

In search of a better future: Aspirations and challenges for young rural to urban migrants: a case study in Hanoi, Vietnam

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Abstract: Young people's aspirations for the future and their sense of competence or ability to achieve these ends are crucial areas of study because youth's aspirations, expectations, and plans serve as important guideposts to the future (Bandura et al. 2001, Schneider and Stevenson 1999). This paper examines aspirations for future lives of young people who migrated from rural to urban areas in Vietnam. It draws on interview data with twenty young migrants, aged 18 to 24, from a larger research project which explores the lived experiences and identities of young rural to urban migrants in Hanoi. Using Appadurai's framework (2004) of 'capacities to aspire', this paper shows the way in which young migrants shape their futures and the factors that constrain them. The findings demonstrate that after migrating to the city, young people formed various pathways to their future, whether to acquire better jobs skills, start their own small business, or migrate further away, taking into consideration their limited social and financial capital. Furthermore, they hold strong hope and positive attitudes toward a better life in the future.

Key words: young migrants, Vietnam, aspirations, future

Introduction

It is argued that aspirations can be a critical contribution to raising attainment, increasing employability and enhancing social mobility (Spohrer 2011). Studies indicate that migrants carry with them hopes and dreams of a better life than the one they leave behind. Migration might be able to bring hope of new beginnings and improved life chances. Employment is placed as highly important to young people as being employed not only provides income but also through employment young people can prove themselves, their sense of identity, and independence (ILO 2011). However, global unemployment rates among young people (aged 15-24) are about three times higher than adult rates (ILO 2011). In developing countries, there is an increasing number of young people migrating both within and across national borders for employment opportunities. It was reported that young people are 40 percent more likely to move from rural to urban areas or across urban areas than older individuals (World Bank 2007). In Vietnam,

inter-provincial migration is dominated by young people and an increasing number of female migrants (GSO and UNFPA 2011; UNFPA Vietnam 2010). Unemployment is among one of the biggest challenges faced by young people in Vietnam as statistics show that young people in the age group of 15 to 24 have the highest unemployment rate, at about 5 percent; almost double the general unemployment rate of 2.8 percent (Department of Population and Labour Statistics 2014).

This paper is concerned with future aspirations and the challenges faced by young people who migrate from rural to urban areas in the context of Hanoi, Vietnam. It aims to contribute to the body of literature on youth rural to urban migration in developing countries through examining how young rural to urban migrants shape their imagined future lives after migration and factors constraining them from realising their dreams. Theoretically, the paper adopts the framework of ‘capabilities to aspire’ from Appadurai (2004) who conceives aspirations as “a navigational capacity which is nurtured by the possibility of real-world conjectures and refutations (and)... thrives and survives on practice, repetition, exploration, conjecture and refutation” (2004: 69). This framework adds nuance to our concept of aspirations. To aspire is presented not as a dichotomous variable that one either has or does not have, but rather as a capacity that is a site of “interplay between agency and social structures” (Archer, DeWitt, and Wong 2013: 59). How and what young migrants are aspired for are understood against the backdrop of a transitional economy of Vietnam.

This paper comprises four sections. The next section provides a background context of youth rural to urban migration in Vietnam where this study took place. It is followed by an outline of the research methodology and a brief description of the participants’ profiles. The third section presents core empirical findings of aspirations of young migrants who participated in this study. Some discussions of the findings will be provided before concluding the paper.

Youth rural-urban migrants and aspirations

It is argued that youth rural-urban migration is strongly linked with rural disadvantage and the results of frustration of individual aspirations (Furlong and Cooney 1990). Young people have been identified as being among the most disadvantaged and restricted by rural living (Chapman and Shucksmith 1996). It is a global trend, in particular in developing countries that young people who grow up in rural communities have a tendency to leave their hometown for jobs or education and training opportunities. Like many other developing countries, rural-urban migration of young people is a dynamic and emerging issue in Vietnam. Recent statistics and surveys (UNFPA Vietnam 2010; UNFPA 2011; GSO 2004, 2009) emphasize the increasing trend of youth migration and its implications to the development of the country as well as the well-being and mental health of migrants. Various issues faced by young migrants have been identified in empirical studies such as uncertainty of employment (Dang, Le, and Nguyen 2005), the high levels of exploitation and vulnerability (Duong 2007, Nguyen 2012), high risks of involvement in accidents at work, and other health concerns (ILO 2013; Bui and Kretchmar 2008; Clatts et al. 2007; Nguyen et al. 2012; Van Nguyen, Dunne, and Debattista 2013).

