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Research Report

The Impact of Covid-19 Response Policies on Select Vulnerable Groups in Vietnam

Thao Do and Eric Kasper

May 2022

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Summary

Despite the significant impact of the pandemic's fourth wave, Vietnam's overall strategy was seen as well planned with one of the lowest infection rates globally in 2020–2021. In June 2019, an estimated 540,000 Vietnamese migrant workers were recorded working legally in 40 countries and territories, making Vietnam a major labour exporter and one of the top ten countries to receive international remittances. Our research shows how Vietnam's Covid-19 policy response has influenced Vietnamese migrant workers and counter-trafficking work, particularly in border areas.

The research discussed four main findings. *Firstly*, border closures left many overseas migrant workers vulnerable and led them to rely on people smugglers. *Secondly*, the suspension of commercial international flights and a lack of transparency and favouritism in allocating seats on repatriation flights left many stranded. *Thirdly*, the national pandemic response plan suffered from limitations. *Lastly*, Covid-19 policies have led to new trafficking trends and challenges.

Based on this evidence, the research suggests that digitalising and modernising social services could strengthen the inclusion of vulnerable groups, simplify the administrative and management process, save costs, and reduce corruption. Participation of vulnerable groups, especially ethnic minorities and overseas migrant workers, including fishers, should be ensured in national policy design and local implementation. Additionally, improving transparency and accountability of support systems could help gain citizens' trust in the government, which would be beneficial for future crisis responses.

Keywords

Covid-19; human trafficking; migration; policy responses; vulnerable groups; Vietnam

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This report is dedicated to those who have struggled, due to either migration or trafficking, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Acronyms

FCDO	UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
HCMC	Ho Chi Minh City
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
MOH	Vietnam Ministry of Health (MOH)
MOLISA	Vietnam Ministry of Labour - Invalids and Social Affairs
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
RP	Research participant

1. Introduction

This research highlights the specific impact of the implementation of Covid-19 response measures in Vietnam on some of the most vulnerable communities, including migrant workers and survivors of human trafficking. The research does not seek to provide a full reading of the issues faced by migrants at borderlands during the Covid-19 pandemic and should not be read as a comprehensive account.

In a previous research study carried out in the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic, we found borderland communities and sea-based industries in Southeast Asia to be facing particular economic and social challenges which intersected with Covid response measures, and which were exacerbating the difficulties that survivors of human trafficking faced on their journeys of reintegration (Kasper and Chiang 2020). This project, part of the Covid Collective¹, offered us the opportunity to build on those existing linkages with local researchers and to further explore what was happening in these severely affected borderland and sea-based communities – focusing especially on vulnerabilities amongst migrant workers and survivors of trafficking.

We recognised that in responding to Covid-19, the Vietnamese government and the governments of the surrounding states were attempting to address an unprecedented public health challenge. While policy responses tended to include measures to mitigate the adverse effects of border closures, economic shutdowns, and mobility restrictions on people and businesses, we saw a need to explore the extent to which these responses had been designed with the particular needs of vulnerable groups in mind as well as to explore what the actual impact has been for those groups. In addition, we started with the observation – based on previous work on the dynamics of trafficking in the region – that those key functions of borderland areas, sea-based industries, and cities tend to shape the conditions of human trafficking. For vulnerable groups in these contexts, Covid response policies would filter through the unique systemic conditions of those contexts, leading to uncertainties about how vulnerable groups would ultimately experience life during the pandemic.

¹ For further details of the programme please see [the programme website](#).

2. Overview of the research design

This study was commissioned as part of the Covid Collective, a research platform offering rapid social science research to inform decision-making on some of the most pressing development challenges related to Covid-19. It is based on the observation that, while countries all over the world had to respond to the public health crisis of Covid-19 by instituting measures to stop the spread of the virus, those measures have had wide-ranging knock-on effects, including negatively impacting people who were already vulnerable or members of marginalised groups. We selected three countries in Southeast Asia – Vietnam, Cambodia, and Myanmar – to explore the impacts of the major Covid response policies on marginalised groups in borderland areas, cities, and at sea. In Vietnam, this has led us to focus on workers who have migrated – from rural to urban areas, from Vietnam to other countries, and workers on ships. We also consider the impact on survivors of trafficking as a particularly vulnerable group, many of whom have been trafficked in the process of migrating for work.

