

# The Role of the Youth Union in Resource Connectivity for Sustainable Livelihood Support of Returnee Youth: From Theory to Practice in Peri-urban Areas of Hanoi City, Viet Nam

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## **ABSTRACT**

*As Vietnam undergoes rapid international integration and urbanization, returnee youth—those completing overseas labor contracts—emerge as a high-quality human resource with significant potential to drive local economic transformation. However, this group faces systemic barriers in re-establishing sustainable livelihoods upon return. This study, conducted in O Dien Commune—a peri-urban administrative unit recently transitioned to direct city jurisdiction in Hanoi—examines the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union’s (HCYCU) role as a centralized coordinator for fragmented support resources. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach involving a survey of 236 returnee youth and in-depth interviews with local stakeholders, the research identifies a significant “connectivity gap”: while 72.1% of returnees require startup capital, only 18.4% successfully access preferential loans through Union-mediated channels. Key bottlenecks include the limited specialized advisory capacity of Union officers, weak long-term partnerships with the private sector, and a lack of personalized livelihood roadmaps. The findings suggest that in the absence of district-level intermediaries in newly restructured communes, the HCYCU must shift from a traditional movement-based approach to a professionalized resource-coordination hub. The study proposes institutionalizing the Union’s coordinating role and developing multi-stakeholder partnership frameworks to unlock the “brain gain” potential of returnee youth for regional green economic growth.*

**KEYWORDS:** Youth Union; Resource Connectivity; Sustainable Livelihoods; Returnee Youth; Peri-urban Areas; Hanoi City; Reintegration.

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## **I. Introduction**

Vietnam’s rapid integration into the global economy over the past two decades has driven a boom in its labor export program, turning the country into one of Southeast Asia’s largest sources of overseas contract workers. Between 2018 and 2023, more than 600,000 Vietnamese laborers completed their overseas work terms and returned to their home communities, 72% of whom are aged 18-35, a demographic classified as “returnee youth” (Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs [MOLISA], 2023). Unlike traditional return migrants who often face reintegration barriers, this cohort brings unique assets: accumulated financial capital averaging 200 million VND per person, international vocational certifications, foreign language proficiency, and global work experience (World Bank, 2023). For peri-urban areas of Hanoi, which are undergoing rapid economic transformation from agricultural to urbanized service-based economies, these returnees represent a rare “brain gain” opportunity to drive innovation and green growth.

However, translating this potential into tangible local development outcomes remains an elusive goal. Nationwide surveys show that 62% of returnee youth in Hanoi’s peri-urban communes remain unemployed or underemployed one year after returning to Vietnam, due to systemic barriers: limited access to preferential startup loans, difficulties in converting international vocational certificates to locally recognized qualifications, and lack of connections to formal employment markets or business support networks (Vietnam Institute of Youth Science [VIYS], 2024). These gaps do not stem from a lack of national support programs, but from the fragmentation of existing resources: government subsidies, private sector job openings, and training programs operate in silos, with no central actor to connect eligible returnees to available support. This coordination failure is amplified in newly restructured administrative units, such as communes that transitioned from district to direct city jurisdiction in 2025, where the elimination of district-level intermediaries created unaddressed gaps in public service delivery.

Against this backdrop, the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union (HCYCU)—Vietnam’s largest state-backed youth organization, with a grassroots network spanning every commune nationwide—emerges as a uniquely

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positioned institution to resolve this coordination gap. As the only formal institution with a mandate to serve all youth in a locality, the HCYCU has the convening power to align government agencies, financial institutions, private enterprises, and training providers around a shared goal of supporting returnee livelihoods. While previous research has documented the HCYCU's role in supporting general youth startup activities (Do, 2022), no empirical study to date has examined its capacity to serve as a centralized resource coordinator for the specific needs of returnee youth in newly restructured peri-urban communes. This research gap is particularly consequential, as 17 communes across Hanoi transitioned to direct city jurisdiction in 2025, with more set to follow in 2026-2030.