Empirical studies on the topic of youth migration and their future aspirations tend to focus more on the motivations and drivers before migrating and lived experiences at migration destinations (Gaetano 2004; Jie 2011; Li 2006; Tran 2002; Brauw and Harigaya 2007; Karis 2013). Studies dealing with the question of what is the next plan after migration tend to focus more on inquiring where the migrants plan to settle in the long run. For example, rural migrants in urban China face a dilemma of not finding a suitable urban place for them as they fail to integrate well into the city life but they no longer find themselves fitting into countryside life after migration (Jacka 2005; Beynon 2004). Similarly, Vietnamese rural to urban migrants have to straddle between rural and urban areas to secure their income from the city and at the same time maintain their social

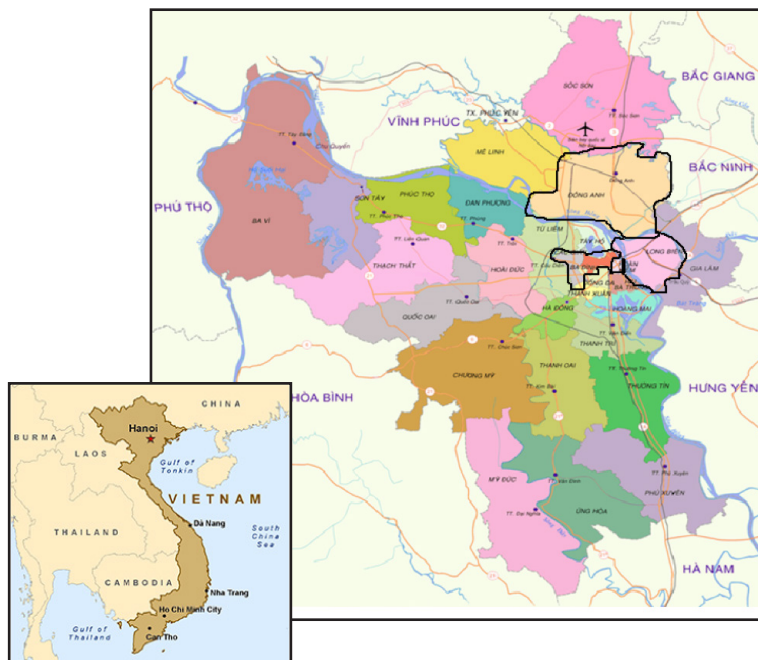
relationships and responsibilities in their hometown (Agergaard and Vu 2011; Catherine Locke 2012; Nguyen 2008). Besides, a recent study on aspirations of young migrants in the apparel and textile industry in China indicates that young migrants' desire for 'proper' jobs, opportunities to learn new things and to become independent is one piece among very limited study on this topic (Centre for Child Rights and Corporate Social Responsibility 2012).

Research methodology and interviewee profile

This paper draws on a doctoral research project which examines the lived experiences and identities of young people who migrate from rural to urban areas in Vietnam using three qualitative data collection methods; participant interviews, adapted photovoice, and field observation. Field study was conducted in four districts in Hanoi including Hoan Kiem, Ba Dinh, Cau Giay, and Dong Anh from November 2012 to February 2013. The research site is shown in figure 1. For this paper, only interview data from the broader study is used. Hanoi is the capital city of Vietnam with a population of about 7 million people, excluding an estimated one million unregistered migrants (VoV.vn 2014). It is one of the most popular destinations for rural to urban migrants in Vietnam, second to Hochiminh City (UN Habitat 2014).

The study sample was purposively selected to access a range of youth migrant experiences, but is not statistically representative. The inclusion criteria included young male and female migrants, aged from 18 to 24 years old who migrated to Hanoi for employment one to four years ago. Twenty young migrants, aged 18-24, living and working in Hanoi participated in this study. Most were from poor farming family backgrounds and had low levels of education, ranging from primary education to higher school education, and a few had completed vocational training courses. The research participants were employed in various jobs such as construction workers, hairdressers, shop assistants, domestic workers, and manufacturing workers.

