage in collective bargaining, and “the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation” (International Labour Organization, June 1998, art. 2). Among other provisions of the CPTPP, article 19.4 on non derogation prevents member states from “weakening or reducing the protections afforded in each Party’s labour laws” to “encourage trade or investment” (New Zealand Foreign Affairs and Trade, n.d.). Further, article 19.14 on public engagement requires that member states establish means by which the public may “provide views on matters regarding” the CPTPP’s labour provisions (New Zealand Foreign Affairs and Trade, n.d.).

In Vietnam, the expectations under the CPTPP are that workers will be permitted to establish unions and that the country will eventually “modernize its labor laws and industrial relations system,” leading to the promise of other rights, such as collective bargaining, freedom of association, and the elimination of forced labour ("ILO: CPTPP helps Vietnam advance labor reforms," 2018; International Labour Organization, 2018). It is anticipated that it may take between three to five years for Vietnam to become CPTPP compliant ("CPTPP expects to help Vietnam advance in labour reforms," 2018), meaning that the country must go through a process of amending its legal infrastructure to address those laws that may not be in agreement with the trade deal’s terms.

Such amendments may hold great promise in terms of expanding labour protections for migrant workers and addressing existing gaps in Vietnam’s governance of internal labour migration. The implementation of antidiscrimination laws, for example, could work in multilayered ways. Depending on their level of enforcement, such protections may strengthen the role of women in the workplace, address gender pay disparities, and provide increased access to Vietnam’s labour market (see Mai, 2018; International Labour Organization, 2018). This could have significant impacts for female labour migrants, especially those who are the primary earners for their families. These same protections could be extended to minority Khmer migrant workers who may find themselves working in discriminatory conditions or receiving less pay as a result of their ethnic identity.

While the International Labour Organization has generally viewed the CPTPP as a positive advancement for Vietnam’s workers (see e.g., "ILO: CPTPP helps Vietnam advance labor reforms," 2018), the agreement has been criticized as a general weakening of labour protections by labour unions in other member states, such as Canada (see e.g., National Union of Public and General Employees). Criticisms focus on Vietnam’s five year grace period for compliance, referenced above, as well as the CPTPP’s high threshold for establishing a violation of labour rights (National Union of Public and General Employees). In order to establish a violation, the agreement requires that the complaining party demonstrate that a member state has “failed to adopt or maintain a statute, regulation or practice in a manner affecting trade or investment” (New Zealand Foreign Affairs and Trade, n.d., art. 19.3.1, p. 19-2). This means that violations of labour rights alone are not enough. The violation must also be shown to affect trade or investment between member parties. Additionally, concerns regarding a widening of the informal workforce have been connected to the CPTPP’s more rigid labour standards, alongside questions of whether the agreement will widen inequality in Southeast Asia (Ariffin, 2019).

Despite the concerns described above, Vietnam has already made strides in reforming its labour protections in accordance with the CPTPP.[[14]](#footnote-14) On 5 July 2019, the country ratified the *Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention* (also known as *Convention 98*), providing a pathway for collective bargaining and the establishment of labour unions in the country (International Labour Organization, 2019b; Trang, September 2019). Following this ratification, Vietnam’s National Assembly adopted *Labour Code No. 45/2019/QH14*, which will come into effect in January of 2021 (Nguyen, 2019). This new labour law recognizes the right of Vietnam’s workforce to establish independent employee representative organizations, outside the purview of the Vietnam General Confederation of Labour, currently the country’s only trade union (Nguyen, 2019). Additional safeguards against discrimination have also been added (Dezin Shira & Associates, 10 December 2019).

If the above projections regarding job creation come to fruition, even in part, Vietnam will likely experience greater migration to its urban regions, including a shift from agricultural to non-agricultural livelihoods. This means that the demand for public services will increase in urban centers. It is possible that some of these demands could be met by employers, especially with the advent of collective bargaining arrangements and the formation of labour unions. Labour unions can also be an effective way for workers to negotiate better social protections from the government, enhancing migrant labourers’ capacities to influence government policies that affect them. While these scenarios are only speculative at this time, the CPTPP may create pathways that could work to address many of the vulnerabilities currently affecting Vietnam’s internal migrant population.

1. **Conclusion**

The connections between international trade and climate change are often made at the global level, with discussions focused on the effects that climate change has on trade (see e.g., Dellink et al., 2017) or regarding how trade can work to offset or reduce the negative impacts of climate change through readjustments to production, supply, or consumption patterns (see e.g., Tamiotti et al., 2009). However, connections between a country’s internal adaptation measures and international trade mechanisms can also be made – connections that link current observations of labour migration patterns due to climate change with expected potentialities of international trade in terms of labour protections. We have provided here a preliminary assessment of those connections.

