

# Majority vs Minority Migration: A Comparison of Characteristics from the Vietnam 2009 Population and Housing Census

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*Migration in Vietnam is intensifying along with the socio-economic development process, involving all sub-groups of the population including ethnic minorities. However, there are very few studies on migration of ethnic minorities due to a lack of information about these poor and vulnerable population groups. In this regard, the 2009 Population and Housing Census provides comprehensive information about ethnic minority populations including their movement. Analysis of the census data shows that the minority population is in a disadvantaged position in comparison to the Kinh majority in terms of geographical distribution, education and socio-economic status. Although migrants from the minority groups are similar to those from the Kinh majority in many aspects, they are quite different with regards to the distance migrated. Information from other sources also suggests that many minority migrants might not move for economic reasons as in the case of the Kinh majority migrants.*

**Keywords:** Vietnam, migration, ethnic minorities, population census

## Introduction

Migration and urbanization have been essential parts of the rapid economic growth in Vietnam since the economic reforms, and are key dynamics in the area of population and development. In the broader context of the Asian region, migration has increased at an unprecedented rate in the last two decades (Deshingkar, 2006) and the urban population has been growing at the fastest growth rate ever recorded in the last decade and a half (UNESCAP, 2007).

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Migration patterns, characteristics of migrants, and the linkage between migration, urbanization and development in Vietnam have been examined in various studies (Guest, 1998; Dang, 2003; Nguyen, 2003; Diep, 2010). This information enriches the migration literature in Vietnam and is useful for policy makers to make sound decisions on relevant policies. However, most migration studies in Vietnam provide information on general migration or on the ethnic majority group, which is known as Kinh. There are very few studies providing information on migration of ethnic minorities. One of the reasons for this is the lack of data, in part because these groups have not given much attention. In Vietnam, ethnic minorities account for a considerable proportion of the population and are considered to be poor and vulnerable. The poverty rate among ethnic minorities is 2-3 times higher than the nationwide average of 12.6 percent (General Statistics Office, 2011). In this regard, the Population and Housing Census is the only data source which can give comprehensive information and better understanding on the ethnic minority population including their movement.

This paper aims to provide a general picture of ethnic minorities in Vietnam. It describes migration patterns and characteristics in comparison to the majority population, i.e. the Kinh ethnic group.

## **Data Source, Measurement and Methodology**

This paper uses data from the Vietnam 2009 Population and Housing Census. This is the fourth population survey and the third housing census conducted since reunification of the country in 1975. The main objective of the Census was to collect basic data on population and housing in Vietnam that would serve research needs for the analysis of population trends, for the whole country as well as for each locality. Census data are useful for evaluating the implementation of socio-economic development plans, outlining progress on socio-economic development, and monitoring the achievement of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (Central Population and Housing Census Steering Committee, 2009).

In addition to the full census covering all Vietnamese citizens residing in Vietnam as of the census date, a sample survey with a longer questionnaire to gather more information was also conducted as part of the 2009 Census. The sample survey adopted a sample size of 15% of the total national population. This paper presents findings on migration by analyzing the sample data. The major advantage of census

data is to allow description and analysis of small sub-groups of the population such as ethnic minorities and to allow examination of fluctuations in population movements through migration. However, explanations for the variations in population size and movement can only be conjectured, as information on explanatory factors such as the reasons for migration are not included in the census data.

In this paper, migrants are defined as people whose place of residence five years prior to the census is different from their current place of residence. Non-migrants are defined as people whose place of residence five years prior to the census is the same as their current place of residence. Because only people aged five years and older are able to be considered under this definition, those younger than 5 years of age are excluded from analysis.

The census data also allow classifying migrants by administrative level, which is important for the integration of migrants into development plans at different levels. Migrants are also classified as being long-distance or short-distance. Long-distance migrants are people who live in a region or province different from the one they did five years ago, while short-distance migrants are the people who live in the same region or province but may be in a different district or commune.