2.1 Methodology

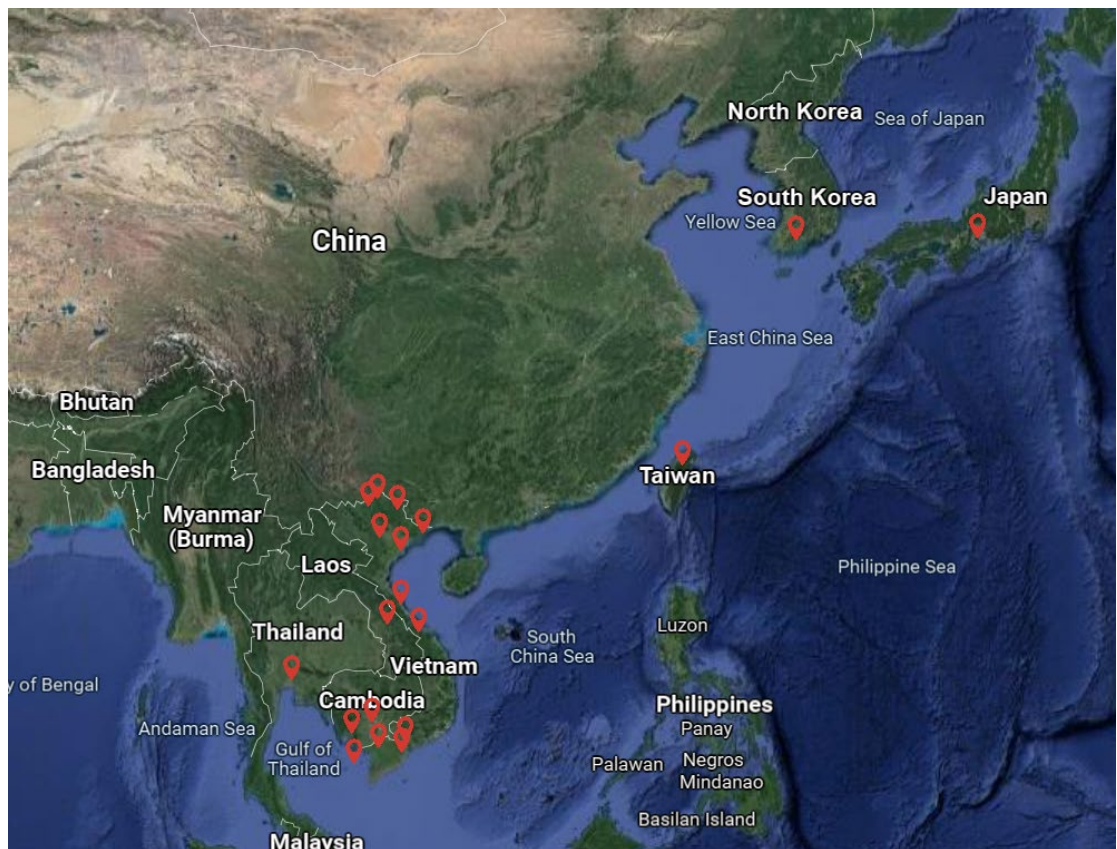
Using purposive and snowball sampling techniques, 20 participants from diverse backgrounds, including migrant workers, fishermen, trafficking survivors, non-governmental organisation (NGO) officers and key stakeholders, were selected to take part in the study. In order to minimise bias and misrepresentation, criteria were applied based on geographical locations, professions, associated organisations (if applicable), gender, and ethnicities of the participants. Data collection took place from November to December 2021, followed by analysis and writing in January and February 2022. Due to Covid-19 travel restrictions, in-depth qualitative interviews with the participants were conducted online or via phone. We obtained informed consent from all participants and discussed the potential risks of participating before interviews were conducted. Respondents retained their rights to withdraw any relevant data or information. Respondents have been anonymised to protect privacy and confidentiality.

2.2 Analysis of respondents

Of the 20 interviewees, nine (45 per cent) were people from vulnerable groups, including eight migrant workers and one fisherman. Eleven respondents (55 per cent) were key informants who have been involved in the work of anti-human trafficking and community development in Vietnam. Fifteen per cent of the respondents work at sea or live on islands, while 50 per cent are migrant workers or have their professional work focusing on neighbouring countries (e.g., Cambodia or Lao). The overseas workers are currently working or have worked

in South Korea (one respondent), Japan (one respondent), and Taiwan (one respondent), accounting for 15 per cent of the respondents. Of the 11 key informants, four (36 per cent) at the time of interview were NGO professionals, four (36 per cent) were state employees, and the remaining three (28 per cent) included a researcher, a private-sector employee and a freelancer. Sixty-five per cent of the respondents were men, while women accounted for 35 per cent. The figure below shows the distribution of residence or workplace of the interviewees.

Figure 2.1 Distribution of the residence and/or workplace of the interviewees



Source: Map data © 2022 Google, TMap Mobility. Please see [here](#) for terms of reuse.

3. Timeline of Covid-19 in Vietnam and the policy response

Vietnam has suffered four waves of the Covid-19 pandemic. The latest wave – the fourth wave - left the most severe damage (Minh, Quan and Khanh 2021; Thu 2021). The first wave ran from 23 January 2020 to 16 April 2020, a result of the original virus strain from Wuhan (China). One hundred community cases were reported, but no deaths. The second wave was between 25 July to 1 December 2020 with 554 community cases and 35 deaths. The majority of deaths occurred amongst old-aged patients and/or those who had comorbidities. Vietnam's efforts to contain the virus were considered to be successful and have been praised by many international organisations (Our World in Data 2021; *The Conversation* 2021; Van Tan 2021). The third wave occurred between 28 January 2021 to 25 March 2021 with 901 community cases, and with more than half of cases identified as being of the more transmissible UK-Indian variant (France-Pressé 2021). No deaths were reported and the majority of patients were young and healthy. The fourth wave started on 27 April 2021 with the arrival of the Delta variant, and it has dramatically changed the situation. More than 600,000 cases were confirmed, and 15,000 deaths were reported. The fourth wave has left a significant impact on every aspect of life: health, economic, social and fiscal, amongst that, ethnic minority people, informal and migrant workers, children, the elderly, people with disabilities, women, and the poor are the most vulnerable populations (UN 2020a).

Figure 3.1: Covid-19 Pandemic timeline in Vietnam



Source: Minh *et al.* (2021) © Minh *et al.* 2021. Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY)

3.1 Overview of Vietnam's Covid-19 responses policies

In early 2020, Vietnam was recognised as one of the few countries that successfully controlled the pandemic with Covid-19 cases amongst the lowest in the world throughout 2020 and early 2021 (World Bank 2021a). The early success has been attributed to the **zero-new-case-approach** including: (i) a rapid and coordinated public health response; (ii) massive quarantine and targeted lockdown; (iii) third-degree contact tracing²; (iv) centralised patient management; (v) early school closures and robust border controls; (vi) mask policies and the 5K message (5K refers to the use of face masks in public places, disinfecting regularly, keeping distance, stopping gatherings, and the making of a health declaration); and (vii) innovative mass testing strategies (Le *et al.* 2021; Nguyen *et al.* 2021).