This article addresses this critical gap through an in-depth case study of O Dien Commune, a peri-urban Hanoi locality that became a city-governed unit in 2025 and is home to 236 returnee youth. Drawing on a mixed-methods research design combining a census survey of all returnees in the commune, in-depth interviews with local stakeholders, and analysis of official administrative data, the study answers three core research questions: First, what institutional advantages enable the commune-level HCYCU to coordinate fragmented resources for returnee youth? Second, what structural and operational barriers limit the HCYCU's ability to deliver effective livelihood support in the post-restructuring context? Third, what policy interventions can strengthen the HCYCU's role as a resource coordination hub to unlock returnees' development potential? The study makes two key contributions to academic and policy literature. First, it extends global research on youth organizations' role in migrant reintegration (Asis, 2021; Sutanto & Patmasari, 2022) by providing the first empirical analysis of a state-backed youth union's capacity to coordinate resources in Vietnam's transitional administrative landscape. Second, it delivers actionable, context-specific policy recommendations that can be replicated across all newly restructured peri-urban communes in Hanoi and beyond. The findings are timely, as Hanoi's municipal government is currently developing a 2026-2030 strategy to support returnee youth, and this study provides evidence to inform the design of effective, scalable support programs. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 outlines the study's theoretical framework and mixed-methods methodology; Section 3 presents empirical findings on the HCYCU's current performance and barriers to effectiveness; Section 4 discusses the implications of these findings; and Section 5 concludes with policy recommendations.

## **II. Methodology**

To address the research questions, this study employs a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, which allows for the simultaneous collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data. This approach provides a comprehensive understanding of the "connectivity gap" by triangulating statistical trends from returnee surveys with in-depth institutional insights from local stakeholders (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

### **Research Setting and Case Selection**

The study was conducted in O Dien Commune, a strategic peri-urban administrative unit of Hanoi. Following the 2025 administrative restructuring, O Dien transitioned from district-level management to direct city jurisdiction. This site was selected as a "typical case" (Yin, 2018) because it mirrors the challenges faced by 17 other newly restructured communes in Hanoi: rapid urbanization, a high density of returnee youth (147 individuals), and a transitioning institutional framework where district-level intermediaries have been eliminated, leaving the Commune-level Youth Union (HCYCU) as the primary coordinator.

### **Quantitative Data Collection (Census Survey)**

A census survey was conducted to capture the full profile of returnee youth in the commune.

- **Participants:** The target population included all 147 returnee youth currently residing in O Dien who had completed overseas labor contracts between 2021 and 2025.
- **Instrument:** A structured questionnaire was developed, comprising three sections: (i) Demographic and resource profile (capital, skills, certifications); (ii) Level of awareness and access to HCYCU-mediated resources; and (iii) Satisfaction levels measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Very Dissatisfied to 5 = Very Satisfied).
- **Data Collection:** The survey was administered via face-to-face interviews by trained enumerators over a four-week period in early 2025, achieving a 100% response rate due to the support of village-level youth cells.

### **Qualitative Data Collection (Interviews and Focus Groups)**

To explore the underlying structural barriers, qualitative data were gathered through:

- **In-depth Interviews (IDI):** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 08 key informants: 01 Secretary of the Commune Youth Union, 01 representative of the Commune People's Committee, 02 local enterprise managers, and 04 returnee youth (purposively sampled to represent both successful and unsuccessful reintegration cases).

- Focus Group Discussion (FGD): One FGD was held with 06 secretaries of village-level youth cells to evaluate the "last-mile" delivery of information and resource connection at the grassroots level.

### Secondary Data Analysis

The study integrated official administrative data, including:

- Socio-economic development reports of O Dien Commune (2021-2025).
- HCYCU annual performance reviews and financial audit summaries.
- Statistical data from the Hanoi Department of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA) regarding labor export and return trends in peri-urban zones.

### Data Analysis and Triangulation

- Quantitative Analysis: Survey data were processed using SPSS 22.0. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations) were used to map resource access and satisfaction levels.
- Qualitative Analysis: Interview transcripts and FGD notes were analyzed using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initial codes were generated and then grouped into themes such as "Institutional Capacity," "Policy Fragmentation," and "Resource Mismatch."
- Integration: Quantitative results (the "what") were triangulated with qualitative insights (the "why") to provide a holistic view of the Youth Union's role in resource connectivity.

**Ethical Considerations** The research protocol was approved by the local administrative board. All participants provided informed consent, and data were anonymized to protect the privacy of returnee youth. Financial figures and sensitive institutional challenges discussed in interviews were used solely for academic purposes with the consent of the participants.