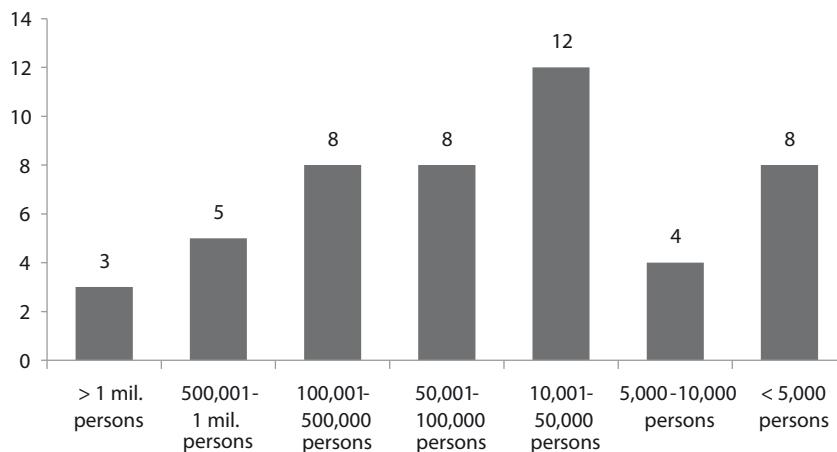
Descriptive analysis is used to present characteristics of ethnic minority populations, migration patterns and characteristics of migrants. Bivariate analysis is used to identify variation and differences between ethnic minority migrants by major demographic and socio-economic factors such as sex, age, education, marital status, and working status. Comparisons are also made between minority and majority migrants.

## **Ethnic Minority Populations in Vietnam: A Profile**

According to the Population and Housing Census, the Vietnamese population was about 85.8 million in April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2009. A total of 49 ethnic groups were reported, with the Kinh ethnic majority accounting for about 86 percent and the other 48 ethnic minorities accounting for approximately 14 percent of the total population. The population size of these ethnic minority groups varies greatly, ranging from a few hundred to more than one million people. The number of ethnic minority groups classified by their population size is shown in Figure 1.

In general, the population of ethnic minority groups in Vietnam is quite small. Out of 48 ethnic minorities reported from the census, only one-third (8 groups) have a population of more than 100,000 persons, and only the three biggest minority groups—Tay, Thai and Nung—have populations of more than 1 million people each. The next largest five minority groups have populations between 500,000 and 1 million. Half of the 48 minorities have a population of 50,000 people or less, and one-fourth have a population of 10,000 persons or less.

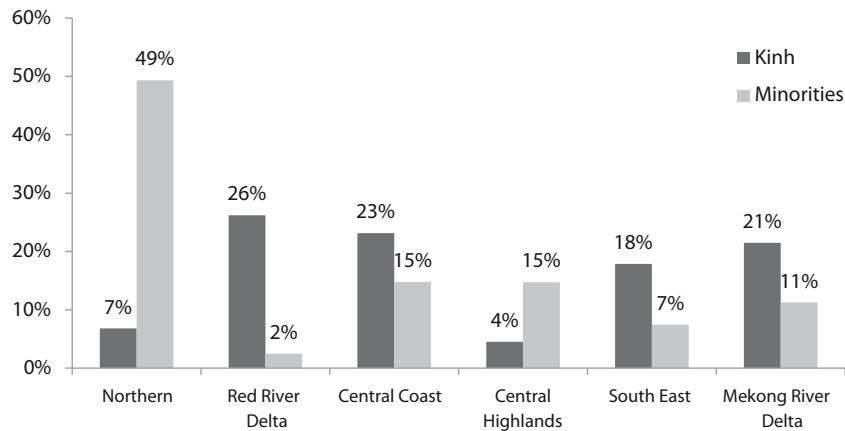
**Figure 1:** Number of ethnic minorities by population size (person)



**Source:** Calculated from the 2009 Population and Housing Census data

The population distribution of ethnic minorities is also different from the Kinh majority. Minorities are more likely to live in mountainous and remote areas rather than lowland areas. When looking at population distribution by rural/urban area, the census data reveal that only 13 percent of the ethnic minority populations live in urban areas while the figure is 2.5 times higher (32 percent) for the Kinh majority. Correspondingly, while 87 percent of the minority population lives in rural areas, the figure is 68 percent for the Kinh.