However, Vietnam's experience during the fourth wave has been less encouraging. The highly transmissible Delta variant spread and broke the country's defence systems that were effective in previous phases (Trien and Hartley 2021). The slow vaccine rollout was amongst the contributing factors (Thu 2021). Like many other developing countries, Vietnam was not able to secure vaccines as early as needed for community immunisation. The expectation of homegrown vaccines, which were not fully developed and ready for usage, also contributed to complacency (*VietnamNews* 2021a). The health care system was quickly overwhelmed and paralysed by severe cases. Additionally, compared to other Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines, and Cambodia, Vietnam received less external assistance, including vaccines, health equipment, masks, and personal protective equipment (Zaini 2021).

The table below illustrates Vietnam's Covid-19 response policies per each wave:

² This is based on tracing degrees of contact from F0 (the infected person) through F1 (those who have had close contact with F0 or are suspected of being infected) and F2 (close contact with F1), all the way up to F5. **For more information see this website.**

Table 3.1: Vietnam's Covid-19 response policies

Wave of the pandemic	Time period	Main policies
The first wave (23 January 2020 to 16 April 2020)	January 2020	1.1. Issued multi-sectoral plan to respond to the novel coronavirus (20 January 2020) 1.2. Closed overland borders with China, suspended all flights from and to China; suspended visa issuing to foreigners from China (31 January 2020)
	February 2020	1.3. First rescue flights to repatriate Vietnamese (February 2020) 1.4. The Vietnam Ministry of Health (MOH) officially launched the website https://ncov.moh.gov.vn/ and an app named 'Vietnam Health' to provide information (8 February 2020)
	March 2020	1.5. Prohibited foreign nationals from entering. Only Vietnamese nationals and foreigners having diplomatic and official passports such as business managers, experts and high-skilled workers will be allowed to enter the country with a 14-day mandatory quarantine (22 March 2020)
	April 2020	1.6. Banned commercial flights from overseas (1 April 2020) 1.7. Applied social distancing nationwide in accordance with Directive 16 (1 April 2020) 1.8. Launched relief packages of US\$2.6 billion to citizens affected by Covid-19 from the Central Government (24 April 2020)
The second wave (25 July to 1 December 2020)	September 2020	1.1. Temporarily resumed six international air routes (15 September 2020)
	December 2020	1.2. Applied criminal charge to person who violated Covid-19 quarantine rules, spreading infection (1 December 2020) 2.3. Again, halted all inbound commercial flights except repatriation flights (2 December 2020)
The third wave (28 January 2021 to 25 March 2021)	March 2021	3.1. Started to vaccinate people on priority list, especially frontline workers (5 March 2021)

The fourth wave (27 th April to now)	April 2021	4.1. National Steering Committee for Covid-19 Prevention and Control convened a meeting to evaluate the pandemic situation (27 Apr 2021)
	May 2021	4.2. Strict social distancing measures were imposed in HCMC (31 May 2021) 4.3. Temporarily suspended international flights to Tan Son Nhat International Airport in HCMC (27 May 2021) and Noi Bai International Airport in Hanoi (1 June 2021)
	June 2021	4.4. Launched the first relief packages provided by People's Committee of HCMC (25 June 2021), followed by the second one (6 August 2021) and the third one (22 September 2021)
	July 2021	4.5. Launched the national Covid-19 vaccination campaign (10 July 2021) 4.6. Sixteen southern localities imposed 14-day social distancing (17 July 2021) 4.7. Launched second relief package of US\$1.13 billion in accordance with Resolution 68/NQ-CP from Central Government (1 July 2021)
	September 2021	4.8. HCMC loosened travel restrictions (30 September 2021). Hanoi loosened travel restrictions (21 September 2021)
	October 2021	4.9. Domestic flights officially resumed under a four phase plan outlined by the Ministry of Transport (1 October 2021) 4.10. Issued Resolution 128/NQ-CP 2021 on Interim Regulation on safe and flexible adaptation to Covid-19 pandemic (11 October 2021)
	January 2022	4.11. Started to resume regular commercial international flights to 15 destination countries (1 January 2022), with seven localities opened for tourists 4.12. Approved US\$15 billion stimulus package for the 2022-2023 period from Central Government (11 January 2022)

Source: Authors' summary.³

³ The information feeding into this timeline summary was sourced from a combination and mix of the following news sources and outlets: **Socialist Republic of Viet nam Government News**; **OpenDevelopment Vietnam**; this **journal article**; **Reuters**; **NhanDan**; **VietnamNews**; **VNExpress**; **Ho Chi Minh City Party**; **MOH**; **Tuoi Tre**; **Laodong**; and **Agency of the Central Committee of the Vietnam Fatherland Front**.

4. Impact of Covid-19 response policies on migrant workers

Since the socio-economic reform, known as “Đổi Mới” in 1986, internal migration in Vietnam has surged. It is estimated that 13.6 per cent of an approximate population in 2015 (World Bank 2021b), or 12.6 million, were internal migrants (Bui *et al.* 2021). Amongst the four migration flows (rural-urban, urban-rural, rural-rural, urban-urban), the flow from rural to urban areas is the most prevalent and internal migration is mostly intra-regional (UNFPA and GSO 2015). While over 25 per cent of internal migrant workers work in forestry, agriculture, and fishery, a large proportion is employed in industry and construction, especially in industrial zones.

“Changes to border function and border-related institutions in response to Covid-19 directly disrupted borderland communities and forced them to adapt; either by making difficult choices about where to ride out the lockdowns and border closures or by finding ways to continue cross-border activities at higher cost and greater risk.”

Vietnam has also been an essential source of labour for other countries. Vietnamese migrants have been working in East Asian countries including Taiwan, South Korea, Malaysia, and Japan, though recently, emerging markets such as the Middle East, Northern Africa, Europe, and middle-income countries in Asia are becoming increasingly popular destinations. The overseas migrant workers mainly work in the manufacturing, construction, fishing, agriculture, domestic work, and service industries. Through June 2019, an estimated 540,000 Vietnamese overseas migrant workers were working in 40 countries and territories around the world, in which female workers accounted for nearly a quarter of the total number of migrant workers (ILO 2018; T.H.Y. Nguyen 2021). However, this data only reflects the number of workers migrating legally; undocumented workers or those who migrated informally are not included. In reality, the total number of migrant workers is much higher.

