

# Kinship Networks and Youth Transnational Labor Migration Decision-making in the North Central Coast of Vietnam

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## [ *Abstract* ]

This paper examines the kinship networks, particularly the various ways networks are expected to assist Vietnamese youth transnational labor migration during their migration decision-making processes. Drawing on surveys and in-depth interviews with Vietnamese migration workers and their family members in the North Central Coast of Vietnam, it shows that Vietnamese youth capitalize on different functions of their kinship networks to facilitate their migratory endeavors. They are more likely to be tied to family networks, regarding them as not just the source of information and practical support but also guarantees. The paper provides deep insights into the way migration choices are made by Vietnamese youth and, at the same time, underscores the effects of their migration choice.

**Keywords:** Youth, migration labor, kinship networks, decision-making, North Central Coast of Vietnam

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## I . Introduction

In recent years, labor migration continued to grow strongly, and between 2017 and 2023, nearly 860,000 Vietnamese working as contract laborers overseas (Bo Lao dong Thuong binh va Xa hoi, 12/2024). International labor migration has become a continuously common livelihood strategy for households in Vietnam, especially in rural areas. This is consistent with the labor situation in the North Central Coast region.<sup>1</sup> This is a region with a large number of contract migrant workers; for example, in 2021, there were 22,902 people out of a total of 47,120 migrant workers nationwide (accounting for 48.6%) (Cục Quản lý lao động ngoài nước - Department of Overseas Labour of Vietnam, June 6, 2024). Obviously, North Central Coast can be considered a typical region for research on labor migration activities.

This phenomenon of labor migration is related to the employment problem in Vietnam. Many young Vietnamese, especially in the Central region, are facing unemployment and underemployment, particularly in rural areas. Rapid urbanization, including land acquisition for construction of industrial parks, and entertainment areas, has reduced agricultural land. As a result, some young people lack the means of production, while others become company workers or remain underemployed. Meanwhile, efforts to create new jobs in Central Vietnam are still limited and unsatisfactory, hence working abroad with high income is being considered by local people as the direction that can actively solve their employment and income problems. This perception also has an influence on youth who are migrating in an increasing number.

In that context, kinship increasingly proves its role in promoting youth transnational labor migration. The existing literature focuses on either the importance of kinship as either financial supporters or carers who take care of left-behind children instead of their parents (Tilly and Brown 1967; Bieder 1973; Hoang and Yeoh 2012; Hoang et al. 2015). These follow the household strategy theory of Stark and Bloom that regards migration as a

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of our surveys, North Central Coast consists of six provinces in the northern part of Central Vietnam: Thanh Hoa, Nghe An, Ha Tinh, Quang Binh, Quang Trị and Thua Thien Hue.

family strategy aimed to increase income (Stark and Bloom 1985: 173-178). Recent studies pay much attention to migration flows involving left-behind children and youths (Bastianon 2018; Huijsmans 2014; Juárez et al. 2013; Punch 2007; Punch 2014; Kofman 2004; Andrikopoulos and Duyvendak 2020). They also focus on remittances and the impact of labour migration on the economics of the family and the country of origin (Keller and Mulangu 2023; Chege et al. 2023). However, there has been little that sheds light on the relationship between kinship and youth migration. It compels a question that this paper seeks to answer: What role do kinship networks play in the migration decision of Vietnamese youth? It is the aim of this paper to examine kinship networks as the driving force of migration, creating both the “pull” and the “push” of the free migration process of Vietnamese youths aged 15 to 24<sup>2</sup> in the North Central Coast of Vietnam.

In the following sections, we first examine the existing literature on kinship networks and youth migration. This is followed by an overview of the methodology and a brief introduction to the research site. We then offer our analysis of three research results, focusing on migration networks in the case study of SE7 Commune,<sup>3</sup> including: (1) Kinship networks as a key motivation and a source of information, practical support, and guarantees during the youth migration; (2) Vietnamese youth migration decision-making process within kinship networks; and (3) The dark side of Vietnamese youth labor migration in the context of kinship networks.

## **II. Conceptual Framework: Kinship Networks and Youth Migration Decision-Making**

### **2.1. Kinship Networks in Transnational Labor Migration**

Kinship has re-emerged as a topic in migration research, especially

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that there is no universal agreement on the definition of youth. The United Nations, however, defines those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 as youth (United Nations General Assembly 1981: 15, 35).

<sup>3</sup> To ensure their anonymity, research participants and the research site (the communes and villages) have been given fictitious names in this paper. Names of the province and district have not been changed.

in transnational contexts. The scholarship on the importance of kinship in migration can be traced back to the 1950s, but their approaches emphasize internal labor migration or rural-urban migration rather than the international labor migration (Young and Willmott 1957; Litwak 1960; Todaro 1969; Tilly and Brown 1967; Bieder 1973). Young and Willmott (1957: 101, 153) recognize that kinship promotes migration in chains, or in another way, the move of a relative influences the others to follow, but migration makes a crucial difference more than kinship. This finding about the relationship of kinship and migration was made clearer by the studies of the 1960s. The idea of Todaro (1969: 138) which considered the probability of having a job as a motivation of migration was followed by Bieder (1973: 429-430, 434) in assuming the function of kinship as a source of jobs and wealth for extended family members during economic depressions. However, Parsons (1977) suggests that kinship lost its place in “modern” societies because of conditions of modernity, such as the mobility of a labor force. In the following decades, kinship ceased to be an attractive topic in labor migration studies, which may have been related to the overemphasis on economic motivations (Kofman 2004).

In recent decades, kinship reappeared as an interest partly because the models that interpret migration as an individual cost-benefit decision are now outdated (Andrikopoulos and Duyvendak 2020: 302). At the same time, studies have emerged that investigate different aspects of the family dimensions of international migration, as well as the introduction of stricter measures against “family migration” and states’ construction of the “immigrant family” as an integration problem (Bonjour and Kraler 2015; Andrikopoulos and Duyvendak 2020: 303). The outcome difference and possibility of sending remittances have become motives for migration (Parrenas 2005). The emergence of some new types of migration under free movement with a more diversity in migrant’s motivations and their economic and social experiences in the destination country have made migration increasingly complex (Krings et al. 2013; Favell 2008). Migration decisions are therefore not only made at individual level but also at kinship level (Akanle et al. 2021). Kinship provides the means to imagine the future and

interpret the past, processes that are vital for migration and settlement in new communities (Andrikopoulos and Duyvendak 2020: 312).