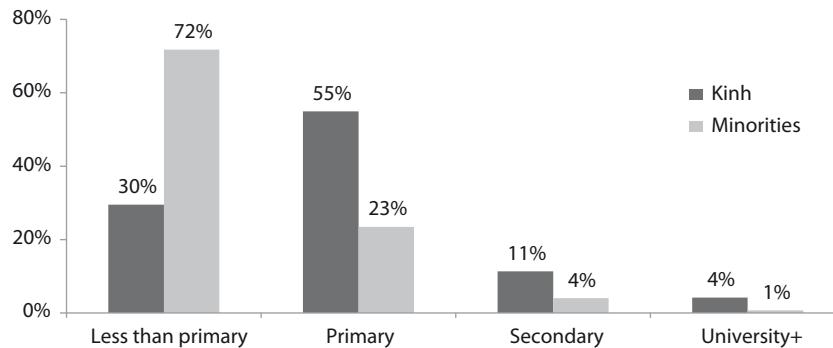
**Figure 2:** Population distribution by ethnic group and geographical regions



**Source:** Calculated from the 2009 Population and Housing Census data

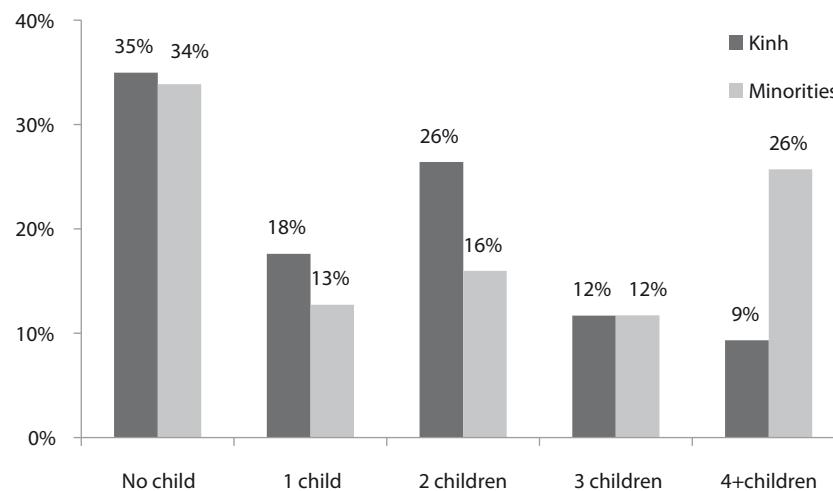
Population distribution by geographical region is presented in Figure 2. It shows great variation in population distribution by geographic regions. About half of the minority population lives in the Northern region, which is the most mountainous and the poorest area in Vietnam. Only 7 percent of the Kinh population resides in this region. Other regions with a high proportion of minority populations are the Central Highlands (15 percent) and the Central Coast (15 percent). In contrast, the Kinh population is distributed more evenly and concentrated more in lowland regions such as the Red River Delta (26 percent), delta areas of the Central Coast (23 percent), the Mekong River Delta (21 percent) and the South East (18%).

Findings on the educational attainment of all ethnic groups are presented in Figure 3. Data reveal that the minority population has much lower educational attainment in comparison to the Kinh majority. More than 70 percent of the minority population has not completed primary school while the figure is only 30 percent for Kinh. About one-fourth of the minority population completed primary school – less than half of the proportion for the Kinh. The proportion of the minority population who have completed secondary education or higher is even smaller, i.e. only 5 percent or about one-third that of the Kinh population.

**Figure 3:** Education attainment by ethnic group

**Source:** Calculated from the 2009 Population and Housing Census data

Another characteristic differentiating minorities from the Kinh majority is much higher fertility, as shown in Figure 4. Almost one-fourth of minority couples have 4 or more children, comparing to only 9 percent among the Kinh population. In contrast, the proportion having 1 or 2 children is lower for minorities than for the Kinh majority, i.e. 13 and 16 percent compared to 18 and 26 percent respectively.