Vietnamese migrant fishermen have been working in the fishing industry in Taiwan, Thailand, the Philippines, Papua New Guinea, South Korea, and other

countries. They are reported to experience labour exploitation in many forms, including non- or underpayment of wages, long working hours, physical abuse, dire living conditions, limited food supply, and being forced to go into debt to pay recruitment fees (Seafish 2021). Child labour also exists in the supply chains of seafood companies, processors, and retailers, though it is difficult to detect child labour on Vietnamese vessels due to inadequate port checks and lack of formal recruitment system of sailors (Environmental Justice Foundation 2019).

In general, the majority of migrant workers are employed in low-skilled occupations. They usually (i) engage in low paid jobs and work in long hours with limited occupational safety and health measures; (ii) lack access to public social services, such as health care and health insurance; (iii) live in poor conditions, which increases risks of transmission; and (iv) face cultural and language barriers (Bui *et al.* 2021). As a result, migrant workers have higher risks of being infected and suffering more severe conditions of illness if infected (Tran *et al.* 2020). Women migrant workers are even more vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence and exploitation when labour is interrupted (UN 2020b). As Vietnam is amongst the top ten countries receiving international remittances as a proportion of their source of income, the disruption in employment and remittances negatively impacts both migrants and their families.

This study is particularly concerned with Vietnamese migrant workers in neighbouring countries (Cambodia, Lao and China), overseas migrants, and migrant fishermen in the South China Sea. The following section explains in detail the impact of selected Covid-19 response policies on these groups.

4.1 Lockdown and containment measures

From the end of May 2021, strict social distancing was applied in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) to contain the virus in accordance with Directive 16 issued by the central government. In order to address the dual goals of containing the pandemic while ensuring economic activity, factories had to be shut down only when they were not able to implement the so-called “3T-three on the spot” policy that enables workers to eat, sleep, and work at their manufacturing plants. Soon after the lockdown in HCMC, all of Vietnam’s southern provinces had Covid cases causing them to have to comply with social distancing measures.

Almost all key informants we interviewed agreed that migrant workers were amongst the most vulnerable populations during Covid-19. Research participant (RP) five explained that many migrant workers in non-essential industries (e.g., hospitality, garments, assemblies) were likely to lose their jobs or had their salaries cut because of the closure of business, the expiration of their working visa, and/or restrictions in travelling. Thirty point six per cent of workers (including migrant workers) in the tourism sector lost work in the second quarter

of 2021, and 62.7 per cent lost work in the third quarter. This made it the most disrupted sector according to the General Statistics Office of Vietnam since tourism is considered a non-essential industry (Vietnam GSO 2022). With limited savings, they struggled to earn a living, pay rents, or cover living expenses and other bills while experiencing a significant reduction in income. Meanwhile workers in essential industries (e.g., food, delivery services) often experienced a considerable increase in their workload; they had to work longer hours while compromising their occupational safety and health, even accepting lower pay in fear of losing jobs. Due to limited skills and professional training, migrant workers have weak negotiating power with their employers, have to accept the companies' terms and conditions (e.g., working without contract, no health or social insurance cover, delayed salaries), and find it challenging to change or quit their jobs.

The same dynamics played out for Vietnamese migrant workers in other countries, with the added complications of formal migration regulations. The need to maintain legal documents and abide by visa restrictions put migrant workers at an even greater disadvantage in negotiations with employers. When work was disrupted by Covid response policies, many workers sought to work illegally in other industries or tried to go back to Vietnam through unofficial channels.

In the case of RP six, a migrant worker in Thailand, she was jobless for two months as the hotel she worked in was ordered to close. With the generosity of her employer, she managed to get back to Vietnam with funded flight tickets. In Vietnam, she was introduced to work as a maid by local officers. However, it was not practical as per the government's guidelines, social contact had to be limited. The host also feared that she could get infected by Covid-19, thus, did not start the work with her. Now, she is working as a seller of minced crab in a market in District 1, HCMC, earning around US\$8.6 per day. Although the market is still crowded and has high risks of transmission, as the sole earner in a family of two children and grandparents, she had to come to work every day with limited protective measures.

RP one worked as an engineer in a manufacturing plant in Taiwan. By the time Covid-19 hit his area, his three-year contract with the company had expired. While waiting for his flight to return to Vietnam, he sought to work illegally in agriculture and construction. Migrant workers without working visas face a high fine by police officers if they get caught. However, he and many other migrants risk doing those jobs as they could not get their working visa extended, even though they were able to legally remain in Taiwan while waiting for repatriation. For migrant workers like RP one, staying without working makes it incredibly hard to survive. They had limited choices of what they could do.

RP 20 remained jobless for two months in Japan without receiving salaries when his contract expired. Unlike RP one, who could seek work outside, he could not change jobs due to his specific working scheme as an apprentice. It was hopeless for him in those two months as he did not hear anything from the companies for which he worked nor knew whether he could return to Vietnam due to limited operating flights. Fortunately, he was granted an extension to his contract and allowed to stay in Japan for two years. However, due to the increase in customer orders, he had to work nine to eleven hours per day. Even though Covid cases were reported at his company, operations weren't shut down. He noted, however, that the company followed good practices and measures to limit the risk of Covid infections.