The concept of “free movement” in migration is very familiar to groups of people from north-central Vietnam, where people have sought spontaneous migration since the last decades of the twentieth century. They either rely on relatives or create fake kinship documents to legalize their passage to Europe and America, or through human trafficking networks; they also seek out relatives in any destination country in the hope of finding a job with a high salary. The participants in our study were mostly migrants of this type or had relatives who migrated illegally. They see kinship as both a driving force and a factor that attract them to the destination countries. Despite the strictness of immigration policy in Europe and some Asian countries, as well as the dangers of migration, they consider migration an inevitable and natural way to make a living.

In this study, we draw on the concepts of kinship by Young and Willmott (1957) and Todaro (1969) to view kinship as a magnet that attracts others to follow for job opportunities. At the same time, we also consider it as a “push factor” for Vietnamese people in Central Vietnam to migrate.

Our research breaks down how subjects consider kinship as a driving force for youth migration in this region. This paper applies an open and progressive approach to kinship to see how it plays a role in processes of migration, as well as the transformations and shifts of kinship in migratory and transnational contexts. These transformations and shifts of kinship, both in form and content, are triggered by migration and/or made migration possible.

Since the increase of youth labor migration from Vietnam, an increasing number of children are growing up in the absence of one or both parents. At that time, care arrangements occurred when one or both parents are away from transnational families. Existing studies of left-behind families, however, have largely emphasized on the central parent-child relationship rather than the effects of the parent’s absence and extended family members on the youth migration decision-making. In this paper, we seek to understand

how kin migrations impact the migration of youth in North-Central Vietnam. Furthermore, this study sheds light on the role of intergenerational carers to examine how migrant parents and other household members assisted their kids during their transnational migration processes. This relates to the “trigenerationality” of caregiving circuits, showing how the multiple actors of various ages care for one another within the transnational families. In this study, we selected many forms of care, even if grandparents were not the main carer, to prove that kinship networks play as “push-pull” factors in the migration of Vietnamese youth in North-Central Vietnam.

## **2.2. Youth Response to International Labor Migration in Extended Families and Clans**

Recent increases in the volume of labor migration from Vietnam has led to the growth of Vietnamese young migrants in “traditional” or extended families. This growth lends support to the previous study of Litwak (1960: 387-389) who indicates that extended families are viable in contemporary society as they obtained a new unique task to provide aid to their members who are moving and the advances in communication techniques that reduced the “barriers” of geographical distance. This study has provided suggestions about the relationship between extended family, kinship and youth migration. In recent years, extended families and clans are becoming important sources supporting young movers in the changing context of transnational mobility (Andrikopoulos and Duyvendak 2020: 312). Research on young migrants, therefore, has developed considerably over the last decade, especially based on case studies from across the globe (Huijsmans 2011). Some researchers looked at youth migrations from the perspective of education and occupation (Punch 2014; Bastianon 2018: 110-112). Some others consider them as independent migrants within the households or the other social networks to better understand the migration of young people (Huijsmans 2011; Boyden 2013; Liu et al. 2018). Liu and her colleagues (2018: 1) argue that the migration decision of young men and are associated with their position within the nuclear

family networks.

Youth, as well as children, are often considered as passive actors who do not participate in the process of their parents' migration decision-making. Although the improvement of children's life and education are always central to parents' migration decisions, they are often the last to know about their parents' migration. Young people are often informed of their parents' choice right at the time of migration either by their parents or by the relatives who will take care of them. There were even young people who are deprived of the right to know about their parents' migration, where parents lied instead about why they went away to work (Hoang and Yeoh 2015: 186-188).

Evidence from existing studies shows that there are two common ways young people react to their parents' migration: (1) some children show their understanding and sympathy with their parents' migration decision because they think it is a sacrifice done for the family, which contributes to rekindle children's gratitude to their parents; (2) Another group expressed anger because their parents did not inform about their migration earlier, and at the same time felt that life without parents, especially for families with migrant mothers, is really miserable. According to Hoang & Yeoh, there are a number of left-behind children who hate their parental migration and want to not migrate when they grow up and get married (Hoang and Yeoh 2015: 191-192). Their study was carried out in Thai Binh province in the Northern Delta, where economic conditions are more developed, and children's education is also high. However, our article studies the North Central Coast region where economic conditions are poor and backward. Therefore, "earning money" (*kiem tien* in Vietnamese) to feed the family has become the leading concern of households. We argue that there exists a hypothesis of a third way children respond to the migration of parents and adults. That is, children neither sympathize, nor are frustrated, but they feel indifferent when their parents migrate. They grow up when many people in their family, relatives, villages migrate, so it is normal/inevitable for their parents to emigrate. Furthermore, although parental migration is always

intended to provide children with better educational opportunities, sometimes the children are negatively affected by their parents' absence, which includes the reduction of school enrolment and the increase of the likelihood of a child dropping out of school because of the high opportunity of future migration (Marchetta and Sim 2021). This probably makes them see migration as the best way to make a living when they grow up, and they also follow in their parents' footsteps to migrate at a very young age, leaving their children to be raised by their grandparents. This paper aims to explore how the Vietnamese youth in the North Central Coast of Vietnam see labor migration as the means of livelihood strategy to get a better life.

Therefore, young people in the North Central Coast region often migrate in considerably large numbers. This is because of the scenarios that parents/relatives pointed out to them by using their previous migration experience, or because their parents are so relatively old that they could not work far away. Hence, they follow in the footsteps of their predecessors to earn money to support the whole family. Here, not only kinship concept is involved, but also relay migration. This research seeks to locate the response of children towards parental migration, arguing that those who feel indifferent towards their parents' migration tend to migrate when they became adolescents to replace their parental.

### **III. Research Methods and Research Areas**

We concern ourselves with finding out how kinship plays a part in migrant decision-making and how migrants believe kinship networks affect them positively and/or negatively. Both secondary and primary data were collected. The primary research areas were rural regions in the North Central Coast of Vietnam. The language used during the research is Vietnamese.