**Figure 4:** Number of children ever born among married couples by ethnic group

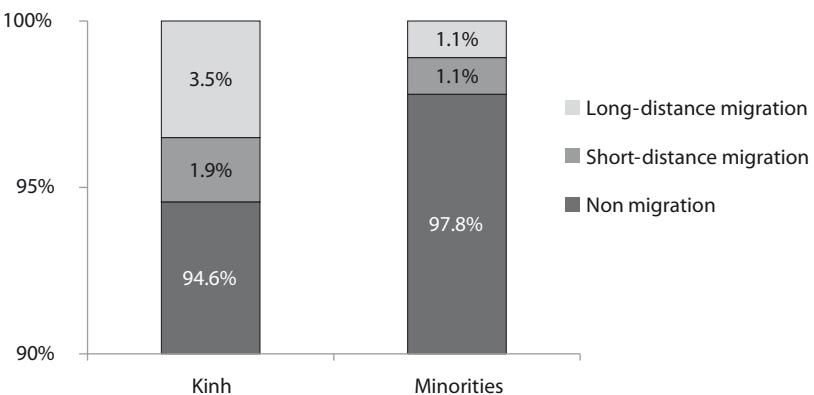
**Source:** Calculated from the 2009 Population and Housing Census data

Data from the census also shows that 85 percent of the minority population engages in agriculture, fishing and forest activities while the figure is only 53 percent for the Kinh majority. Since production in those fields is much lower than in the industry and services sectors, economic status is much lower among minorities in comparison to the Kinh, and the poverty rate is 2 to 3 times higher (General Statistics Office, 2011).

## Migration among Ethnic Minorities: Patterns and Characteristics

The level of migration among ethnic minorities in Vietnam is presented in Figure 5. In terms of migration level, 2.2 percent of minorities made a move during the 5 years prior to the census. This figure is much lower in comparison to 5.4 percent among the Kinh majority. With regard to the distance moved, the number of ethnic minority migrants is about evenly split between long-distance and short-distance moves (about 1.1 percent each). In contrast, Kinh migrants are more likely to make long-distance moves: 3.5 percent compared to 1.9 percent for short-distance migration.

**Figure 5:** Migration level by ethnic group



**Source:** Calculated from the 2009 Population and Housing Census data

Minorities also have different patterns of migration from the Kinh majority, though migration happens in all provinces across the country. The top ten origin and destination provinces for both groups are presented in Table 1. Census data (not shown in the table) reveal that ethnic minority migrants were concentrated to and

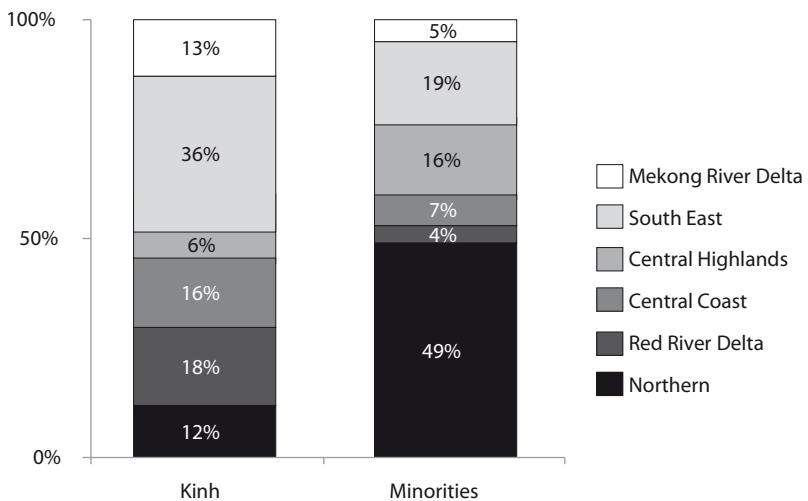
from certain provinces i.e. top ten origins and destinations of minority migrants account for 64.1 percent and 63.7 percent of the total minority migrants respectively. The figures for Kinh majority are only 35.9 percent and 51.4 percent.