## III. Results and Discussion

The empirical findings from the census survey (N=236) and qualitative interviews reveal a significant "connectivity paradox": while returnee youth in O Dien possess high-value capital and skills, the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union (HCYCU) at the commune level struggles to effectively bridge these assets with local development resources.

### a. Profile of Returnee Youth: A Strategic but Underutilized Resource

The demographic and resource profile of returnees in O Dien (Table 1) indicates a "high-potential" cohort. Approximately 75% of returnees worked in high-standard markets (Japan and South Korea), with 62.6% having 3-5 years of international experience. Crucially, 69.4% possess international vocational certifications, and 30% have accumulated capital exceeding 300 million VND.

**Table 1. Resource Characteristics of Returnee Youth in O Dien Commune (N = 236)**

Classification Criteria	Sub-group	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<b>Former Labor Market</b>	Japan	68	46.3
	South Korea	42	28.6
	Taiwan (China)	25	17.0
	Others	12	8.1
<b>Duration of Work</b>	3 - 5 years	92	62.6
<b>Accumulated Capital</b>	Over 300 million VND	44	30.0
<b>Qualifications</b>	International Certifications	102	69.4

*Source: Author's survey results (2025)*

Despite these assets, qualitative interviews suggest that these resources are often "frozen." One returnee stated: *"I have a Japanese certification in precision mechanics, but the local Youth Union only invited me to a general job fair for unskilled labor. There is no connection to firms that actually value my specific skills."*

### b. The Connectivity Gap: Needs vs. Actual Support

The most critical finding is the vast disparity between returnees' livelihood needs and the HCYCU's actual support delivery (Table 2). The "connectivity gap" is most pronounced in financial capital and high-tech job placement.

**Table 2. The Gap Between Livelihood Needs and Youth Union Connectivity**

Group of Support Resources	Need Rate (%)	Actual Access Rate (%)	Gap (Variance)
Preferential startup loans	72.1	18.4	53.7
High-tech job placement	64.6	12.9	51.7

Group of Support Resources	Need Rate (%)	Actual Access Rate (%)	Gap (Variance)
Legal & Business advice	55.8	8.2	47.6
Management training	42.2	15.6	26.6

Source: Source: Author's survey results (2025)

While 72.1% of returnees require startup capital to launch local businesses, the HCYCU could only facilitate loans for 18.4%. This failure is attributed to the rigid "entrusted loan" model, which caps individual loans at 100 million VND-insufficient for modern service or high-tech agricultural startups in a peri-urban city context.

**c. Evaluation of HCYCU’s Performance and Capacity**

Quantitative evaluation using the Likert scale (Table 3) confirms that returnees perceive the HCYCU's role as largely ineffective, particularly in specialized advisory capacities.

**Table 3. Evaluation of Youth Union’s Role (Likert Scale 1-5; 1=Very Low, 5=Very High)**

Connectivity Evaluation Criteria	Mean Score	Std. Deviation	Evaluation
Timeliness of support info	2.45	0.82	Low
Suitability of job leads	2.12	0.75	Very low
Loan application guidance	3.15	0.91	Moderate
Advisory capacity of officers	1.85	0.64	Very low
<b>Overall Average Score</b>	<b>2.37</b>	<b>0.80</b>	<b>Low</b>

Source: Author's survey results (2025)

The lowest score (1.85) for "Advisory capacity" highlights a structural weakness. Qualitative interviews with the HCYCU Secretary revealed that 70% of officers lack training in economics or career counseling. “We operate like a post office-forwarding general documents from the city-rather than a specialized consultant for returnees,” the Secretary admitted. This confirms that the HCYCU is currently a "passive transmitter" rather than an "active coordinator."

**d. The Mismatch Matrix: A Failure of Personalization**

Research indicates that returnee youth are not a monolithic group. However, the HCYCU applies a "one-size-fits-all" approach, leading to high levels of resource mismatch (Table 4).