A 2014 United Nations report on migration and climate change in Vietnam indicated that “[m]obility is often understood as a common and potentially beneficial adaptive response and strategy for vulnerable households” (United Nations in Viet Nam, 2014, p. 8). Our research indicates that labour migration has had primarily positive effects for some of Vietnam’s most impoverished communities. Yet, internal labour migration creates new vulnerabilities, particularly those linked to social sacrifices, such as the separation of families and the inability to access public services in the location of work due to restrictions found in the *ho khau* system. At the time of this writing, it is not possible to accurately predict whether the CPTPP will successfully usher in many of the labour protections that are anticipated; however, we speculate that if these changes were to go into effect, many migrant workers would see improved working conditions as well as additional reforms to the *ho khau* system.

With new commitments to labour reforms alongside the ratification of the CPTPP, Vietnam presents an ideal case study for further exploration of the interrelationship of domestic climate change adaptation and international trade. The process by which Vietnam achieves CPTPP compliance and the resultant outcomes will offer ample opportunities for ongoing and future research into the linkages between international trade, climate change, and internal labour migration, including closer scrutiny of both the purported benefits and potential pitfalls of such connections.

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# ANNEX II

## Field Trip Group 3: Vulnerability and Saline Intrusion Adaption in Tra Cu District, Tra Vinh Province, Vietnam

Available at:

<https://www.knots-eu.com/students-blogs/2019/5/7/knots-summer-school-and-field-trips-2019-student-reports-on-field-trips-1>

**Field Trip Report**

*Field Trip Group 3:* *Vulnerability and Saline Intrusion Adaption in Tra Cu District, Tra Vinh Province, Vietnam*

1. **Introduction**

Vietnam is reported to be one of the most vulnerable countries to sea level increase. As a result, various areas in the country have endured natural disasters, including floods, drought, saltwater intrusion, and landslides. The Mekong River Delta, located in the southwest of Vietnam, is the largest area in the country to be negatively affected by this phenomenon due to its unique geographical and social characteristics. Among the 13 provinces of the delta, Tra Vinh is a coastal province with the highest poverty rate (GSO, 2011), and a large number of Khmer and Hoa people living beside the dominant Kinh ethnic group. These characteristics make the province a suitable place to study vulnerability and adaptation to climate change. Tra Cu district is one of the poorest coastal districts in the province and has been severely affected by salinity intrusion as well as water scarcity for years. Based on the levels of salinity intrusion, Tra Cu district is divided into different ecological zones with various economic activities, which can be seen in the following map (Figure 1):



**Figure 1**

1. **Framing**
	1. **Before the Field**

Based on the knowledge gained after a week of summer school, and before the field trip, our group had several discussions to decide on a main research topic. After the presentation of the field trip leader about general and specific characteristics of Tra Cu district, we agreed that the main topic of research would be salinity intrusion in the area. Given the available amount of time, the group would try to examine this issue from political, cultural, and social aspects. For the political and cultural aspects, we specifically wanted to look at the interrelation between different stakeholders participating in the salinity intrusion adaptation process. Additionally, since ethnic diversity is one feature of the area, we wanted to examine whether there were any differences in livelihoods and adaptation strategies between the Kinh and Khmer ethnic groups, as well as the impact of religion (if any) in relation to people’s perception of climate change and adaptation. With these ideas in mind, our group decided against identifying a specific research question before going to the field, but instead drafted a list of methods we wanted to use to collect data. With input from the project staff, there emerged a variety of planned methods, including: interviews, document analysis, mapping, timelines, activity schedules, transect walks (photo interview), seasonal calendars, and observation.

* 1. **Resources**

After planning the research methodology, we considered what stakeholders may be involved with, or affected by, salinity intrusion in the Tra Cu district, so as to decide what actors could inform our study. The group ended up with a long list of prospective participants, including governmental officials, university researchers, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), agricultural experts/officers, community members, and farmers. Since we were trying to apply the transdisciplinary approach, the information and knowledge gleaned from local farmers was considered of similar value and importance to that of experts and authorities. With regard to the socioeconomic situation in the area and the role of the South Mang Thit Sub Dyke in salinity intrusion prevention and relief, we wanted to gain information from different groups of farmers: those living inside and outside the dyke; old and young farmers; those with and without land ownership; male and female farmers; and last but not least, Kinh and Khmer farmers. Because Tra Cu district has an area specializing in sugar cane farming, we also wanted to investigate the opinions and perspectives of local sugar cane traders and middlemen. Finally, we wanted to meet with monks from a Khmer pagoda in order to explore whether religion played a role in the livelihoods and adaptation of local people.