**Table 1:** Top ten origins and destinations of migrants by ethnic group

Kinh ethnic		Minorities	
<i>Origin</i>	<i>Destination</i>	<i>Origin</i>	<i>Destination</i>
Thanh Hoa	HCMC	Tuyen Quang	Dak Lak
HCMC	Ha Noi	Lang Son	Cao Bang
Ha Noi	Binh Duong	Thai Nguyen	Bac Kan
Thai Binh	Dong Nai	Ha Noi	Thai Nguyen
Nghe An	Lam Dong	Hai Phong	Lang Son
Nam Dinh	Baria-Vungtau	Ninh Binh	Tuyen Quang
Dong Nai	Da Nang	HCMC	Lai Chau
Binh Dinh	Dak Lak	Bac Kan	Ha Tay
Hai Duong	Gia Lai	Bac Giang	Gia Lai
An Giang	Hai Phong	Thanh Hoa	Binh Phuoc

It is observed from Table 1 that common origin and destination provinces of minority migrants are the mountainous provinces in the Northern region and some provinces in Central Highlands. Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh City was the origin of many migrants from the Chinese minority – one of the biggest minorities. In contrast, many Kinh migrants originated from populous and poor provinces in the lowland regions such as Hai Duong, Thai Binh, Nam Dinh, Thanh Hoa and Nghe An, and their destinations were mostly big cities such as Ha Noi, Hai Phong, Da Nang, and Ho Chi Minh City or industrial provinces like Dong Nai, Binh Duong and Baria-Vungtau. In addition, a high proportion of minority migrants moved within their province or region while more Kinh migrants moved across provinces or regions.

This pattern of migration is confirmed when looking at migration in each region. Figure 6 reveals that half of the minority migrants moved within the Northern region, followed by the South East (19 percent) and the Central Highland (16 percent). For Kinh migrants, 36 percent of them migrated within the South East, followed by the Red River Delta (18 percent) and Central Coast (16 percent). Kinh migrants seem to be more likely to move for economic purposes as many of them tend to move to places with more economic opportunities than their minority counterparts.

**Figure 6:** Migration destination by region and ethnic groups

**Source:** Calculated from the 2009 Population and Housing Census data

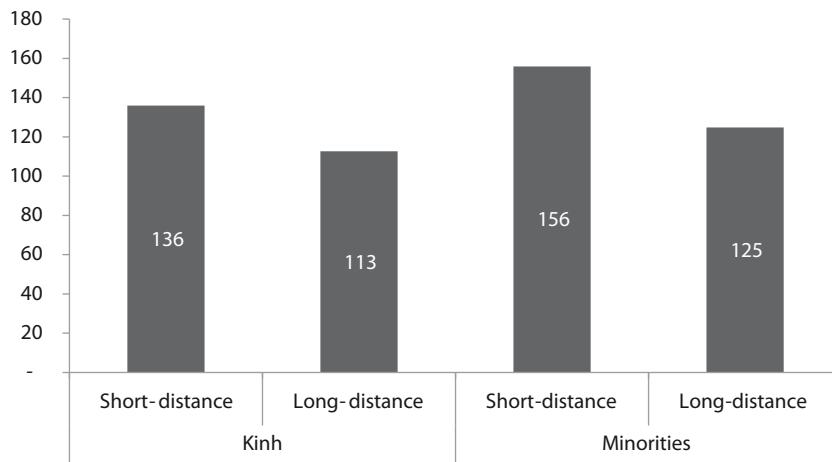
**Notes:** Provinces in each region

1. **Northern:** Ha Giang, Cao Bang, Bac Kan, Tuyen Quang, Lao Cai, Dien Bien, Lai Chau, Son La, Yen Bai, Hoa Binh, Thai Nguyen, Lang Son, Bac Giang and Phu Tho
2. **Red River Delta:** Ha Noi, Quang Ninh, Vinh Phuc, Bac Ninh, Hai Duong, Hai Phong, Hung Yen, Thai Binh, Ha Nam, Nam Dinh and Ninh Binh
3. **Central Coast:** Thanh Hoa, Nghe An, Ha Tinh, Quang Binh, Quang Tri, Thua Thien-Hue, Da Nang, Quang Nam, Quang Ngai, Binh Dinh, Phu Yen, Khanh Hoa, Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan
4. **Central Highland:** Kon Tum, Gia Lai, Dak Lak, Dak Nong and Lam Dong
5. **South East:** Binh Phuoc, Tay Ninh, Binh Duong, Dong Nai, Baria-Vungtau, HCMC
6. **Mekong River Delta:** Long An, Tien Giang, Ben Tre, Tra Vinh, Vinh Long, Dong Thap, An Giang, Kien Giang, Can Tho, Hau Giang, Soc Trang, Bac Lieu and Ca Mau

Migration selectivity has been mentioned in various migration theories and research both abroad (Stilwell and Condon, 1991) and in the Vietnam context (Guest 1998; Dang et al., 2003; Nguyen, 2009). Common individual characteristics presented in this analysis include sex, age, education, marital status, employment and economic condition. Are there any differences among minority migrants compared to the general population and Kinh migrants?