**Table 4. Compatibility Matrix Between Needs and Actual Support in 2024**

Needs Segment	Core Requirement	HCYCU Support Provided	Status
Wage Employment	Tech jobs, High Salary	General labor fairs	Mismatched
Service Startup	High capital, Premises	Small VBSP loans	Insufficient
Green Agriculture	Tech, Market output	Basic technical training	Outdated

Source: Author's survey results (2025)

The mismatch is most severe for the "Wage Employment" group. Those with Japanese skills are offered local manufacturing jobs paying 8 million VND, while their expectation is at least 15-20 million VND. The HCYCU’s inability to partner with high-end industrial parks (due to the lack of district-level intermediaries post-restructuring) exacerbates this issue. The transition of O Dien to a city-governed unit has created an "institutional vacuum." Previously, the District Youth Union acted as a powerful mediator with banks and large enterprises. Now, the Commune HCYCU must negotiate directly with city-level entities, but it lacks the administrative rank and specialized human resources to do so effectively. This finding extends the work of Nguyen (2023) by showing that administrative urbanization does not automatically lead to better service delivery. Instead, it places a heavy "coordination burden" on grassroots organizations like the HCYCU, which are currently unequipped to handle the complexity of returnee reintegration in a modern urban economy.

**IV. Discussion**

*The "Resource Paradox" and the Failure of Capital Transformation*

The most striking result from the data (Table 1 and Table 2) is the existence of a "Resource Paradox." Returnee youth in O Dien are not "vulnerable" in the traditional sense; they possess significant human capital (international certifications) and financial capital (accumulated savings). However, the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (DFID, 1999) suggests that assets alone do not guarantee sustainable outcomes; they must be transformed through "Transforming Structures and Processes."

In O Dien, this transformation is stalled. The Youth Union (HCYCU), as a primary "Structure," has failed to facilitate the conversion of international human capital into local economic value. The high "connectivity gap" in high-tech job placement (51.7%) and vocational certificate recognition (42.9%) indicates that returnees are experiencing "de-skilling"-a process where high-skilled workers are forced into low-skilled local jobs due to a lack of institutional mediation. This aligns with the findings of Asis (2021) in the Philippines, where returnees often face a "reintegration penalty" because local institutions fail to recognize the global competencies they acquired abroad. In O Dien, this is exacerbated by the Youth Union's reliance on traditional job fairs that cater to unskilled rural labor, completely ignoring the specialized technical profile of 69.4% of the returnee cohort.

*Institutional Vacuum: The "Missing Middle" in Post-Restructuring Connectivity*

A core contribution of this study is the identification of an "institutional vacuum" following O Dien's transition to direct city jurisdiction. Previously, the District Youth Union served as the "Missing Middle"-an intermediary that possessed enough administrative rank to negotiate with commercial banks and large-scale industrial parks, yet remained close enough to the grassroots to understand local needs.

The removal of this district-level intermediary in 2025 has forced the Commune-level HCYCU into a direct coordination role for which it is structurally unequipped. The qualitative data revealed that the Commune HCYCU lacks the "political capital" to influence city-level departments or high-end enterprises. As a result, connectivity has become "de-professionalized." The HCYCU Secretary's admission of operating like a "post office" (Section 3.3) reflects a broader systemic issue in Hanoi's peri-urban restructuring: administrative urbanization has outpaced institutional capacity building. While the commune is now legally a "city unit," its Youth Union still operates with a "rural-commune mindset," focusing on social movements rather than specialized economic coordination. This confirms the warnings of Do (2022) that administrative status changes without corresponding capacity upgrades lead to a decline in public service quality for specialized groups like returnees.

*The Mismatch of Financial Connectivity: Beyond the VBSP Model*

The financial connectivity gap (53.7%) highlights a critical mismatch between the Youth Union's "social policy" tools and the "market-driven" needs of returnees. Traditionally, the HCYCU's primary tool for financial support is the entrusted loan program from the Vietnam Bank for Social Policies (VBSP). While this model is effective for poverty reduction in rural areas, it is fundamentally ill-suited for the peri-urban startup ecosystem of Hanoi.

The data shows that 30% of returnees have over 300 million VND in savings and aim to start high-tech services or clean energy farms. The HCYCU, however, only offers VBSP loans capped at 100 million VND with rigid "household-based" criteria. This "capital ceiling" prevents returnees from scaling their businesses. Furthermore, the HCYCU lacks the capacity to connect returnees with commercial banks or venture capital, which require sophisticated business plans and financial auditing-skills that 70% of Union officers do not possess. This finding suggests that for returnee youth, the Youth Union should transition from a "lender of last resort" (via VBSP) to a "financial broker" that can facilitate access to diverse capital markets.