1. **Research Process Implementation**

Given that we had to travel out of Ho Chi Minh City to the field, we spent some time on the bus. That amount of time was utilized to discuss and draw out a plan of implementing research methods, as well as a creating a schedule for feedback and reflection after every session. During our five days of field work, we spent the day collecting data from different stakeholders and gathered at the end of each day to summarize what we had learned, provide comments and reflections, and to create a diary of collected data in order to prepare for the final group presentation. After five days, we managed to carry out a number of interviews, in particular three with governmental officers, one with a researcher, one with an NGO representative, and 10 with farmers. There was a diverse variety of interviewees in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, and land ownership. In addition to interviews, we carried out two mapping sessions (where we split into two small groups) and two transect walking sessions, with photos taken based on the decision of the participants.

1. **Reflections and Outcome**

In the following section, our reflections on the methods applied during the field trip are presented. They cover all three stages of the process: (1) preconditions before applying the methods; (2) difficulties and challenges when undertaking research; and (3) lessons learned from our experiences during the field trip.

* 1. **Preconditions**

First, we reflect on the conditions we met before the actual application of the methods in the field. This was crucial because the preconditions influenced the procedural undertakings in the field. The main factor we needed to be aware of was the limited time we had during our stay in Tra Vinh province. Therefore, our way of proceeding was guided by the question: “how do we make the most of the time allotted?” Additionally, there were two important factors to be considered. First, the setting was already preselected, meaning that it was already decided where and with whom we were going to interact. Second, we had our own assumptions about the target issues, including expectations regarding what information we could obtain from specific respondents. These factors were the basis for us to make decisions on a suitable method and how to utilize it.

* 1. **Challenges and Difficulties**

During our activities in the field, we encountered some difficulties and challenges which sometimes were not foreseeable. In order to make the most of our short time, we tried to have as many meetings as possible, covering the different occupations of our participants (e.g., officials, scientists, farmers, etc.). However, our agenda did not always work out as scheduled, which resulted in some delays or changes to our appointments. The reason for these changes during our meetings was that we often needed more time than was planned. For example, in interviews, new questions arose from different information we discovered. Moreover, even while conducting interviews, we faced unpredictable situations or unexpected reactions from respondents, meaning that some methods did not turn out as planned especially when talking about very personal issues.

Other challenges resulted from cultural differences. In some situations, it was difficult to explain to a respondent the target idea of a question (in interviews), how a specific method worked (such as mapping), and the method’s purpose. We believe this was not only the result of a language barrier, but also the different understandings of certain topics which might lead to misinterpretations of a question or method’s essential core. There was also the issue of our positionality, especially regarding the respondents’ assumptions about us. As a group of students and staff coming from urban areas as well as other countries, we were put into a higher hierarchical position than that of the locals themselves because they compared our living standards with their own conditions. We did not expect that situation and believed we could talk to the locals at the same level.

* 1. **Adapting the Methods**

The aforementioned challenges and difficulties provided us the opportunity to adapt our methodology to the context of a given situation. The first adaptation was to change the strategy of a method which unintentionally altered the “atmosphere.” This helped us to get out of difficult situations. For example, the change from a strict interview with prepared questions to an open group interview/conversation allowed the group to be more active and dynamic. The second adaptation was to split into groups targeting different respondents at the same time. This gave us the advantage of saving time while still ensuring a diverse pool of participants. In addition to that, we found a smaller group might be less intimidating for the respondents and more comfortable to talk to.[[15]](#footnote-15)

* 1. **Lessons Learned**

All in all, the purpose of the field trip to Tra Vinh province was not only to study the general issues there, but also to explore methods and their application in the real field. During our stay, we faced problems we were aware of before, but on the other hand, there were also unexpected ones. The lack of time was a main issue that influenced the course of the practice and the outcome of the methods, especially because time is crucial for preparation, conducting research, and wrap-up. Thus, in order to make work in the field easier, in-depth preparation and increased awareness are important as a foundation. However, the biggest lesson we learned was to be flexible and to be able to adapt to unexpected situations in order not to get stuck. Thanks to good organization and a harmonized group, we were able to take these new experiences and make every step a successful lesson.

* 1. **Findings**

Based on our proposed methodological framework and knowledge related to climate change issues in the Mekong River Delta and Tra Cu district, we tried to explore what we expected to find in a real field trip scenario. In reality, our field work necessitated adapting different methods and our findings exceeded our expectations.