The research was conducted in two phases. The first phase took place from January to March 2021, using online surveys and interviews. The second phase was conducted in February 2023 in

SE7 Commune, Yen Thanh District, Nghe An Province. Since there was no Social Sciences Ethics Committee established in Vietnam in early 2021, as Vietnam's laws exempted social sciences study from requiring ethical approval, this research did not obtain ethics committee approval before the field trips. In spite of that, the personal information of interview and survey participants were kept confidential. Their names and personal information were not required when interviewing or answering questionnaires. The names of the interviewees were also coded with random letters and the names of their villages were not shown in this study. Furthermore, the participants were fully informed about their voluntary participation, the purpose of this research, how personal information would be kept confidential, and how their responses would be used and stored. The information provided by participants cannot be used as evidence to legally charge them because it is anonymous.

This study relies on large quantitative and qualitative primary data. It draws upon 198 surveys and 20 in-depth interviews with either Vietnamese labor migrants who are working abroad or Vietnamese returnees who settled in Vietnam after their migration, and lived their left-behind parents/spouse. The sampling were participants from families with a history of multi-generational migration. Many of them had migrated multiple times by the time we conducted the surveys and interviews. Like other young people from the North Central Coast, the participants in this study mostly came from middle-income families and did not have stable jobs. Therefore, they wanted to go abroad to solve unemployment and family economic problems. These migrants generally worked as unskilled or semi-skilled low wage laborers to cover the daily costs of their school-age children. The sample was designed to ensure a diversity of migration patterns and types as well as participants' characteristics such as age and gender.

The distribution of the participants in relation to sex shows that 79.8% (174/218) were males while 20.2% (44/218) were females. This data does not contradict the provincial and communal statistics on labor migrants in SE7 Commune of Nghe An. According to this

source, only 215 out of 2030 exported workers (equivalent to 10.59%) were female from 2000 to May 2022.<sup>4</sup> Obviously, very few women from the research community migrated for overseas work, showing a lack of gender-balanced sample. Despite that, the growing participation of women in migration indicates international migration turns out to be more gender-balanced, and both sexes were well represented to a large extent in this study.

For educational qualification, findings show that only 4.59% (10 out of 218) of the participants are associate/bachelor's degree holders, 52.75% (115 participants) had higher education, 38.07% (83 participants) had secondary education, and 4.59% (10 participants) had primary education as the highest educational level. Most of the participants were educated from the secondary level. Despite that, the education of the participants is regarded as lower than the national education average.

The interviews were conducted with (1) Vietnamese returnees (12 participants); (2) and migrant's parents/grandparents (9 participants), and (3) migrant's spouse (2 participants).<sup>5</sup> The samples were limited to 8 villages out of 14 villages in SE7 Commune, Nghe An province.<sup>6</sup> The language used in the interviews as well as survey sheets was Vietnamese to make sure that all the questions and responses were clear and thoroughly understood.

The surveys were based on self-completed questionnaires asking: (1) Vietnamese adolescents of age 18 and above who are overseas; (2) Vietnamese returnees who have no longer been

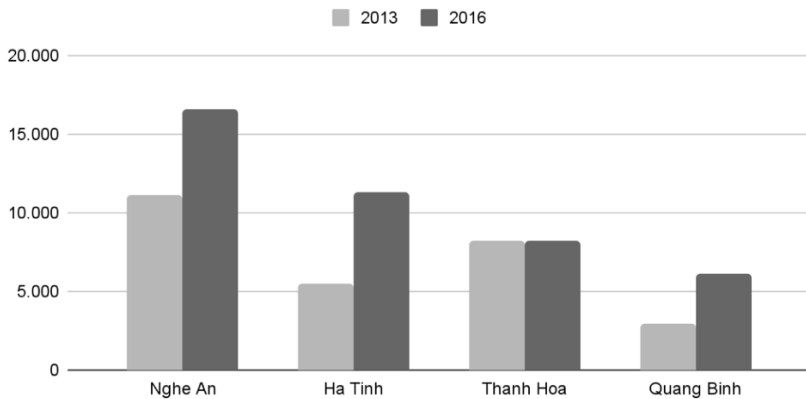
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<sup>4</sup> Calculated by authors. This data is kept in SE7 communal police, Yen Thanh district, Nghe An province. We collected it during the field trip in this commune in February 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Among participants, there were two people who were migration returnees and migrant's parents and one person who was a migrant's wife and migrant's mom.

<sup>6</sup> Nghe An is a coastal province near the northernmost part of the North Central Coast region, the Central of Vietnam. It has a natural area of 16,489.4 Km<sup>2</sup>, and 21 districts, towns and cities (including 11 mountainous districts), Nghe An is the province with the fourth largest population in the country (after Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh, and Thanh Hoa) with more than 3.4 million people. The labor force is over 1.926 million people, accounting for 57.57% of the total population (Nghe An Provincial Party Committee 2022).

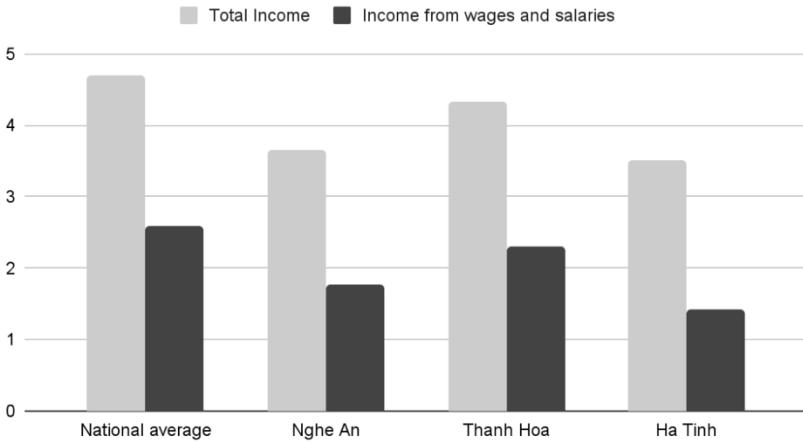
migrants, about their feelings and satisfaction with various aspects of their lives. The populations in this research regard one of the provinces in Central Vietnam<sup>7</sup> as their hometown, which included Thanh Hoa, Nghe An, Ha Tinh, Quang Binh, Quang Ngai, and Thua Thien Hue. These provinces, especially Nghe An and Ha Tinh, are located in the North Central Coast region and are among the provinces with the highest number of labour migrants in Vietnam (see Figure 1).