Figure 1. Research sites in Hanoi, Vietnam



Findings: Aspirations for what?

The interview material revealed that most participants emphasised the economic dimension of their futures with the top priority given to better employment, and financial resource improvement, or in general 'a better life'. While discussing future imagined lives, young migrants mentioned various possible options that they would pursue in the future, and these can be categorised in three

main themes: (i) vocational skills acquisition; (ii) opening a small business; and (iii) migrating further to somewhere else for better opportunities. Each direction is presented in the following.

Better employment through vocational skills acquisition

Most young migrants in this study expressed an aspiration of having a better job in the future. A better job, according to them, was one with higher wages (compared to their current wages), more stable (both in terms of working hours and income), and not too physically demanding. Many expressed their desire to learn and improve their job skills in order to get better jobs in the future. The majority of the participants did not have any vocational training before they migrated to work in the city of Hanoi. They were mainly employed in unskilled labour jobs with low payment, such as domestic workers, shop assistants, and factory workers. They developed different ideas and plans for their future. For example, Hang, currently a domestic worker, planned to get another skilled job in the future. She explained:

Working like this [as a domestic worker] cannot continue in a long run. I am still working here for them [the employer's family] but til early next year when the smaller baby grows up more, they [her employers] will let me to attend a job skill training course [in the evening]... in order to have a more sustainable job in the future... as once I get married, I cannot live far away from my family to be a live in domestic worker like this... I also think that I need to have a certain type of job skill which helps bring a better life (Hang, female, 18, domestic worker).

For Hang, her desire to learn a specific job skill in order to get a 'proper' job was also a strategic preparation to start her own family life. A more stable job was what many young migrants aimed for, but they were also aware of the need for skills upgrade to make it happen. In addition, a job was not simply a source of income, but the type of occupation was also considered as a social class marker which young migrants wanted to change. For instance, Minh were employed as a worker at a foreign invested electronic factory, but he did not want to be a manual worker for the rest of his life. He noted:

You know no one wants to be a worker. No one wants to be a worker in a life time... I have to learn something, some sort of job skills that give me another job, a career (Minh, male, 20, factory worker).

Unlike older generations of migrants who tend to stick with the same job, younger migrants in this study showed their aspirations and expectations to make progress in their future through the acquisition of job skills to make a 'career' not just a job. Respondents mentioned a variety of vocational skills that they figured out as potential options for them to get more desirable jobs such as electricians, hospitality, tailoring, hairdressing, and so on. However, at the same time, many expressed their concerns about the affordability and time constraints in making their study plans happen. For instance, Nga, a sale assistant, commented:

I prefer to learn hairdressing. I want to take the course, but if I do so I won't have money to send to my parents, to support my younger siblings for their schooling. I feel for my parents and for them, so I was reluctant not to spend on the course... Learning at the salon they will feed me and accommodate me, but they won't give any pay. Without receiving a wage I don't have money to send to my parents... so I leave the idea. I still like to learn to become a hairdresser, but my situation does not let me... I have to continue working to send money to my parents (Nga, female, 20, sale assistant).

Nga was not the only participant who experienced this challenge between earning and investment into job skills upgrade. The tension between one's wish and financial constraints was shared by other participants as well. They encountered a dilemma of lacking financial resources to invest into their cultural capital (in skills training) in order to move ahead. The situation of lacking initial financial capital might lead young migrants into a vicious circle of insufficient financial capital to invest into enriching cultural capital leading to no opportunity to increase their economic capital

to help to result in 'a better life'. Since resources (that support the capacity to aspire) are usually unevenly distributed (Bourdieu 1986), so too the effort required in reaching the desired aim will also be unevenly distributed (Appudurai 2004).