* + 1. **Salinity Intrusion**

In terms of climate-related issues, salinity intrusion is caused by climate change in the dry season when there is a lack of fresh rainwater and saline intrudes from the sea. Moreover, we discovered that climate change alone is not the only reason for worsening saline intrusion in the area. The trade-off for development has strongly attributed to this issue at both the international and local levels. In the former, the bloom of hydrological power plants in the upstream (Laos, Cambodia) threatens water availability of downstream areas, especially in Tra Vinh province, which is dependent upon agricultural production. In the latter, mass production for food security has been adopted for more than three decades in the Mekong River Delta, leading to the arrival of a bundle of dykes and sluices which regulate water flows and prevent saline water intrusion. However, as a long-term policy, this approach has not been as efficient as expected, and has contributed to increased saline intrusion in agricultural areas.

* + 1. **Stakeholder Relations**

Stakeholder relations were one of the main aspects that we expected to deeply understand as a result of adopting a transdisciplinary research approach. We found that while scientists, NGOs, and authorities have the same knowledge of climate change (both theoretical and political), local farmers understand climate change as specific climate variabilities, such as rainfall, saline intrusion, sun light, etc. Moreover, the knowledge exchange from the academic world (we grouped scientists, NGOs, and authorities together) to farmers has seemingly been dominated by academia, and the reverse trend is rare (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2**

In terms of water management, stakeholder relationships were explored, and it was revealed that a top-down approach is adopted in water irrigation activities. We also learned about the role that each stakeholder held in this regard (see Figure 3, below). An interesting point is that there appears to be some flexibility in water management regulation, meaning that official control and planning at a local level provides for informal allowances, such as unplanned snakehead fish farming and increased groundwater consumption for a short time.



**Figure 3**

* + 1. **Adaptive Models**

Adaptive models were the next issue we tried to explore in the subject area. We discovered that there were many models which integrated climate change adaptation at the local level; however, the efficiency of these models requires further consideration. Additionally, the priority of saving water was emphasized by farmers and should be considered in the context of these models. With regard to climate change, we found the existence of “climate change winners” (i.e., those persons who knew how to use saline water for shrimp cultivation) and “climate change losers” (those farmers whose livelihood is based on freshwater fish or rice cultivation). There are two seasons of cultivation: six months for fresh water and six months for brackish water. These different seasons create conflicts between the livelihoods dependent on brackish versus fresh water. The trend toward brackish water is considered by local farmers to be more economically intensive and the environmental risks of this trend have been questioned by experts, NGOs, and authorities (see Figure 4).



**Figure 4**

* + 1. **Livelihoods and Social Issues**

Finally, we explored two vicious cycles that worsen the negative impacts of saline intrusion on livelihoods and social issues; there is no doubt that climate change is a complicated issue. Agricultural mass production can be considered as a driving factor for chemical use in cultivation, with the purpose of increasing soil nutrients toward high crop productivity; however, as a result of such production, an ecosystem imbalance has emerged. This imbalance has led to soil damage and degradation, which in turn forces local farmers to use even more chemicals. Lower crop yields and productivity correlate to lower incomes and poverty and the migration of young workers away from agricultural areas. Indeed, all of the above-mentioned issues have threatened not only the farmers’ living standards, but also the adaptive capabilities of the agricultural sector (see Figure 5).



**Figure 5**

1. **CONCLUSION**

As discussed in the sections above, the largest challenge to our field work was a lack of time to undertake a full research project, including the time needed to substantively review our findings and coalesce our results. Despite these issues, our group was hardworking and dedicated, with a flexible and harmonious dynamic; thus, we believe we maximized our time to the greatest extent of our abilities. Our field trip leader went above and beyond our expectations and proved himself to be a capable and adaptable organiser. This allowed us to keep the pace when unexpected situations arose – a crucial component to the success of our field trip.

Having discussed the various elements of our work in the field, we conclude this report with a reflection of what we would need to implement a transdisciplinary research project in the future. We have listed these elements, with explanations, below.

**Language**

The issue of language was omnipresent throughout our work. Thanks to our translators, we had the chance to process a great deal of information and data, including feelings that were expressed by the people interviewed. Yet, translation can often be an interpretation, as opposed to a verbatim exchange of information. When undertaking research in a different language, you may never be able to overcome this issue. Different languages have different words and expressions for feelings or situations, and these expressions always carry their own intrinsic assumptions. For example, during a mapping exercise, we asked a question and the farmers started to laugh and made small comments and expressions to each other. It was not possible for us to feel the atmosphere and our translator was unable to explain what exactly what was going on in the moment. What was the reason behind the laughter? Was the question awkward, funny, or uncomfortable? Often these situations were so quick that when reflecting upon the scenario in the evening, it was impossible to know what had actually transpired.