The sex ratio of migrants, defined as the number of female migrants per 100 male migrants, is presented in Figure 7.

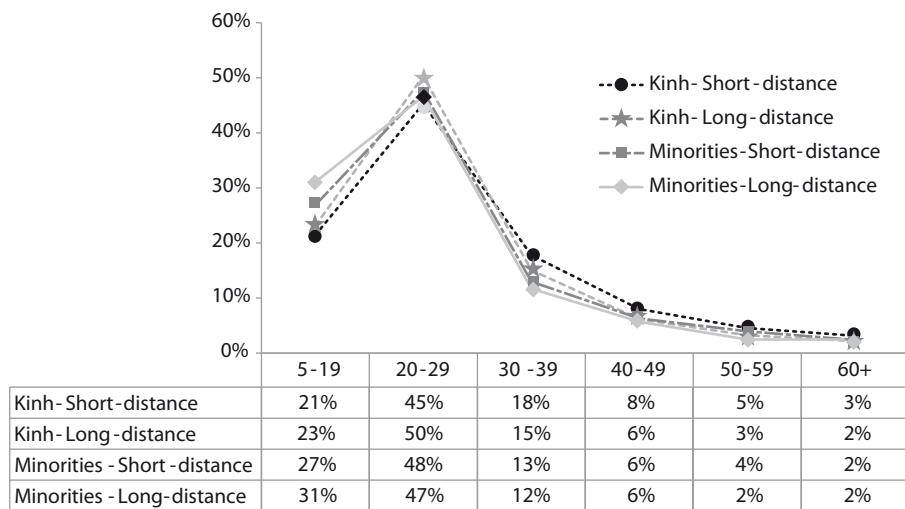
**Figure 7:** Sex ratio of migrants by ethnic group and migration type



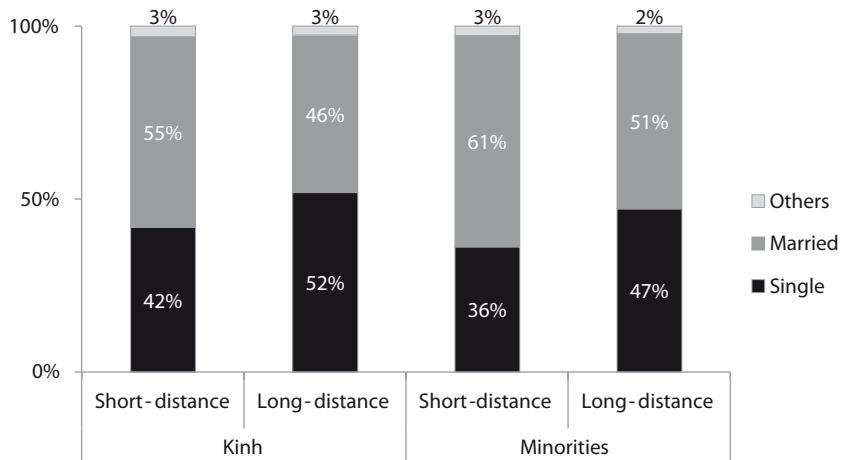
**Source:** Calculated from the 2009 Population and Housing Census data

The census data confirm the pattern of higher female migration in Vietnam i.e. the proportion of female migrants in the migrant population has continuously increased over the last two decades from less than half in 1989 to half by 1999 and more than half in 2009 (GSO, 2011). Similar patterns are observed in other surveys in Vietnam including the 2003 Survey and Assessment of Vietnamese Youth (SAVY), 2004 Migration Survey, and 2007 Population Change Survey (Nguyen, 2009). Elsewhere, feminization of migration among the Kinh majority as well as the minority population is also noted (Dang, 2003; General Statistics Office, 2011). In addition, females are more likely to engage in short-distance moves. The sex ratio for short-distance migration is 156 among minorities and 136 among Kinh. The figures are 125 and 113 for long-distance migration respectively.

