



Field Trip Report

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

I. 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.



2. 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

3. Research 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.

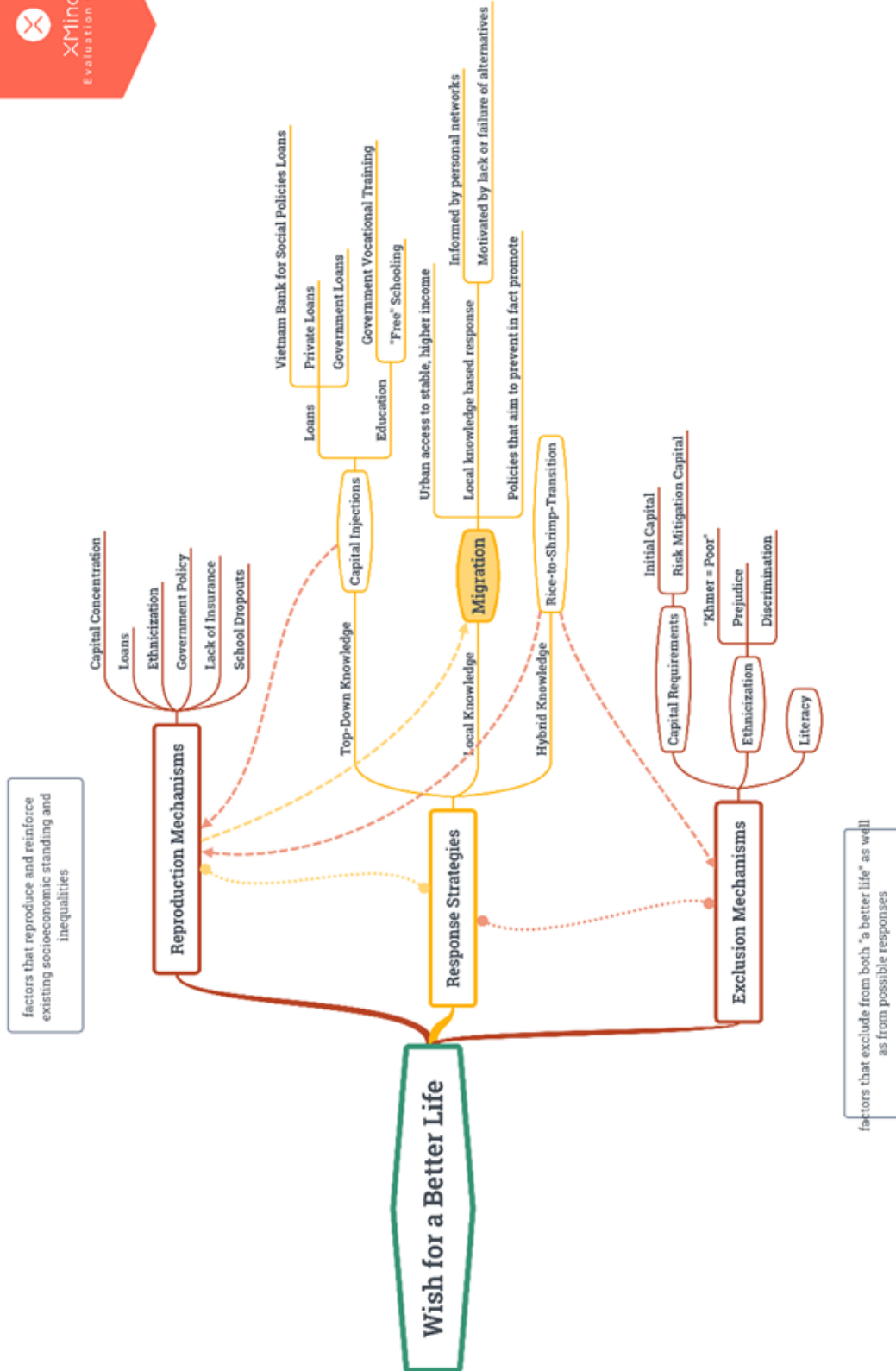
II. Research Question

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.



III. 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.

IV. 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 mitigation¹) 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 sources²) that appear

¹ 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.

² 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



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.

V. 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:

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.



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 actors

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.

VI. 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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