**Time**

We would need more time. As we previously stated, time was an issue in many parts of our fieldtrip. For instance, while separating into groups for smaller interviews had advantages, there were also disadvantages, as we needed even more time for a mutual wrap-up to inform the other group members about our interactions.

**Better Access and Relationships**

In order to conduct an appropriate amount of research, a more intimate connection to the stakeholder actors would be necessary. This is again connected to the time issue. The longer you stay in the field, the more trust can be built up. In our field trip, we were only able to meet certain farmers that were selected by the local authorities. We found that out of all the farmers that we met, none of them expressed a concern about the future; however, we did not have the opportunity to talk to landless farmers, which may have presented a different perspective.

**Flexibility**

We need the flexibility to adapt different methods to the moment, adjusting to a specific situation, and a willingness to abandon a previously laid plan, if necessary. This means a realization that a method may not be working or may require rapid and spontaneous adjustments.

**Additional Stakeholders**

Our research revealed a need to expand the parameters of our engagement to include additional stakeholders, such as scientists and experts from fields other than agriculture. This is especially important when examining the topic of climate change, a subject that requires expertise in various technical, physical, and chemical processes. Additional experts that may have been helpful to our research include the following: hydrologists, engineers, economists, political scientists, and social scientists.

**Knowledge Sharing**

We realised that when working together in a group, most members took detailed notes; however, we did not have the time to compare these notes in detail or combine them. For professional research undertakings, it is crucial to have a system for both knowledge storage and sharing. This will ensure that all researchers are informed by the findings/problems that other group members discover.

**Funding**

As a conclusory comment to our report, we note that funding is an integral aspect of a transdisciplinary research undertaking. The time needed to engage in transdisciplinary research necessitates an ample source of funding, perhaps even one that is flexible in its deadlines for results. If transdisciplinary research is to be fully embraced, it may take months to even establish a viable research question; hence, an adequate amount of funding is required in order to ensure that a research project can be completed in its entirety.

# ANNEX III

## Field Trip Group 6: The Role of Migration in Attaining a Better Life for Bang Lang Villagers in Soc Trang Province

Available at:

<https://www.knots-eu.com/students-blogs/2019/5/7/knots-summer-school-and-field-trips-2019-student-reports-on-field-trips-1>

**Field Trip Report**

*Field Trip Group 6:* *The Role of Migration in Attaining a Better Life for Bang Lang Villagers in Soc Trang Province*

1. **Introduction**

As assigned to the field trip Six, we went to Soc Trang, which is a province located in Mekong Delta of southern Vietnam. According to Vietnam Tourism (n.d.), Soc Trang is bordered by the Hau River (lower Mekong River), Tra Vinh Province, Can Tho Province, Bac Lieu Province, and the East Vietnam Sea (72 km seaside). Soc Trang is covered by rice paddies, shrimp lagoons, fruit gardens. Kinh, Khmer, and Hoa ethnic groups live together here.

Soc Trang is one of the ten Vietnamese provinces that are under the severe impact of salinity intrusion as a consequence of climate change (Nhan Dan News, 2014). It is one of the poorest provinces in Vietnam and many poor families in this province are Khmer ethnic (Dai Doan Ket News, 2017).

1. **Brief Introduction of Bang Lang Village**

On the 23rd of March 2019, our group headed to Bang Lang - a small village in Lich Hoi Thuong Commune, Tran De District, Soc Trang Province. We had a case study in this particular village, which was selected due to the previous work experience of our team leader, Ms. Nguyen Thi Tuyet Nuong. Bang Lang village is a salt - marsh area where a part of the land is planned for shrimp farming, and another part is used to grow rice. Most of the villagers are Vietnamese Khmer.

During the field trip, we could not access any official documents or data related to this small village. Therefore, we could not have specific details of the history or development of the village. Based on the interviews that we had with the government officials and locals, we drew some general ideas about Bang Lang Village. They are some main incidents or milestones that were repeated in the interviewees’ responses. Many villagers have been living in this area for a quite long time since the time of their parents or grandparents. According to some aged women in the village, this land used to have abundant natural resources with lots of fish in the river and rice paddies before 1990s. After that, salinity intrusion started and it caused great losses in 2016. The locals also mentioned the canal which was built along the village for shrimp farming. When we arrived in the village, the most common scene that we saw is a newly-built house situated right next to a very old house. Such new houses have just been built by the villagers who migrate to other cities for earning a living. Even with the house where our group stayed during the field trip, the owner was not there as she is living with her migrant children in Ho Chi Minh city to take care of her grandchildren. Many houses have only elderly people and children as the adults at working age have to work far away from the village.