<Figure 1> Transnational Labour Migration in Central Vietnam (unit: person)  
 Source: The Ministry of Labour, War Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA, Vietnamese: Bộ Lao động - Thương binh và Xã hội), *Statistical yearbook of Labour, Meritorious People and Society*, 2011-2018.

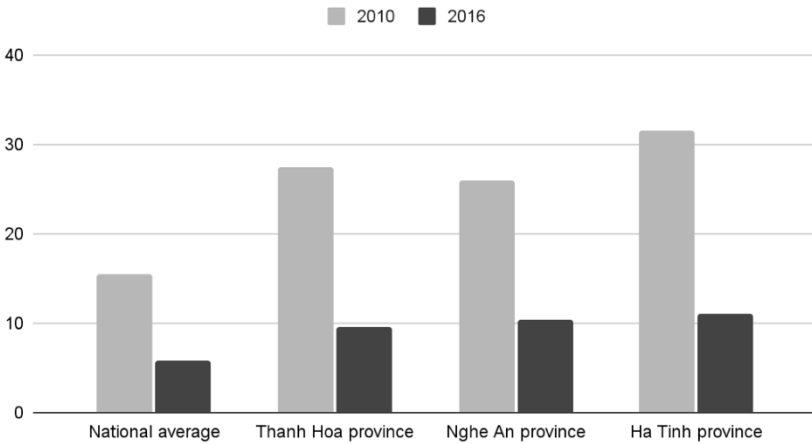
The North Central Coast region of Vietnam is inherently poor and its income is lower than the national average (Figure 2). This is related to the unemployment and underemployment rate of this region being generally higher than other regions. Data collected in the General Statistics Office of Vietnam shows that the unemployment and underemployment rate of Ha Tinh were 5.43% and 2.63% respectively in 2022 while those of national average were 2.34% and 2.21% (General Statistics Office of Vietnam 2022).

<sup>7</sup> Central Vietnam includes three administrative regions: North Central Coast, South Central Coast, and Central Highlands.



<Figure 2> Average monthly income (unit: million VND)  
Source: General Statistics Office of Vietnam, <https://www.gso.gov.vn>

Therefore, the North Central Coast is also an area with a higher poverty rate than the national average (Figure 3).



<Figure 3> Poverty Rates (2002-2016) (unit: per cent)  
Source: General Statistics Office of Vietnam, <https://www.gso.gov.vn/>

It can be seen in Figure 3 that although the poverty rate of the North Central Coast provinces decreased rapidly from more than

25% in 2002 to under 12% in 2016, it was still higher than the national average. However, it is worth noting that Vietnam's standards for escaping poverty are relatively different from other countries, and hence, households' vulnerability to poverty is possible. The poor are mostly farmers with very low and unstable income due to the main agricultural production, and low education, culture and skill level; they have little (or no) opportunities to access scientific and technological achievements. The above situation shows that hunger eradication, poverty reduction, and improvement of people's quality of life is an urgent issue in society. As a result, the movement to work abroad in the Central region since the 90s has made people's lives better, so many families have directed their children to go abroad to work and earn money, instead of investing in education.

Meanwhile, remittance was increasingly becoming an important source of income in this region. Figure 2 shows that while the national average monthly income of Vietnam was mainly from wages and salaries, that of the provinces of Central Vietnam was considerably dependent on remittances. It is evident that the monthly remittance contributed more than 50% of the income of these provinces every month. Specifically, the annual remittances transferred from foreign countries to Thanh Hoa province since 2012 has been about 3,000 billion VND (equivalent to more than \$133 million), while that to Nghe An in the period of 2015 to 2018 reached more than 6,000 billion VND (equivalent to about \$255 million) (Provincial Party Committee of Thanh Hoa 2022; Provincial Police of Nghe An 2020). Remittance has no doubt contributed to poverty reduction, people's lives improvement.

SE7 Commune (Yen Thanh District, Nghe An Province of Vietnam), which was once a poor commune, has now become "a billionaires' village" in the eyes of Vietnamese people, have found ways to work abroad and they have now formed several large family lineages in the overseas countries. According to the statistics of the SE7 commune police, by April 2022, there were at least 2037 villagers who have been or are working abroad. It also shows that 1,585 out of a total of 10,735 working-age people (accounting for 14.8%). Among the interviewees, most of the parents/grandparents

believed that the international migration from SE7 Commune dates to at least the early 1990s, or even earlier. At that time, they mainly went to Laos, Cambodia, Angola and some European countries, such as Germany and Belgium, to work without permission from the destination country. Most of the migrants were men. However, this kind of migration has not been included in the reports of SE7 commune police. The commune report only covers labor migration cases from early 2000 onwards. Most grandparents participating in this study migrated before 2000 when their children were small.

By approaching the theories of kinship networks, family migration, and collecting semi-structured surveys and conducting interviews, we examine the migrants' attitude towards labor migration and their migration decision-making when they become adults/parent(s).

#### **IV. Kinship Networks as a Key Motivation and a Source of Information, Practical Support and Guarantees**

Migrants often rely on existing familial ties to pursue migratory opportunities. This is consistent with the view that migrants, especially those from developing countries, depend on familial ties in accomplishing migratory plans. For Central Vietnam, kinship is still an important factor promoting the labour migration process. Kinship here is both a “push factor” in the migration process, in other words, “going for family,” and a “pull factor” for providing information and assurance about the possibility of success of the migration process.

Regarding kinship as a “push factor,” family becomes the biggest motivation for people to work overseas. Among 218 migrants participating in the survey and interview, up to 174 (equivalent to 79.82%) claimed that their family had a decisive influence on their migration decision. Besides, the rest (11 migrants accounting for 5.05%) made their decision either at personal and individual levels or at social networks levels, that is, either by their friends/colleagues or commercial brokers, even by the state's/local information agencies.

