-- Extended abstract –

'Migrant networks and the migration process: considering the spatial and temporal dimensions of social capital'

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In this paper I investigate the various functions of migrant networks at different stages of the migration process. The paper will use a case study of internal migration in Vietnam to look at the historical origins of frontier migration and the way socio-economic, political and social drivers have influenced ongoing movements into these areas. Interviews with over 100 migrants, migrant households and non-migrant households at both origin and destination areas recorded migrant histories and livelihood profiles alongside network mapping and the support received through these connections. On a more theoretical level, migration processes are conceptually divided into three stages (a) decision making (b) transition and (c) adaptation. Looking at migration as a spatial as well as a temporal process allows us to consider the role of social capital in managing the risks and opportunities of mobility, and to gain a deeper understanding of migrant agency.

Findings point to a complex picture in which migrants are highly reliant on their family and friends to access resources and information to reduce the challenges associated with moving, settling and both accessing and maintaining income opportunities at the destination. This is particularly pertinent in the context of Vietnam, where household registration and poverty combine to exclude many migrants from accessing opportunities at their chosen destination. It is important to view the role of social capital over time, and in parallel with economic and political changes. For example, a decline in the abundance of land has caused migrants to rely increasingly on social contacts to negotiate an informal land market. Relationships also change over time and space so that the resources accessible through these social contacts do not always remain constant throughout the migration process. Finally, ongoing connections between origin and destination areas are found to have far reaching consequences for the livelihood vulnerability of both migrants and their households.