Entrepreneurial dreams

About one fourth of the respondents showed an interest in opening their own shops in the future. They shared their plans of saving and accumulating work experiences from their jobs to do so. A range of business options were mentioned, for example, a grocery store, a tea and coffee stall, a café restaurant, a hairdressing salon. It was observed that those respondents who had intentions to run their own business often used to work for or currently worked in a business environment. For example, Duc, a metal worker of a family owned enterprise, wanted to open his own metal workshop. Mai, a hairdresser planned to open her own hair dressing store. In addition, Nam, who used to be a bartender at a bar, shared his aspiration to open a café:

I want to open my own café. ... I will work for a restaurant or a bar for some more time to get more practical experience. Working and learning at the spot you might think that you have known a lot, but things are changing you cannot know or be up to date with all the new things in the industry... (Nam, male, 24, factory worker)

This shows that working environments in which the participants were employed influenced their views towards employment aspirations. Working experiences accumulated in such working environments are important cultural resource which enables the possibility to follow the aspiration for setting up a business. In addition, the business networks that they established through their jobs also facilitated them to think of their own business plan.

In some cases, some participants transferred their knowledge and experiences to their friends and relatives back in the village through their visits by helping them with various things that they picked up from their work in the city. Nam also said that he was going to help his friend with setting up and running a café in a town. Research also shows that migration tends to facilitate entrepreneurial development in rural areas through remittance-sending to family members or starting up their own businesses on returning (Centre for Child Rights and Corporate Social Responsibility 2012; Hoang and Magnani 2010). The close linkage between their original places and the city helped young participants to realise potentials for self-employment in their hometowns. Those entrepreneurial respondents revealed that they were trying to save up and accumulate more practical experience before investing in their own businesses in the future. Interestingly, quite a few of them considered the future imagined businesses in their hometown as additional income for their family on top of farming.

While having a belief in attaining a better employment status many participants worked very hard in realising them. For extra income, quite a few participants took a second job after their main job's working hours; most factory worker participants frequently took on overtime shifts. In addition, many tried to cut their spending such as rental costs by sharing a room with more people; not buying a television to cut electricity bills; cooking at home instead of buying take away food. They tried to spend less and save more in order to invest in their future plans. Furthermore, a number of participants thought of migrating to somewhere else, particularly overseas as they heard of the fortune of making a lot of money than working domestically.

Hopes for better economic outcomes through further migration

Though fewer respondents who wished to migrate to somewhere else, those who had intentions to do so wanted to go longer distances such as to the South of Vietnam and overseas. Domestically, Hochiminh City is the most popular destination for rural to urban migrants in Vietnam. It not only attracts people from surrounding provinces in the South, but many from the Northern and

Central regions too. Cuong who had migrated to work in the South before, planned to return there for long term settlement. He said:

I am planning to go to Saigon again in the future, maybe next year. My brother will be working by next year when he completes his university degree... Because my mother wants to remarry soon, my father is now living alone in the village. He drinks a lot. If I have a stable job [in Saigon], I want to take my father along with us (Cuong, male, 23, builder).

For Cuong, migrating to the South was not only for his career developments, but also for the reunion of his family. In addition to migrating to other cities within Vietnam, some participants also aspired to migrate overseas. The participants who dreamed of working overseas said that they had given lots of effort and had spent quite a lot of money to apply for a 'labour export' position, but they were not yet successful by the time this study conducted. Hung, one of the participants in this group, said:

I really want to go to Japan but my road towards Japan is very thorny so far... I have lost thirteen million [one and a half thousand AUD], language learning cost, uniform, food and accommodation costs within six month [for pre-departure training course with the recruitment agency in Vietnam] it cost me more than thirteen million... (Hung, male, 21, sale person).

A few common things were shared by those who wished to migrate further. First, they had learnt about opportunities in potential migration destinations through their friends and co-villagers, or knew someone in their networks who had done so. Second, they were inspired by the fact that their fellow villagers who worked overseas sent home very good amounts of money. However, international migration transaction costs are very expensive. In order to have a work position in Taiwan and Japan, usually a Vietnamese labour candidate is required to pay a large amount of money as a secured deposit to the recruitment agency based in Vietnam. For example, Hung explained to me that it required eighty million Vietnam Dong (equal to about four thousand Australian Dollars) for a job in Taiwan, and one hundred million (equal to five thousand Australian Dollars) for a position in Japan). Those who manage to migrate to more developed countries in the regions to work often need to get loans from their relatives or banks. Hung, however, was from a poor family that could not support him. Nga, another participant, shared a similar story of her dream to migrate to Taiwan to earn more money, but she failed to get a bank loan to finance her immigration costs. Regardless of going through all these obstacles, both participants still held their hopes to make it happen one day.