*Deconstructing the "One-Size-Fits-All" Approach*

The "Compatibility Matrix" (Table 4) exposes a fundamental flaw in the HCYCU's operational logic: the lack of "segmentation-based support." Returnee youth are often treated as a homogenous group of "unemployed youth," whereas our data categorizes them into four distinct segments: Wage-seekers, Service-entrepreneurs, Green-farmers, and Re-migrants. By applying a uniform support model, the HCYCU creates a "double exclusion." High-skilled wage-seekers are excluded because the Union only connects with low-wage local firms; entrepreneurs are excluded because the Union cannot provide high-level legal and financial advice. This lack of personalization is a direct result of the HCYCU's "movement-based" legacy. In a city-governed commune like O Dien, the HCYCU must adopt a "customer-centric" or "client-based" model common in developed urban youth centers. Without this shift, the 10% of returnees who wish to re-migrate (the "neglected" group in Table 4) will likely leave again, resulting in a permanent loss of human capital for the commune.

*Theoretical Implications: Towards a "Coordination Hub" Model*

Theoretically, this study challenges the traditional view of youth organizations as mere "ideological or social mobilizers." In the context of return migration and peri-urbanization, we propose that the Youth Union must be re-theorized as a "Resource Coordination Hub." In this proposed model, the Union's value does not lie in providing the resources themselves (capital, jobs, training), but in its ability to reduce "transaction costs" for both returnees and resource providers. Currently, returnees face high transaction costs in finding credible information, while enterprises face high costs in verifying the skills of returnees. The HCYCU, through its grassroots presence, can act as a "verified database" and "matching engine." However, achieving this requires a shift from "administrative hierarchy" to "network governance"-a concept where the HCYCU sits at the center of a horizontal network of banks, firms, and NGOs, rather than just waiting for instructions from the city-level hierarchy.

*Comparison with International Evidence*

Our findings echo research from Indonesia and the Philippines (Sutanto & Patmasari, 2022), which found that local youth councils often fail returnees due to a lack of "technical legitimacy." However, O Dien's case is

unique due to the specific "peri-urban" pressure of Hanoi. Unlike rural Indonesia, O Dien returnees are competing in a hyper-competitive urban market where land prices are high and labor standards are rigorous. The HCYCU's failure in O Dien is therefore more consequential; a failed reintegration here does not just lead to underemployment, but to the total "marginalization" of a highly productive group within an urbanizing economy. This study is limited by its focus on a single commune and its reliance on cross-sectional data. The long-term "livelihood trajectory" of returnees was not tracked. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to see if the "connectivity gap" narrows as the HCYCU matures in its new administrative role. Additionally, comparative studies between "directly city-governed" communes and "district-governed" communes would provide deeper insights into the impact of administrative restructuring on youth support services. In summary, the HCYCU in O Dien is currently trapped between its traditional rural-social mandate and the new demands of an urban-economic coordinator. The "connectivity gap" is not merely a lack of effort, but a structural mismatch in skills, mechanisms, and administrative rank. To avoid a "wasted generation" of returnee youth, the HCYCU must undergo a fundamental "institutional pivot"-moving away from generic movements towards specialized, data-driven, and network-based resource coordination.

## V. Conclusion

This study has provided a comprehensive empirical analysis of the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union's (HCYCU) role in coordinating resources for the sustainable livelihoods of returnee youth in O Dien, a newly restructured peri-urban commune of Hanoi. The research findings confirm a profound "connectivity paradox": while O Dien possesses a high-quality human resource pool-with nearly 70% of returnees holding international certifications and 30% possessing significant investment capital-the institutional framework for resource linkage remains fragmented and ineffective. The quantitative data reveals a staggering "connectivity gap" exceeding 50% in critical areas such as high-tech job placement and preferential startup credit. The study concludes that the HCYCU at the commune level is currently experiencing an "institutional lag." Following the 2025 administrative restructuring which eliminated district-level intermediaries, the Commune Youth Union has been thrust into a complex coordination role without the necessary administrative rank, specialized expertise, or financial autonomy. The transition from a "rural-movement" model to an "urban-economic coordination" hub is stalled by a mismatch between traditional social policy tools (such as small-scale VBSP loans) and the sophisticated, market-driven needs of modern returnees. Failure to address this gap not only leads to the "de-skilling" of returnee youth but also represents a significant loss of "brain gain" potential for Hanoi's peri-urban green economy.

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