Similar to findings from other research, the age pattern of migration shows a higher proportion of migrants in younger age groups; this proportion goes down in the older age groups. It can be seen from Figure 8 that migrants in the age group of 20-29 account for almost half of total migrants, regardless of migration type or ethnic group. Age selectivity of migrants is similar between Kinh and minorities.

**Figure 8:** Percentage of migrants by age-group, migration type and ethnic group

**Source:** Calculated from the 2009 Population and Housing Census data.

**Figure 9:** Percentage of migrants by marital status, migration type and ethnic group

**Source:** Calculated from the 2009 Population and Housing Census data

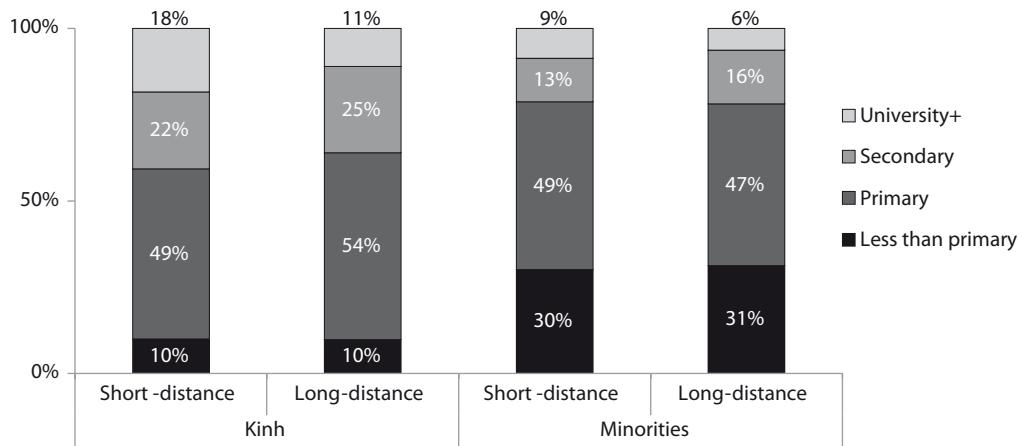
Regarding marital status, it is found that married migrants account for the highest proportion among all categories, except for long-distance Kinh migrants (Figure 9). The percentage of married migrants is high among short-distance movers, especially

among the minorities. This might be partly attributed to marriage migration, which is more common among minority groups. A higher percentage of single migrants (52 percent) is found only among long-distance Kinh migrants. It might be easier for single Kinh migrants, many of them in young ages, to make longer distance moves to big cities or industrial provinces for job opportunities. In addition, economic reasons are mostly cited by migrants in migration literature (Dang, 2003; Nguyen, 2009).

Migrants with primary education account for about half of total migrants (Figure 10) and there is only a small difference between ethnic groups and by type of migration. However, the proportion of migrants with less than primary education among the minority groups is triple the figure for Kinh migrants, i.e. 30 percent compared to 10 percent. In contrast, the percentage of secondary and university education is much lower among minority migrants than among the Kinh. This reflects the fact that ethnic minority populations have much lower educational attainment than the Kinh majority.

However, among the minority populations themselves, those with primary education are more likely to migrate than those with less than primary education. Minority migrants with secondary education or higher accounts for only small proportions, i.e. only 22 percent each for short-distance and long-distance migration.