1. **Assumptions before the field trip**

Before starting our field trip, we decided not to have specific research questions. Instead, we brainstormed our research interests after receiving some information about the field-trip destination from our team leader and some other information shared by our team members. Therefore, there were some assumptions that we had about work migration in Bang Lang Village. Firstly, migration might be considered as an issue in the village where many young people left to the big cities to work. As a result of that, only the elderly, children, or those who refused to migrate still live in the village. Secondly, there might be lots of suffering because of the environmental issues such as salinity intrusion. Yet, social inequality might happen as most of the villagers are Vietnamese Khmer. Thirdly, the school dropout rate might be another concern as many internal migrants decided to take their children with them to the cities. According to Soc Trang TV Report, after Lunar New Year (2019), over 1.400 students in Soc Trang Province did not return to school. In 50 % of the cases, the students had to move with their families because their parents work in the big cities.

1. **Methods**

The researchers used various techniques include in-depth interviews, a group interview, a focus group discussion as well as informal conversations. Additionally, we conducted participatory and non-participatory observations. The respondents ranged from villagers of wildly different biographies and socioeconomic positions over representatives of the local government and government-affiliated organizations to the executive board of a farming cooperative.

The researchers spoke with 41 respondents, with 30 women and 11 men.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Techniques** | **Respondents** |
| In-depth interviews | The leader and representative of Women Union, 7 individual interviews with local people, local authority’s, a staff of Job Promotion Center, the vice principal of the primary school, the president and board member of Evergrowth Cooperatives  |
| Group interviews | 1 group interview with 3 Women Union members  |
| Informal discussions | 1 chilli farmer, 1 elderly person, 2 teenagers, a group of 9 local women, a group of 4 (farmer and his family members), 1 Buddhist monk, police and a local security  |
| Focus group discussions | 1 focus group discussion with 4 (past/ present) female shrimp farmers  |
| Observations | Non-participatory observation and participatory observation  |

The absence of methods and therefore input from outside anthropology and social sciences, which was also built-in with the field trip plan we were given, represents another crucial failure at the implementation of transdisciplinary principles. The study could have potentially profited greatly from the inclusion of quantitative research, historiography and others, as well as more innovative techniques. However, as the composition of our team was randomized when it comes to the members’ disciplinary backgrounds and method knowledge, we lacked the capacity to design the project in such a way. This also meant, that we collectively lacked practice in the application of even the narrow catalogue of methods we employed as well as the data handling, which leads to extensive (and fairly successful) improvisation.

1. **Research Question**

The central problem at this stage was the fact, that the transdisciplinary principle requires the research to address “real-world” pressing issues that have been identified in close cooperation with stakeholders and non-academic actors. The research question is to be designed in such a manner as well. Our practice setting, however, did not allow for that and had put that cart before the horse, since the problem had already been identified and we had no access to external actors before we left for the field. Because of this, we decided to not formulate our research question just yet and only brainstorm the “research interests” present within our team as a guiding frame. As it turned out, we ended up finalizing the research question only on the last day of the trip, when all data collection and part of the analysis had already taken place, again with no direct input from external actors.

After the data collection, the research question was set, the research question is “What role does migration play in attaining a better life for the villagers of Bang Lang?” for three main reasons: First, “migration” had been preset as the core of our research interest. Second, “attaining a better life” represented best the wide variety of motivations expressed by our respondents. And, third, “for the villagers of Bang Lang” expressed our activist interest in serving the needs of those that were disadvantaged in the situation we were researching. We were lucky to encounter very cohesive narratives in our data that addressed both our interests and the eventual research question in spite of the absence of a research question during the collection process.

1. **Findings I / Conceptual Framework**

In the analytical phase after data collection, we then inductively abstracted a conceptual framework that served, at the same time, as the explanatory narrative to the phenomena we had observed and been told about. The first necessary adjustment to our assumptions in this process, was the realization, that “migration” as a phenomenon, only occurs further back in the causal logic of people’s perception of the socio-economic situation. It was consistently mentioned or contextualized as a strategy to “attain a better life” in some way or another. We decided to use this common-sense phrasing, because neither “poverty” nor “livelihood insecurity”, which we had discussed as the driving force before, were prominent in our respondents’ narratives. But even those who would not see themselves as “poor” or their livelihoods as insecure still expressed a wish for more stable, more accessible and consistently higher incomes, as well as frustration with the “bad job-situation” and the erosion of agriculture-based livelihoods in Soc Trang. In fact, while the other aspects listed under “response strategies” in our graphic are in fact just that, “migration” would more accurately have been labelled as an “advancement strategy”, or something similar more representative of the proactive way the strategy was employed in.