4.2 Border and entry control measures

Vietnam closed its overland borders with China and suspended all flights from and to China in January 2020 when the first case was detected from Wuhan, China. A directive to ban all commercial flights from overseas was effective from April 2020, though six international air routes were temporarily resumed in September 2020. However, all inbound flights were halted again in December 2020 and only opened in January 2022 with 15 destination countries. During those periods, vigilance continued in testing and contact-tracing, and violations of quarantine and illegal entry across land borders were prosecuted. Vietnam imposed a 14-day mandatory quarantine administered in government facilities for all inbound passengers, and for people crossing land or sea borders. It also suspended entry of all foreigners (except diplomats and technical experts). Goods could still be transported through overland and sea routes, though bribes and corruption were reported (RP 14).

Communities near borders frequently trade and maintain social ties with their neighbours across the border. Border closures mean a cut in their sources of income and supplies of essential goods, and a disruption in social life. Further, in rural borderland communities, people often struggle with limited livelihood opportunities – typically restricted to agriculture or ecosystem services, which may involve informal or even illegal activity (RP 17 and 18). In these places, normal life before the pandemic typically involved informal negotiations with authorities to maintain ways of life that included regular trade and migration across borders. Changes to border function and border-related institutions in response to Covid-19 directly disrupted borderland communities and forced them to adapt: either by making difficult choices about where to ride out the lockdowns and border closures or by finding ways to continue cross-border activities at higher cost and greater risk.

Due to limited flights available for repatriation and high costs of returning (e.g., PCR test, quarantine costs), many migrant workers were reluctant or unable to

go back to Vietnam (RP 10) in spite of work disruptions in their host countries. Many migrant workers across the region lost jobs and were legally required to return to their home countries. When following these rules became prohibitively difficult, migrants who stayed often ended up with illegal/informal migration status, which forced them into illegal and informal work. These workers had weaker bargaining positions relative to their employers, had to work longer hours for less money, and were subject to the risk of being caught and prosecuted by the authorities.

Other migrants were unable to leave Vietnam for their host countries where they had already established work contracts (RP 7). In these cases, by *not* migrating, the migrants risked violating the terms of their contracts or migration arrangements, meaning they could have lost the future ability to migrate and would be left without livelihood options.

Many people, therefore, have taken great risks to illegally cross the border – both into and out of Vietnam (*Vietnam Law and Legal Forum* 2021). Smuggling people across borders has long been a booming business for many brokers or trafficking groups, in some cases, with the help of ethnic communities who live along the border (*VietnamNet* 2021). The efforts to close borders will always be imperfect. In practice, a closed border simply means the price and risk levels associated with crossing increase. The people we spoke to reported that the going rate to cross the Vietnam border during the Covid pandemic can vary from US\$500 to US\$2,000 per person (*Người Lao Động* 2021; *TuoiTre* 2021).

In Lang Son, a northern province sharing a border with China, many residents work in the sugarcane fields in China as there are not many available jobs in their area of residence when the agricultural seasons are over. When Covid-19 hit, the Lang Son local authority built a barbed wire fence to prevent people from crossing the borders illegally. Limited alternative jobs and travelling restrictions made it even harder to find employment in other provinces. Many workers had to use a small path and hire someone (usually a smuggler) to guide them through the border to reach China. In China, they mostly work illegally, according to RP 10. If they get caught by the Chinese police, they will be arrested and fined, and if the Vietnamese police find them, they could be fined and captured. When China started to deport undocumented migrant workers due to the fear of Covid-19 transmission, many Vietnamese workers were reluctant to go back to Vietnam through official channels because of the heavy fine and quarantine cost they might face. Additionally, spending 14 days in quarantine means that they could not work for that period, losing income. Thus, some chose to stay in China to continue working illegally, bearing risks of being detected and deported rather than coming back jobless.

RP 14 and her husband had a business selling rice across the border from Cambodia to Vietnam. During Covid-19, they reported paying the border officers some informal fees to get their grains transported. They had to pay twice to get through Cambodian and Vietnamese checkpoints. In Cambodia, they had to pay US\$61.26 for two minor checkpoints and a major checkpoint, while in Vietnam, it was US\$87.52 for a major checkpoint. However, according to RP 14, 'the fee is not fixed or regulated in any document' and 'depends on the border officers.' She stressed that during Covid-19, the price of pesticide, fertiliser, and other materials increased while the grain price reduced, which has significantly squeezed farmers and traders like her. 'In my opinion, closing the borders is the right thing to do as it helps prevent the spread of the virus and protect the citizens. However, it affects our livelihoods and income for our family' (RP 18, a migrant worker in Lao's opinion on the Covid policy response).

4.3 Evacuation and repatriation

When all international flights were suspended in April 2020, the Vietnamese government had operated repatriation flights for Vietnamese citizens stranded overseas and allowed some chartered flights for foreigners, including highly skilled workers, specialists, and investors. From the beginning of Covid-19 through January 2022 - when Vietnam resumed its international flight routes, nearly 800 flights were organised to bring home 200,000 citizens from 60 countries and territories (*Aljazeera* 2022).

There is a consensus amongst the RPs that there was a lack of transparency and signs of favouritism in the selection process of flights passengers (RPs one, seven and 20). Though the government published a priority list, which included people with underlying conditions, seniors, children, pregnant women, and those whose visa had expired, available seats were usually reserved for people with connections to the embassy or flight agencies, or those who could pay additional charges. Only a handful of citizens were able to get repatriation tickets even after several months of waiting.

In January 2022, four senior officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were arrested over allegations of bribery. They are accused of using their power and pursuing personal gains when licensing firms to organise repatriation flights (Mai 2022). The investigation process is still ongoing.

Due to the price of the tickets, which had skyrocketed to five to six times higher than the normal price, many migrant workers choose to stay in the host country, even if it meant working illegally outside their contracts (*VnEconomy* 2021). Some of those who took return flights had to use two or three months' salary or savings to pay off the ticket. Others chose to go back to a neighbouring country,

typically Cambodia, where the flight tickets were more affordable, then enter by foot to return to Vietnam (Cao 2021).