Migration first provided the possibility of fulfilling the role of a “good child” and/or “good parent” by remitting money for their children’s education and/or parents’ needs. 100% migrants who participated in this study agreed that most of their monthly income received abroad were usually sent back to their families in the form of remittances that, they believe, can provide support in times of need and ensure a better life and future for their lovers. This relates to the fact that most of the participants (98.2%) came from a poor or middle-class family in the rural area in Central Vietnam. Their migratory decision, hence, always received the support of all adults in the family. Mr. A (24 years old), who came to Angola and Laos to work when he was under 18 years old, shared about his life that his life abroad was not as good as he had imagined. However, working abroad helped him and his family increase their income, so he could help his parents, siblings. Family was the motivation for him to continue working abroad. According to Mr. B (35 years old), the biggest motivation for him to continue working abroad was the economic issues of his family. His work abroad has made his family’s life better. He accumulated money that was first used to pay off debt, then build a house, and accumulate some capital for his children. Ms. Q (19 years old) honestly expressed that the best motivation for her to go abroad was so that her parents would not have to work hard because her salary for an hour was the same as her parents working all day. Similar things were found in the responses of other participants in this study.

Moreover, since migrants often marry and have children at a young age, they rely on help from their families to care for their children, which consequently motivate them to work abroad. These migrants have often left their children and/or parents to other family members in their country of origin to migrate, work, and send remittances to help those who have remained behind. This has led to the revival of extended family<sup>8</sup> models in Northern Central Vietnam rather than the nuclear family.<sup>9</sup> At the time of our visiting to SE7 Commune, all respondents were living in extended families.

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<sup>8</sup> The extended family consists of the nuclear family along with close relatives.

<sup>9</sup> The nuclear family, sometimes termed the conjugal family, consists of husband and wife, with or without children.

PTL, 28 years old, said that “Our grandparents said that the two [of us] must help each other to work well, and they will help take care [of the children]. That was a huge motivator for me to go.” Mr. P (65 years old), father of a migrant named D, said that his son went abroad to work at the age of 24 and one day, he called to tell that:

I felt miserable [to work] and I didn't know when I could come home. [...] I would try to stay here longer until my children finish school. When the kids grow up, I will return [...] I try my best because I know both of you are still alert and can take care of my children's illnesses.

He replied to his son that he could work with peace in mind because there were grandparents at home to support his wife in taking care of the children. When we asked Mr. H when he should return, he said it was up to him, he could go for as long as he wanted, and if he had enough money, he should think of coming back because of the many difficulties regarding documents and procedure. The same question was also asked to a migrant's wife, Ms. L (20 years old). She very comfortably shared that when her husband migrated for work, everything went normally because there were grandparents and relatives to help with the children. The husband can return at any time, which is up to him, but it probably shouldn't take too long.

Family also plays a critical role in supporting the loan process for the migrants. Among respondents, 206 people (94.54%) did not have enough money to finance their migration process and were assisted by their kinfolks and family members. However, it should be noted that at the time we conducted this study, financial support from relatives no longer exerted pressure on migration decision-making because most families had accumulated little money and property and received financial support from the Commune People's Credit Fund (*Quy Tin dung nhan dan xa* in Vietnamese). Many of them had to ask their parents to mortgage their land documents to borrow part or all of a bank loan.

Not only acting as “push factor,” kinship networks also attracts for labor migrants. Migrants in this study cited the success of other

family members and relatives who migrated before them as a motivation for their migration. They even consider exporting labor as a normal phenomenon and an inevitable and vital livelihood strategy in their commune. Ms. Q (19 years old) shared that her father went to Angola to work. When she was in ninth grade, her older brother moved to work in Japan. At that time, she had the intention of going abroad. The fact that her father and brother had gone abroad before made her feel more comfortable with her decision.

Moreover, the presence of family members and relatives in destination countries also encourages the people. Migrants view going abroad and meeting relatives here as a family or clan reunion. This is especially true for SE7 Commune (Nghê An Province) or Ky Chau Commune (Hà Tĩnh Province), places known as “billionaires’ village,” “European village” or “labor export village.” Therefore, the migratory decisions are largely not haunted by feelings of loneliness or fear, but instead by excitement and curiosity. Data shows that migrants often encourage their own family members or relatives and friends to work as export labor. 138 out of 218 respondents (63.3%) said that there were two, or even more four members in their family working abroad at the time of their participation in the study. Moreover, the research participants also shared that many of their relative brothers went abroad after being introduced to the possibility. In 2023, 89 people (42.9%) taking the survey confirmed the decisive influence of people who had lived/worked/studied abroad to their migration decision. T (42 years old), who had worked in Germany for one year and England for three years, shared that

My family wanted me to go [abroad] to earn more [money]. [...] At first it was just me [going], but then three of my brothers went. One brother went to Germany, another brother has returned, the other is in England.

This reflects that kinship networks may influence migration intentions and contribute to chain migration.

Due to kinship networks, migrants can find the suitable

destination countries, pay lower fees, and better jobs. P (29 years old) was happy to say that “My husband was here, so he asked his company to sponsor my visa and find a job for me. Hence, it doesn't cost me much.” Mr. D (45 years old) has shared that he used to work illegally in many European countries, and as a result was imprisoned and deported. Having learned from that, he oriented his children to go abroad in through legal means. While he was abroad, his children stayed with their mother and grandparents. However, because they were not good at studying, as soon as they graduated from high school, he suggested they should work abroad. His two children are currently in Japan. Mr. T (19 years old) said to his mom that he also planned to go to England for a long time because there were uncles and many relatives there. But after the deaths of 39 migrants in a British truck, as it was the first time he went abroad, he wanted to try his luck at another, and then planned to go to England eventually. His father, who went to Angola and Laos, was a decisive influence on his emigration. Kinship no doubt becomes a source of information for labor migrants during their migratory decision-making.

## **V. Vietnamese Youth Migration Decision-Making Process within Kinship Networks**

There was a strong relation between family and clan migration history and the youth migration status. Migrants participating in this study often came from families and/or clans with migration experience. There were 89 respondents (42.9%) taking the survey in 2023 that confirmed that their migration decision was influenced by relatives who had worked abroad. This result shows support to the previous studies on migration networks that family migration experience made one's migration decision less likely to be contested in the household (Hoang 2011: 426). Strong clan ties that are considered as a characteristic of Vietnamese villages are significant in people's migration decisions, providing a trusted support network. Obviously, although there are many recent studies showing other motivations for migration, kinship still does not lose its motivating role in the migration decision, especially for the youth who are still

heavily influenced by family factors.