Our findings also showed throughout, that there were certain dynamics at work in the region that systematically excluded (specific) people from either the “better life” they wished for or from successfully attempting these strategies, as well as systematically reproduced existing socioeconomic inequalities.

1. **Findings II / Introduction and Examples**

The exclusion factors are prominent in three aspects namely capital requirements, ethnicization and literacy. One primary factor is evident in the fact that it is necessary for a certain amount of both starting and risk mitigation capital for a local villager to be able to initiate certain strategies when attempting to improve their lives. One example to prove how we come to this finding is the transition from rice- to shrimp-farming with which many people in Bang Lang village as well as surrounding area aimed to alleviate the problems caused by the wide-spread salinity intrusion into the Mekong Delta’s fresh water. Capitals are required in several forms including financial capital (required at both starting stage and that for risk mitigation[[16]](#footnote-16)) and certain cultural or social capital such as the knowledge of aquaculture or people of their acquaintances who possess this kind of knowledge in order to reduce risk of failure. This ties closely into the primary reproduction mechanism, which is (ethnicized) capital concentration and loans. As a trend, the ethnic Kinh farmers in the area, that traditionally held more land, utilized their higher existing stock of capital to successfully and often more timely transition from rice- to shrimp-farming. They then bought up the land other, often Khmer, farmers still owned and needed to sell off to pay off debts (mainly loans from various sources[[17]](#footnote-17)) that appear to regularly accompany failed attempts at shrimp-farming. As a consequence, they were then compelled to sell their labor to the owners of the shrimp farms and so the entire dynamic tended to compound existing structural inequalities. Migration to sell the labor for a more stable and higher income thus also appears to be another responding strategy.

We also found that literacy is another exclusive factor that drives certain people from attaining a better life evident in the fact that basic literacy skill is required when signing the contract with the company one is intending to work for in the migrant city. Contrary to the needs of basic literacy skills, we observed the prevalence of school dropouts in the households of our respondents. Parents decide to cut off their child/children from education or sometimes a mutual decision as they need extra help to take care of younger family members and even to work at the migration city at a premature age to earn extra income for the family. This phenomenon becomes also a reproductive mechanism through which the dropouts therefore are stripped off on an educational opportunity that could potentially economically elevate them, or the entire household, to break from the cycle of poverty.

Migration comes in as a strategy to exit these reproduction cycles of poverty and break the socioeconomic barriers excluding many from improving their situation. Many working-age people in the region decided to migrate to work in urban areas, primarily Ho Chi Minh City, Binh Duong and Binh Tan, where jobs are more accessible, more stable and better paid. From our data it seems that the Khmer in the region, because they often do not (or no longer) have land to cultivate that would bind them to the seasons, migrate for long periods of time. The longest absence we came across extended to 15 years, but several years of only returning for the Tet holidays, or not at all, appear to be common. However, the respondents all shared the view that the migrants absolutely want to and eventually will return. This is demonstrated by the fact that there are many “nice” houses in the area, which have been built with money earned by work-migrants in the cities, which are empty and awaiting an eventual return. It is also compounded by the other field trips’ data, some of which talked to the actual migrants absent from our field site, who expressed the wish and plans to return. The most common explanation provided for this seems to be “to return to family and friends” and a general sense of “loyalty to the land” as one respondent put it.

1. **Challenges**

There were many challenges that we had to contend with during our preparation and field trip itself. Here is a brief summary of them:

**A fairly homogeneous team**

This means that all members of our team were focused on social sciences (such as development studies or social and historical sciences). However, if we had someone who was versed e.g. in natural sciences, we might have brought more transdisciplinary perspective.

**A lack of experience in research methods**

As some of us applied the methods such as interview, discussion or observation for the very first time, we had to tailor our research to diverse kinds and levels of knowledge and experience of our team members. Nevertheless, this was a good opportunity to train teamwork skills.

**Framing without any field-trip actor**

This is one of the challenges we had to face already during the framing. If some field-trip actor had been present already during the framing part, we could have been better prepared for the field-trip itself, because we would have had a better provisional idea of the real situation in the site.

**A pre-planned order of research phases**

The other one was the unusual order of research phases, which means that in contrast to the real research, our location and interviews had been already mostly selected, so we had to adapt our research conception to this.