At sea, at least 1,500 fishermen were reportedly trapped on boats unable to return home, and they received little support from the Vietnamese embassies in the responsible countries. Even in some bordering countries (e.g., Lao), where there was no need for repatriation flights, the organisation for migrant workers to return home did not go so smoothly either. A significant influx of migrant workers went through the borders when Vietnam first announced closing its borders in April 2020, disrupting transportation, and increasing the risk of spreading Covid-19 (*TuoiTre* 2020). During the Covid-19 period, due to the limited capacity of the quarantine centres, some border provinces had to stop receiving returning migrant workers. Some smugglers took advantage of the situation to help people cross the borders illegally (*Vietnamese Government's Newspaper* 2021). In addition to disrupting the efforts to stop the spread of the virus, the increased reliance on illegal smuggling of people put migrants at much greater risk of exploitation, as the smugglers might just as easily have trafficked them.

4.4 Social relief package

As part of the national Covid-19 Pandemic Response Plan, the Vietnamese government issued and implemented a multi-sectoral response to address the social and economic impact of the crisis. Several incentives were issued such as tax breaks, delayed tax payments, loans with zero interest rates for affected enterprises, reduced electricity price, and reduced bank interest rates (UN 2020c). There are two social relief packages that target the vulnerable households and individuals during the four Covid-19 waves.

Specifically, the first package worth US\$2.6 billion was issued in 2020, following the issuance of Resolution No. 42/NQ-CP (9 April 2020) on assistance for people affected by Covid-19 and Decision No. 15/2020/QD-TTg (24 April 2020) on implementation of policies for assistance of people affected by Covid-19. The second social assistance package worth US\$1.13 billion was approved in 2021 as in Resolution No. 68/NQ-CP (1 July 2021) on urgent Covid-19 pandemic prevention and control measures and Decision No. 23/2021/QD-TTg (7 July 2021) on policy support for workers impacted by the pandemic. The packages consist of nine main policies: supporting employees whose labour contracts are suspended, supporting employees who have been terminated from work, additional support for infected and isolated children, food support for the infected person (F0), and those who have close contact with the infected person or are suspected of being infected (F1), supporting employees without labour contracts, support artists and tour guides, and household business (MOLISA 2021).

However, the packages and their implementation have faced criticism. Firstly, the second package is considered too small and insignificant regarding the fourth wave's magnitude, duration, and impact (RP five; UNDP 2021a). Direct assistance for vulnerable people only accounts for nine per cent of the total designed budget. For example, RP six, an informal worker in Ho Chi Minh City, received US\$65, and RP 18, a member of an ethnic minority group living near the border between Vietnam and Lao, received US\$52.5 and 42kg of rice during the whole Covid-19 period. This amount is less than one-third of the monthly minimum wages of US\$195 in Vietnam (Trading Economics 2021). Furthermore, the poor data management infrastructure caused difficulties for local officials in collecting and managing residents' eligibility information, resulting in assistance not being delivered at the right time or for the right person. The people we spoke to reported quickly having used up all the assistance money and not receiving support from additional sources.

Secondly, the aid was almost impossible to access for those with no legal documentation or working in the informal sector. This was especially the case for migrant workers in Vietnam not living in the locality associated with their official residential status (or *Hộ khẩu*) (Ravelo 2020). At least four groups of vulnerable people were identified as missing from the list of beneficiaries for the first package: (i) migrants without residential registration; (ii) small informal household businesses and unregistered household businesses; (iii) homeless people who have escaped the attention of the authorities; and (iv) people who lost income due to Covid-19 before the date when the decision on social distancing was issued (UNDP 2021b). Although the issue was resolved in the second relief package, not receiving the support on time has exacerbated the challenges faced by many migrant workers (RP five).

Thirdly, bureaucratic hurdles, low disbursement rates, a lack of transparency, and delays in distributing the allowance to local officials are barriers that prevented vulnerable populations from getting support. For example, in Hanoi, to receive US\$66 in assistance, the beneficiaries had to submit a request form, a copy of their residential status, and, if they were not Hanoi residents, a certified letter stating that they had not received support from their hometown; all were impractical during the lockdown period (L. Anh 2021). In many cases, the beneficiaries could not actively claim benefits, but had to wait for several months until a local official came and distributed the allowance (RPs six and 18).

Besides the social relief package from the central government, vulnerable households and individuals could receive support from their provincial authorities. For example, Ho Chi Minh City residents were entitled to receive support three times through the social relief package issued by the People's Committee of Ho Chi Minh City, regardless of their residential status (RP eight). However, this support depended on the capacity and resources of local

authorities; therefore, it exacerbated the existing inequalities between provinces. Additionally, many social-political organisations and NGOs actively provided emergency response support to vulnerable and marginalised groups during Covid-19 (RP 12; Tung 2021). Many citizen-led initiatives, such as rice ATMs and the oxygen banks positively impacted society (*Reuters* 2020). However, ethnic groups and citizens in remote areas were often excluded as most of the communication campaigns were in Vietnamese (not ethnic languages), and most support and initiatives still focused on urban areas (Ravelo 2020; RP 18).

5. Impact of Covid-19 response policies on human trafficking

Vietnam is a source, transit, and, to a lesser extent, a destination country for men, women, and children trafficked for labour exploitation, sexual exploitation, forced begging, and organ trafficking, both domestically and internationally (Nguyen and Le 2021). Vietnam has remained on the US Department of State Tier 2 Watch List for three consecutive years, meaning that '[t]he Government of Vietnam does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so' (The US Department of State 2021: 605). The three major recognised trafficking routes in which Vietnamese victims are transferred across the border or farther abroad are from northern Vietnam to China, southern Vietnam to Cambodia, and further to other countries (Binh 2006). It is estimated that 70 per cent of Vietnamese women and child victims are trafficked to China for forced marriage (Steering Committee 138/CP 2010). Victims from Southern provinces to Cambodia are often trafficked into sex work and are subsequently subjected to conditions of forced labour (e.g., domestic servants). Victims of labour trafficking are known to be trafficked to Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, Angola, Malaysia, and the United Arab Emirates, and they are often trafficked into work in agriculture, fishing, and coal mining. Internal trafficking has also been recognised as a problem with the trafficking routes from rural to urban areas (Shelley 2010). The commonly known tactics used by the traffickers are to lure potential victims into vulnerable situations such as online dating relationships, fraudulent job opportunities, kidnapping, and then to subject them to forced labour or sexual exploitation (Nguyen, Le and Luong 2020).