Living in households with father migrants increases individuals' likelihood of labor migration during their adulthood. Q (19 years old) shares her life story. Her dad left home for Angola when she was in elementary school but the absence of her father did not make her life bad or dull. She supported her father's migration decision and furthermore found that her father and brother's migration made her plan to go abroad more favorable amid the widespread aversion to women migration in her village. Mr. A (24 years old) said that his father also went to Laos, Thailand, and China for trade when he was small. He soon realized migration was a way of life. His father's frequent overseas commercial trips made him feel that migration, like any other occupations, is not dangerous, which helped to reduce psychological barriers. Therefore, when he was 16 years old, he first went to Angola alone to work. After coming back from Angola, he went to Laos, and then Japan. He also plans for the next migration trip with his wife next year, leaving his child to the care of grandparents.

Along with family ties, clan ties play an increasingly important role in international labour migration, contributing to the formation of migration chains. The former go and guide the latter. The brothers in the family clan have all pulled each other away. Mr. D (45 years old) shared that when he was 22 years old, he came to Laos to do business; although he was the unique member in his family working in Laos, a lot of his relatives followed him coming to this country; at that time, there were about 40 or 50 people working for his project. Mrs. N (38 years old) honestly told us about her husband who had been to Laos and Algeria, and now intends to go to Taiwan the following year because there were many clan brothers there and they encouraged him to go to that country. At the time of our interview, her son was also in Japan and intended to go to England in the next few years because there were many of their relatives there. According to D (42 years old), during the time he worked in Germany and England, he worked with fellow Vietnamese; because he was an illegal worker and was not fluent in the language, he and his colleagues had to ask Vietnamese predecessors to apply for a job on their behalf. After the broker

helped him take care of the documents and put him on the plane to Germany, he had to find fellow Vietnamese to ask for their help in seeking a job and a place to live in that country.

In recent years, the security of family members and relatives in the destination country has promoted the migration of two groups of population--youth and women.

Firstly, youths experiencing parental and clan migration previously or currently tend to first migrate at a young age. M in the above example is such a case. Additionally, among 170 people from SE7 Commune participating in this research, 12.9% claimed that they migrated internationally for the first time when they were below 18 years old, 49.4% at the age of 19-25, which reflects a youthful migration profile. Among them, only 16% have worked as exported labor once, and the rest have gone twice or more. Mr. A shared that he followed his father to Laos when he was only 14 years old. Two years later, he went to Angola alone to work. Mr. A's migration story is also the story of many other young people whose fathers and relatives migrated freely to Laos when they were very small.

Secondly, the recent decade has seen an increasing number of women who have worked as international migrants, from the Northern Coastal Center region. While among migrants who came from SE7 Commune, there were only 21 females who were under 25 years old at the time of their migration before 2010, the number considerably increased to 91, or more than 4.5 times in the period of 2010-2022. For the case of CK Commune (Ky Anh District, Ha Tinh Province), female workers engaging in export labor in the first half of 2023 accounted for nearly 50%.<sup>10</sup> This was related to the shift in the concept of women's status and position in the families, as well as the guarantee provided for females by the kinship. Q (19 years old) shared that her villagers did not like to send girls or women abroad in the past, but her father supported her decision, telling her to go to any country she wanted because her clan's brothers were staying in every country in the world. Due to that, her

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<sup>10</sup> This data is kept in CK communal police, Ky Anh district, Ha Tinh province. We collected it during the field trip in February 2023.

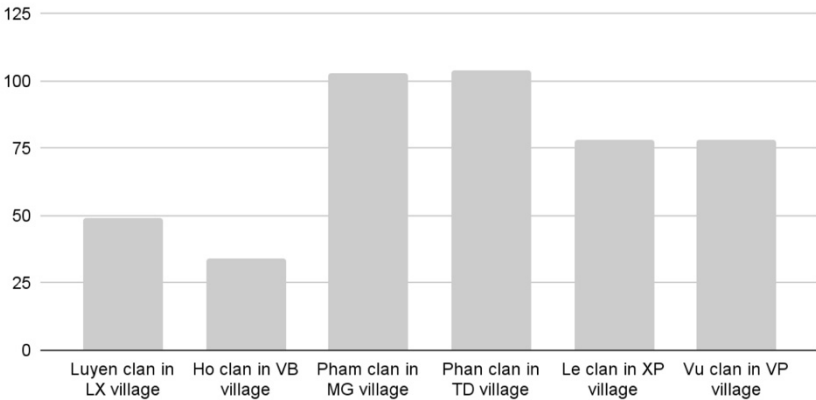
journey abroad was very smooth. When we conducted interviews in SE7 Commune, some husbands and grandparents showed a comfortable and sympathetic attitude towards their wife and daughter-in-law if they wanted to go abroad to work. Mr. A (24 years old) said that he would go abroad first, then, if his wife wanted to go there, he would let her go if their children were taken care of by grandparent.

Despite that, the above phenomenon has not had a great impact on the migration of the youth in SE7 Commune. Basically, the proportion of women going to work abroad is still much smaller than men. According to data collected and kept by SE7 Commune's police in April 2022, only 10.5% migrants were women since the 2000s. When we interviewed the grandparents left behind, although most of them were quite comfortable with allowing their daughter-in-law to work abroad, they still wondered about their responsibility for the children. This is related to the fact that women face more difficulties and barriers than men during the labor migration process. Traditionally, Vietnamese women have extremely important responsibilities: being wives, mothers and taking care of the family. Most women working abroad are between the ages of 20 and 45, the peak time for women to carry out their vocation. Thus, a woman working abroad is a trade-off between her income and her responsibilities as a wife and mother.

Besides psychological barriers, women also have difficulty accessing information before migrating, like vocational training and problems that arise when working abroad (for example, hard labour; risk of abuse, exploitation, even sexual abuse, and so on). The stories of previous women about an unsafe working environment, loneliness, and fear could make women and their family feel hesitant in their decision to migrate. Moreover, when repatriated, female migrant workers have to face marital breakdown and even domestic violence. In summary, the concept of the husband doing the business and the wife taking care of the family creates fairness and harmony in each family. That concept puts responsibility and pressure on the husband to make money. Therefore, in Northern Central Vietnam, the migration decisions to work abroad are usually made by men. Kinship, however, has different effects on gender.