International migration seems to be an attractive option for some young people. Many people in Vietnam, particularly the young, try to seek fortunes by immigrating to work in more developed and higher wage countries in the region such as Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and elsewhere in the world (Centre of Overseas Labour). However, international migration often requires much higher costs and is a more complicated procedure compared to internal migration. Therefore, not many people can actually achieve international migration.

Discussion and Conclusion

The above narratives show that young migrants' hopes and preferences were focused on economic and material goals. One explanation for this might be that most participants were from poor family backgrounds whose families and their main concerns were to ensure to have enough food to put on the table. Strong emphasis was given to having a good job by which they mean one that give high and stable income. Employment was the top priority of young people in contemporary Vietnam so as to survive and thrive given there is no unemployment welfare available in the country. This finding supports Appadurai's argument that "aspirations are not merely individual, but rather they were culturally located, formed in the thick of social life" (Appadurai 2004: 67). It was evident that some participants had to consider and balance their wishes for their future in the city with the responsibilities that they hold to their parents such as such as Cuong and

Nga. In Vietnamese culture, sons and eldest children are often tied with larger responsibility of care giving to their parents when they get old, while this duty is more relaxed for daughters and younger children of the family.

Secondly, unlike a view that capability to aspire of the poor is lower than the better off; ‘to contest and alter the conditions of their own poverty’ (Appadurai 2004: 59), I would argue from the evidence on aspirations of young migrants in this study (considered as economic and socially disadvantaged group) that they did not necessarily have lower aspirations but, rather different based on their calculation of their available and potential economic, social and cultural resources in order to consider more realistic options for their futures. In fact, the data showed that none of the participants expressed their preferences for farming as what their parents did. The hardship and poverty that they saw from their parents’ life actually triggered them to aspire for a better life, out of the farm. Working on the farm was considered to be a last option when they did not have any other thing to go for, or an additional option to add on for the family. However, it should also be noted that aspirations and future are often a mystery and uncertain and often to be against the rational calculation of individuals. Therefore aspirations are very much dynamic and changing over time. Especially being young, the participants were expected to be exposed to more new experiences and their perspectives might change along with their new experiences.

In addition, there were numerous structural constraints and barriers which might prevent them from realising their dreams. Financial constraint was the most frequently mentioned hurdle, being identified as one of the most important constraining factors that prevented them from realising their future plans. It all required financial investment whether to take vocational training, to open a business, or to migrate further somewhere else, particularly migrating overseas. The resources that support the capacity to aspire are not, as argued by Appadurai (2004), evenly distributed, so too the effort required in reaching the desired aim will also be unevenly distributed. This acknowledges that there are many social factors – including friends, schools, family, and the local environment (Wilks and Wilson 2012)– that influence young people’s aspirations and how robust or connected to reality these aspirations are. Nevertheless, the participants demonstrated their agency by exhibiting their capacity to aspire, to work hard in order to achieve what they aspired for in order to escape poverty, lifting their living standard, and gain social mobility–through employment, training and gaining more financial capital. They not only hold positive attitudes to the future, showed their belief on their attainments of their aspirations, but also worked hard towards it. Many took extra jobs, overtime shifts, and so on to increase their financial capital and accumulated their skills and knowledge through their jobs to boost their cultural capital, the two types of capital which are keys to gain position in the field (Bourdieu 1990).

In conclusion, the migration journey from rural to urban areas of many young migrants is a journey to find a better future, a journey of enhancing their capability to aspire. The new work and living experiences in the city proved to act as learning process that enable capacity to aspire from ‘wishful thinking’ to ‘thoughtful wishing’ as termed by Appadurai (2004:82). However, there were tensions between what they hoped for and the capabilities to realise them. Support for young migrants, both financially and socially, from families, communities and the government is crucial for them to move forward toward better lives in the future.

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