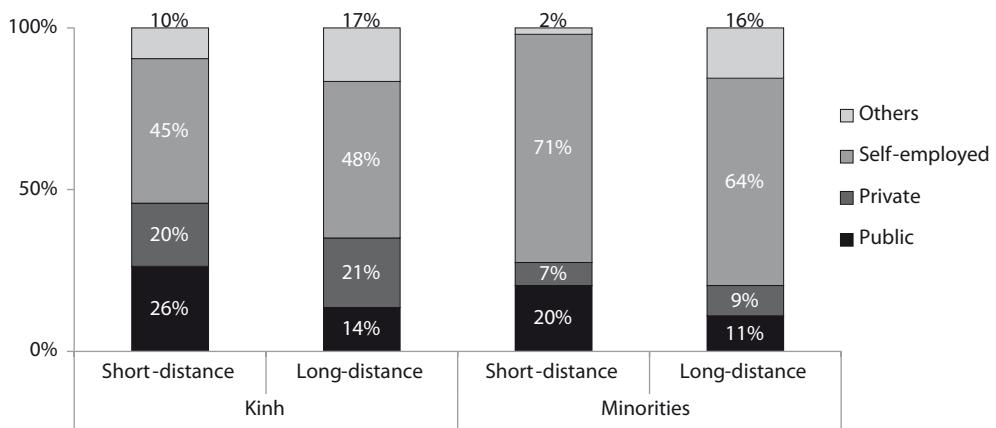
**Figure 10:** Percentage of migrants' education by migration type and ethnic group



**Source:** Calculated from the 2009 Population and Housing Census data

Since economic reasons for migration are very common, the work sector of migrants at destination is also a focus of the analysis. Minority and Kinh migrants have quite different work sectors of employment at their destination. Even though self-employed migrants account for the largest proportion, the figures are much higher among minority migrants than among those of the Kinh majority, i.e. 71 and 64 percent comparing to 45 and 48 percent.

**Figure 11:** Percentage of employment sector at destination by migration type and ethnic group



**Source:** Calculated from the 2009 Population and Housing Census data

A high percentage of self-employment among minority migrants may be due to their low education. The percentage of minority migrants working in the public or private sector is also lower than that for Kinh migrants. Migrants classified in the ‘other’ category include those below working age, still in school, doing housework or unemployed. The situation is similar for both long-distance and short-distance migration.

## Summary

In Vietnam, the ethnic minority community consists of nearly 50 different ethnic groups with populations ranging from only a few hundred to more than 1 million. Except for some larger and more developed minorities such as the Chinese, Thai and Tay, most minorities are in a disadvantaged position compared to the Kinh

majority. These disadvantages are observed in terms of their geographic distribution, low educational attainment, high fertility and low economic status.

The level of migration in the 2009 census is much lower among ethnic minorities than among those of the Kinh majority, especially for long-distance movement, i.e. inter-provincial or regional migration. The migration pattern is also different between the two groups. While Kinh migrants are more likely to originate from populous and poor provinces and move to big cities with more economic opportunities, many minority migrants just move to nearby mountainous provinces which also have a large minority population. In this regard, the impact of economic push-pull factors appears to be more important motivations for Kinh migrants than for minority migrants.

Characteristics of minority migrants from the census data are somewhat similar to those found from other migration research in Vietnam. Migrants are more likely to be female, to be younger, to have primary education and to be mostly self-employed. The only different characteristic found for minority migrants is that they are more likely to be married, perhaps because minority females migrate due to marriage or because minorities are more likely to move as a family.

Regarding the movement of ethnic minorities, another issue should be mentioned that is not apparent from the recent census data. Due to economic development, many minorities have been displaced involuntarily in recent years and are likely to be displaced in the future. An example is the construction of hydropower stations which are mostly placed in mountainous areas – the residence of many ethnic minority populations. More than 60,000 people need to be displaced for construction of 14 hydropower stations in the coming years; more than 80 percent of the displaced people are ethnic minorities (Stockholm Environment Institute, 2008). Construction of the biggest hydropower station in Vietnam and Southeast Asia, the Son La hydropower station, requires displacement of more than 18,200 households with about 91,000 people in three Northern mountainous provinces of Son La, Lai Chau and Dien Bien. Most of them are ethnic minorities (Online News, 2012). It should be noted that the total number of people displaced due to construction of the Son La hydropower station cited here already surpasses half of the total minority migrants during the 5 years prior to the 2009 census.

In addition, the practice of nomadic life in some small ethnic minorities also contributes to the migration picture of the minority population. Taking these facts into consideration, policies for minority migrants need to focus on resettlement issues, economic development and education. Currently, such policies have been integrated into the national program on poverty eradication and alleviation. However, more effective strategies still are needed to meet the actual demand of these vulnerable populations.

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