**Defining the field site**

At first, we wasted some time interviewing other people in other villages instead of our main area, Bang Lang village. We then focused more on the main field site of our field trip. We were confused and could not distinguish the levels of the administrative province of Vietnam, such as communes, villages and zones. It is very complicated and not easy to understand for foreigners.

**Lack of official documents and data**

Before and during the field trip, we did not get enough official information and documents of Bang Lang village. In particular, the information of history, the population and the number of migrants of this village are not fully provided.

**Presence of officials and bystanders during the research**

During the research, local security followed, observed us, and they even occasionally participated in some of our interviews. They sat close to us, observed and sometimes helped the interviewees answer our questions. And the bystanders, the neighbors of the interviewees, were curious and also came to observe us when we conducted the interviews.

We did not know how to deal and control with their presences because they sometimes distracted our interviews.

**Time constraints**

The five-day trip was not enough for us to do what we wanted on this field trip. We only had three full days to do research. On the fourth day before going back to Ho Chi Minh city, we worked very hard from early morning until late night. We finally completed the task in this limited time.

1. **Conclusion**

Here are some conclusions about the findings of our research during the field trip. In Bang Lang Village, migration has been used as a response strategy for a better life, however, there are many factors related to environmental change, social transformation, policies, etc. Besides, excluding mechanism and reproduction mechanism play an essential role in migration process.Thanks to the summer school and field trip 2019, we have learned a lot about methodologies for Trans-disciplinary Research as well as challenges for conducting a research which involves both academic and non-academic actors. We all are aware that what we have done during the field trip is not a genuine Trans-disciplinary Research process, but it truly helps us get better insights on the steps in developing the research questions, and collecting the data. As mentioned in the challenges, the work agenda of our field trip was mostly predetermined and there are limitations in getting the non-academic actors actively involved in our research process. We believe that this five-day trip is only the beginning stage for a researcher to recognize the research matter and develop a conceptual framework for the research based on the initial data collected from the multiple actors. When working as a research team, we also had great opportunities to learn from each other in doing research. The differences among the team members in terms of nationalities, academic backgrounds, and work experiences may be considered as a barrier for group work, but in fact this is the way Trans-disciplinary Research should be done. We joined the group discussion and contributed the ideas from our different perspectives. However, it would have been greater to have more members whose majors are in economics or environment since all of our team members are in social science studies. Last but not least, we would like to express our sincere thanks to our team leader, staff, and interpreters for organizing, facilitating, and supporting us. Without them, we would not have been able to complete the field trip and achieve some noticeable outcomes within the limited time.

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# ANNEX IV

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Ms. Phillips is a Doctoral Candidate in the Graduate Research in International Development program at Chulalongkorn University, Faculty of Political Science, where she undertakes research on the socio-legal aspects of resource development, including stakeholder engagement, inclusive decision-making processes, human rights, and environmental justice. She is a Doctoral Fellow in Sustainability and Environmental Politics at the Stockholm Environment Institute Asia, working with the Climate Change, Disasters and Development research theme, an Associate Fellow in the Natural Resources Programme at the Centre for International Sustainable Development Law at McGill University, and a Doctoral Researcher at the Center for Social Development Studies at Chulalongkorn University. Ms. Phillips holds a Juris Doctor from Vermont Law School, a Master of Laws in Environment from McGill University, and a Bachelor of Arts in International Affairs from the University of Colorado at Boulder. She is a qualified attorney, licensed to practice in the State of New York.

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3. All KNOTS fieldwork reports may be accessed online at <https://www.knots-eu.com/students-blogs/2019/5/7/knots-summer-school-and-field-trips-2019-student-reports-on-field-trips-1>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See ANNEX I for additional information regarding the ho khau system in Vietnam. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
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12. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Our research indicated that the setup cost of such endeavours is approximately VND 10 million (or USD 430). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Vietnam has made similar commitments with regard to labour standards under the June 2019 European Union-Vietnam trade and investment agreements (see International Labour Organization, 2019a). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. As we were limited in time, it was not possible to share the findings in detail with the other group members during the wrap-up sessions in the evening. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Through interviews most respondents who have or are still having shrimp farming experience shared with us the sensitivity of shrimps to environmental changes which lead to hardship relating to raising shrimps successfully. Most of them have experienced failure in keeping the shrimps healthy and alive and thus are in need of risk mitigation capitals. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. An important finding regarding the mitigation strategy the villagers use when faced with capital insufficiency is through loans. It is also the primary source of government welfare support. Throughout our interview process, we found out loans come from various sources mainly consist of government or related institutions and private sectors. Government provide loans through Social Warfare Bank as well as institutions such as Woman’s Union and Job Promotion Center. Private sources can be friends, relatives and some agencies. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)