Women tend to perceive kinship as a “pull factor,” while for men, it is a “push factor.”

Migration of young people within kinship networks is also associated with the phenomenon of relay migration. Youths tend to migrate as replacements for their parents in labor-sending societies. Among interviewees, some of the migrant fathers said that they had no better choice than going abroad to earn money to support their family; when they got old, their children would take their places and they would support that choice of their children. A migrant child said she did not hesitate to share that the purpose of her and other siblings’ work in foreign countries was to follow their migrant father to become labor migrants, and thereby replacing their fathers, so that they would take a break and not go abroad anymore.



<Figure 4> A number of labour migrants according to clans in SE7 Commune in 2022 (unit: person)

Source: Communal Statistics in the SE7 Commune Police office (Nghe An province)

The existence of relay migration is because migration provided the chance of fulfilling the role of “good parents,” as well as that of “good children,” by remitting money for their children’s education and for parents’ needs (Andrikopoulos and Duyvendak 2020: 306). 100% of migrants in this study said that parts of income received abroad are usually sent home to family members in the form of remittances that, they believe, can provide support in times of need. This caused the absence of young men at home. During our

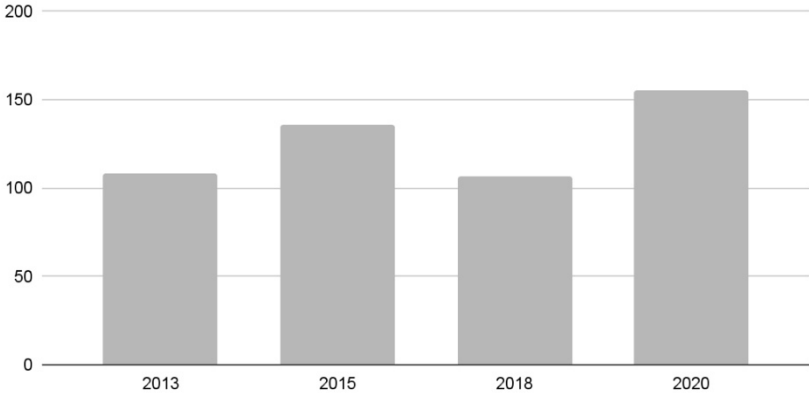
interview in SE7 Commune, 100% of the participants said that all the young people in their village have gone abroad, leaving only the elderly, women, and their children. There are even villages that mostly go to the same country, like Angola, Germany or Laos. (Figure 3). P (65 years old), a retired soldier, assumed that there were a great number of his relatives going abroad; all the children of two his brothers stayed in either England or Poland. According to T (40 years old), half of the people in his village were overseas, of which 50 people were his relatives.

In summary, Vietnamese youth in Northern Central of Vietnam see labor migration as an inevitable and vital livelihood strategy to get out of debt and poverty. There is no clear difference between the migrant groups in North Central Vietnam. They all consider kinship as both a push and pull factor in their migration decisions. Vietnamese migrated as laborers in search of better job opportunities abroad to sustain personal, familial, kinship and national economies. The survey results of 218 migrants show that 198 of migrants, accounting for 88.3%, have worked abroad for the purpose of increasing income, seeking jobs and repaying debts. This figure indicates that many of them put a lot of faith in their work abroad. The issues of unemployment and underemployment no doubt could be solved due to the international labour migration.

## **VI. The Dark Side of Vietnamese Youth Labor Migration in the Context of Kinship Networks**

Since migration provides the opportunity of accomplishing the role of “good parents” or “good children” due to remittance (Andrikopoulos and Duyvendak 2020: 306), many migrants “run away” to find a “better” job, thus becoming part of illegal workers abroad (Hoang 2020: 34-35). They also either did not return home despite their finished contract and overstayed a visa, which makes them become undocumented migrants (Genova 2002: 436). A large number of which are in three Central provinces of Nghe An, Thanh Hoa, and Ha Tinh (Hoang 2020: 34-35). According to the statistics of Nghe An province for the period of 2013-2022, 11,543 Nghe An

people worked illegally overseas, with 1,117 violating laws and customs in the destination. By 2020, there were 1,780 workers who were arrested and deported from Korea, and more than 3,000 from Taiwan.<sup>11</sup> We also met similar cases from Central Vietnam. All of our interviewees said that they or their relatives had to ‘run away-to work, so when they got sick, they did not have documents to go to the hospital because if they were caught, they would be deported back to their home country.



<Figure 5> The number of Nghe An people violating laws and customs of the destination countries

Source: Statistics provided by the Provincial Department of Labour, War Invalids and Social Affairs of Nghe An Province.

Because of the strong beliefs and truths put on the kin ties, migrants tend to ignore the law on migration and labour in Vietnam and in the destination countries. This resulted in the increase in illegal labor exports in Northern Central Vietnam. Because later migrants trusted the guidance of their predecessors, many people in this region chose the illegal way to go abroad despite rising risks in the international migration movements. 50% of interviewees went abroad illegally, but it is important that most of them were not aware that the way of their migration was illegal.<sup>12</sup> Some others first

<sup>11</sup> Data was provided by the Provincial Department of Labour, War Invalids, and Social Affairs during our field trips in Nghe An province in February 2022.

<sup>12</sup> The concepts that migrants use to describe their form of migration are “following the migratory line,” or the secret “forced labor” migration route, and “free

worked legally<sup>13</sup> under the program of the Ministry of Labour, War Invalids, and Social Affairs, but for many reasons, they later switched to illegal work under the guidance of their relatives and families. P (65 years old) shared the story of his son's migration. He at first went to Korea as a tourist; in this country, he had a cousin who has worked at a state-owned company belonging to the Ministry of Construction of Vietnam for 20 years. Because of kinship, the father believes that the cousin found jobs for him, and carried out the legal documents that could help him return home any time. According to Mr. B (35 years old), he went to work legally in the Czech Republic at the age of 20, then went to Germany, France and England illegally, respectively. However, the case of M as well as other migrants were all illegal immigrants in the first place, but they did not know that.