Covid-19 has triggered new trafficking trends in Vietnam. Thanks to strict measures during the pandemic, the number of rescued victims in China increased dramatically as local governments checked every household to contain the virus (V. Anh 2021). The stringent border control between neighbouring countries also made it difficult for traffickers to traffic victims from Vietnam into China. However, **domestic exploitation, surrogacy trafficking, and sex trafficking within Vietnam were on the rise** as more people experienced economic hardship (Freedom Collaborative 2020). Months of restrictions, job and income losses, border closures and school shutdowns have heightened the risks and vulnerability of the populations to trafficking – including the risks of being trafficked by smugglers employed by people attempting to migrate across closed borders. Ethnic minority groups living along the borders, who already faced disproportionate risks of trafficking, are particularly vulnerable due to a lack of access to information (e.g., most of the communication

campaigns are in Vietnamese, not their languages) and loss of incomes from their trading activities crossing the borders (Blue Dragon Children's Foundation 2021a). For example, in Ha Giang, a northern province of Vietnam sharing the border with China, an increased number of teenagers from H'mong ethnic groups reportedly lost their jobs in buckwheat farming during Covid and were trafficked to China for marriage or sold to brothels (RP three). In addition to those groups traditionally vulnerable to trafficking (e.g., communities in border areas where poverty is pervasive), fewer working opportunities and increased competition in local communities led to increased risks for other groups as well. Evidence suggests that significantly more underage girls are being coerced away from their rural villages and trafficked into karaoke bars, which are often fronts for brothels to serve workers in the industrial zones, where Covid-19 clusters boomed (DW 2021).

Furthermore, before Covid-19, surrogacy trafficking happened as pregnant women crossed illegally to China and sold their infants when they were born. The Blue Dragon Children Foundation, a leading NGO in Vietnam against human trafficking, indicated that they are dealing with more consistent and targeted cases of this type of trafficking (Freedom Collaborative 2020; RP four). Instead of trafficking women across the border to China, the traffickers focus on selling the babies. Additionally, economic hardship has also pushed people to seek opportunities in other countries through illegal migration (Minh 2021b). Berlin, Germany, has been regarded as an important centre of the human trafficking and smuggling network of Vietnamese victims in Europe (Knight 2019).

Traffickers have been adapting their tactics. As the borders closed, traffickers attempted to diversify destinations by trafficking victims within the country (Vietnam) and neighbouring countries where the laws were looser – such as the northern part of Myanmar – instead of China. According to Blue Dragon, which works to identify and support victims of trafficking in Vietnam, the numbers of Vietnamese victims of trafficking found within Vietnam and Myanmar increased dramatically during the pandemic (V. Anh 2021). Traffickers have increasingly used the Internet, gaming sites, and particularly social media to recruit, advertise, and sell potential victims (Mekong Club 2012). For example, sex trafficking victims have been lured by traffickers through online dating relationships or job promises, then subjected to forced labour or sex trafficking. Cybersex trafficking, in which children are abused and exploited livestream for paying clients, has also started to boom (*South China Morning Post* 2019). One of the interviewees noted that:

Human trafficking happened in cyberspace more than before. Traffickers become victims' lovers and deceive them with more sophisticated tricks. Traffickers do not physically get involved and only appear online. The

victims are transported across many provinces until reaching the Vietnam-China border; then, they are transferred to traffickers in China.
(RP four)

The widespread use of the internet and the rise in mobile phone ownership has helped enable trafficking operations in online environments. The economic conditions have also led more people to become traffickers themselves. In many cases, low-level traffickers are the acquaintances of the victims, and they share similar backgrounds such as a lack of basic education, legal knowledge, awareness, and employment (Blue Dragon Children's Foundation 2021b).

Covid-19 has disrupted the rescue efforts of law enforcement officials and challenged the rehabilitation work of NGOs (T. Nguyen 2021). Under domestic travelling and border crossing restrictions, law enforcement officials in Vietnam find it more challenging to collaborate with their counterparts in neighbouring countries to identify, rescue, and support survivors of trafficking. Many survivors were identified as illegal migrants rather than victims of trafficking due to a lack of court evidence and legal support from social services. Scarce Covid protective equipment and testing kits made the collaboration less effective and exposed law enforcement officials to higher risks of infection (MOLISA 2020). NGO staff have to pay higher expenses and experience longer bureaucratic processes, for example, in coordinating with different departments, including staff in quarantine camps, local health departments, and provincial governments, to return the survivors to their homes.

Different provinces may have different travel restriction policies in place or may not allow inter-provincial transportation, and as a result many survivors have had to spend longer time away from their hometown, which can be up to three to four months or longer before reunion with their family members. For survivors without identity documents or vaccination certificates, they have even been prevented from entering their provinces (e.g., children under 18 accounting for 80-90 per cent).

For those reasons, many have experienced mental health problems, and NGOs have struggled to find them shelters, food, and other necessities. For victims experiencing acute trauma, the problems have been further exacerbated. Closures of services and the prioritisation of hospital treatment for Covid-19 patients has meant that their health check-ups and psychological support have often been delayed. Even once reaching home, victims have also faced additional stigma from their communities due to fear of Covid infection (since returning victims may be seen as potential sources of new infections) (RPs three and four).

Covid-19 has affected the reintegration process of survivors of trafficking.