This resulted in the increase of returnees who were forced to be removed unwillingly upon Central Vietnam. Among 20 interviewees, seven people shared that they had been deported back to Vietnam or had children who were deported back to their home country. When these people return to Vietnam, it is difficult for them to adapt to new life. Many interviewees shared that they could not find a suitable job, feeling life boring, so they would find a way to leave again. Although being aware that the deportation will make their visa application process to work legally in another country is much more difficult, no matter how, they will find a way. Thus, the risk of them repeating the illegal work scene is very high. Although the fact that 39 people died in the UK has made them a bit timid, they still did not give up on this route. Some people shared that they would go to another country and then try to get to England via this secret route. There are people who, after working in many countries, are still determined to return to Europe because they think they can find better jobs.

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migration" which means migration without permission and fixed job.

<sup>13</sup> To people in Northern Central Vietnam, the concept of legal work is vague; accordingly they believe that if there is an agent company that introduces and carries out the procedure for them to go abroad, it means "legal migration." They do not care if the companies belong to the Minister of Labour, War Invalids, and Social Affairs and are managed by the Department of Overseas Labours (DOLAB).

The increase in migrants at a very young age is associated with another downside. Recently, nearly 50% of respondents said that they had not been married at the time of their migration, which had a two-sided impact on their economic and social life. First, on the positive side, according to the communal police chief and members in SE7 Commune, there were many young people in the village; however, due to the unemployment and underemployment, they fell into the evils of drug addiction, gambling, and family problems. Since export labour has become a trend in the Northern Central provinces (Figure 1), there are hardly any young people left in the village, so evils have also decreased a lot.

However, young people migrating at an early age also leaves negative impacts. The existing writings on Vietnamese workers in Japan, Taiwan and Korea indicate that the youths without much life experience, so they easily fall into social evils in destination countries. *Vietnamnet* and *VnExpress*, two popular online newspapers, published a few cases of Vietnamese who made a lot of money for the first time seeking out opportunities to spend money through gambling in which they became exhausted debtors. Some others, while not sending remittances back to their country of origin, had to ask for more money from their family to pay their debts and redeem them (*Vietnamnet* 2021; *VnExpress* 2021). Website of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in Japan also posted some articles about the increase of crimes such as organised theft, illegal residence, use of fake papers, kidnapping, extortion, drugs, gambling in Japan in recent time (The Socialist Republic of Vietnam in Japan 2021). These migrants participating in this study are mostly young people between 16 and 25 years old. However, living in a poor countryside in Central Vietnam, they were determined to go abroad to earn money to support their family. It was the family that became the light for them to stay away from gambling temptations in foreign lands. Most of them have accumulated assets due to labour export. Many people also have quite a lot of savings, from over 500 million (2.6%), and over one billion (2.6%).

In addition, youth migration contributed to an “incomplete” nuclear family model, which means parents and children do not live together in the same spatial area. Family members maintain contact

with each other through information means such as phone and internet. Previous studies on families in Northern Vietnam assume that geographical separation leads to a lack of connection and understanding between family members, especially when women migrate, which pushes children to fall into negative emotions, even some of them hate their parents' migration. All these things can cause children to fall into a psychological-emotional crisis. We often encounter similar situations in the Northern Central region of Vietnam when parents go to work abroad, children are sent to their grandparents to take care of them, bringing many problems such as the large generation gap, no common language, this causes children to become quiet and shy. Among the households selected for the interview, we encountered a special case in a divorced household. The child was in fourth grade, living with grandparents. He did not seem to be upset about the migration of his father who was working in Europe illegally, but what bothers him was the absence of the mother. He was quiet and shy. He did not run out but sat and played with toys alone. His grandmother spoke of him as a poor child.

However, it is interesting that unlike other regions in the North and South of Vietnam, the reaction of people left behind, including adults, youths and children, to the labor migration of their relatives is neither sympathy nor anger, as argued previous studies, but an indifferent attitude, neither happy nor sad. Because of unemployment and underemployment, people in Northern Central Vietnam have considered exporting labour as the best way to make a living. This concept is not only in the minds of adults, but youths and children are also taught it. When we conducted interviews with some grandparents and left-behind wives, they said that children would be sad if being separated from their parents, but they were always explained to understand that labour export was an inevitable choice that they could not do otherwise. Furthermore, because their friends around them are also in similar situations, youths and children tend to consider their parents' absence due to working far away as normal, neither sad nor happy. The same thing also happens with left-behind mothers. When asked about life after her husband went abroad, Ms. L (21 years old) calmly shared that she

found it very normal for her husband to work far away, not tired, worried or lacking anything because he called home every day. When the child was sick, there were grandparents and relatives who took care of them. She did not need or want their husband to stay at home. Ms Q (19 years old) expressed that she agreed with her father's decision to emigrate wherever he wanted to go, and when she and her other brothers grew up, they went to work abroad instead of their father.

## **VII. Conclusion**

Transnational labor migration is a household strategy in the eyes of youths from the North Central region of Vietnam. This view is increasingly supported by the network of family and relatives who have been or are living abroad. Most of them received physical and moral supports, considering it as assurance for their migration process.

Free migration or the choice of Vietnamese people from Central Vietnam to become undocumented migrants is further facilitated by strengthening kinship networks both within Vietnam and abroad. It is not only a "trend to making a living" due to the phenomenon of mass migration and chain migration of relatives in the same commune, but also a guarantee for jobs and helping each other in life abroad. Therefore, although the connection between transnational human trafficking networks is causing concerns in the international community since the death of 39 Vietnamese people in the UK, Vietnamese youths and adults from the North Central region of Vietnam still have the belief that kinship will help them overcome those problems. Therefore, they still find ways to go to Europe to work in the hope of changing their lives.

In that context, this study proposes some following recommendations to manage well and improve the efficiency of migration:

First, the Vietnamese government needs to introduce a clear and specific system of labor migration laws to both strictly manage

and protect the rights of workers abroad.

Second, it is necessary to cooperate with other countries to limit and resolve issues related to Vietnamese workers residing illegally in these countries.

Finally, in order to reduce migration pressure for the North Central region, the Vietnamese government needs to have a plan to build or plan specific economic zones, focusing on infrastructure investment, building industrial zones in this region. This contributes to solving the problem of unemployment, underemployment and low income in the North Central Coast region, which can reduce migration pressure in this region.

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