Trafficking survivors who have been on vocational training programs have lost their jobs due to the impact of Covid-19, particularly in the tourism, hospitality, and beauty industries. Those who enrolled in school after being rescued faced disruptions when schools were closed (*VietnamNews* 2021b). According to many NGO staff, psychological support offered to survivors, especially survivors of sexual exploitation, has had to be organised online, which they feel is less effective and has little impact (RPs one and three). Many faced additional challenges obtaining a 'certificate of victim'⁴, without which they could not receive initial support or other relief packages for victims of trafficking during the Covid period (RP four). Therefore, many survivors have faced compounded hardships because of the Covid response policies, which have made it more difficult to get identified, receive services, heal, and find a foundation from which they can earn a livelihood without excessive risk of exploitation or re-trafficking (UNODC 2020).

⁴ Victims need to be verified by law enforcement officials by the investigation process in order to be considered as victims of trafficking. The process can take up to two or three years.

6. Recommendations

Addressing implementation gaps in policy responses:

- **Digitalise and modernise the social services:** The lack of a centralised data management system of vulnerable households and individuals has caused delays in the disbursement process and complicated the registration process (e.g., beneficiaries need to be verified with additional documents), thus, consuming extra time and the efforts of the administrators and beneficiaries, making the systems prone to errors (e.g., beneficiaries who have received money or not), and containing risks of excluding certain marginalised groups (e.g., undocumented migrant workers). Additionally, the current distribution systems rely heavily on cash payments, thus, increasing risks of spreading Covid-19 and corruption. Therefore, there is a need to digitalise and modernise the social system to ensure a rapid and inclusive response for future crisis. The privacy and security of the beneficiaries should be taken into account when designing this system.
- **Ensure inclusion and participation of vulnerable groups in policy responses:** Research has shown that certain vulnerable groups (e.g., undocumented migrant workers and ethnic minorities) were at risk of exclusion from the social support provided by the government, social groups, and NGOs. The majority of communication campaigns were in Vietnamese; thus, ethnic minorities, who speak their own languages, could not access the necessary information on Covid-19 policies and measures. Social support, including financial and in-kind assistance, was highly concentrated in urban areas - remote or rural areas were relatively negligible - thus, equal distribution and attention need to be considered in resource allocation. Migrant workers or fishermen stranded overseas are also identified as vulnerable groups and need additional support from the local government or the representatives of Vietnam's government overseas to ensure their basic needs and citizen's rights.
- **Keep the policies responses flexible and the public well-informed:** While it is essential to have central policies responses to Covid-19, the distinct situations in each area require additional adjustments to ensure their socio-economic growth while curbing Covid-19. For example, early lockdown in some islands (e.g., Phu Quoc Island) affected the livelihoods of many residents and was deemed to be unnecessary when the island reported zero cases of Covid-19 and is rather isolated from the mainland. Inconsistent responses to city lockdown (e.g., Ho Chi Minh City) have led to a massive migration of migrant workers, especially those working in industrial areas,

thus risking further spreading Covid-19 and increasing the insecurity and uncertainty of their jobs.

- **Improve collaboration and coordination between Departments and between Departments and NGOs:** During Covid-19, major socio-economic activities still need to function, and many have moved to online spaces. Additionally, Covid-19 related measures such as contact tracing and Covid testing also contributed to the additional work undertaken by bureaucrats, government officials and NGO workers. As the organisation of investigation, victim rescue and identification in trafficking has also moved online, it requires smoother and more effective interdepartmental collaboration and collaboration between departments and NGOs. For example, law enforcement officials at the borders; the Department of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs; and NGOs groups in anti-trafficking could improve communication in their operations in relation to victims' rehabilitation to their hometowns. More initiatives need to be undertaken to address the shortcomings of the online working style, though doing so could increase the costs of operations and human resource deployment.
- **Improve transparency and accountability of the support systems:** Many corruption scandals during Covid-19 have been reported by the media and locals in Vietnam. They range from small amounts to large ones, such as increasing the charges of transporting commodities across the borders (RP 14) or taking advantage of evacuation flights for the personal interests of many officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Favouritism and lack of transparency (e.g., selection process of passengers for rescue flights) are also well-documented in the organisation of evacuation of many Vietnamese embassies overseas. These events severely impacted the trust of citizens towards the government, a crucial factor during the crisis. Publicising the information, regulating the markets, especially monitoring the black market and maintaining check-and-balance are some of the measures to improve the transparency and accountability of the Vietnamese government towards its citizens.

7. Conclusions

This report has reviewed evidence of the impact of Vietnam's response to Covid-19 on some of the most vulnerable groups in the country, including domestic and international migrant workers and victims of trafficking. We have provided an overview of Vietnam's major policy interventions across the four global waves of infections by drawing on publicly available policy documents and news sources. We interviewed officials and NGO workers who were able to provide first-hand insights to help us understand those interventions in their holistic context. We also spoke with members of those key vulnerable groups to get first-hand accounts of how people experienced the pandemic, including how they were impacted by the knock-on effects of the Covid response policies.

Early in the pandemic, Vietnam's decisive 'zero-new-case' approach prevented the kinds of major disruptions to the economy and the significant impacts to members of vulnerable groups associated with high infection rates that were experienced in other countries. This decisive early response has rightly been praised for saving lives and preventing disproportionate hardship (including disproportionate deaths) for vulnerable people. However, this report also explains how, in spite of the many successes, members of vulnerable groups faced significant hardships from the efforts to control infections, and these were further exacerbated when infection rates spiked during the fourth wave.

Across many countries in the region, migrant workers are a particularly vulnerable group. Even before the pandemic, people in rural and borderland areas faced disproportionate levels of poverty. Their access to livelihood opportunities were more likely to depend on the ability to migrate into cities and across borders. The difficulties of migration put them at risk of labour exploitation and made them vulnerable to trafficking, especially when safe, legal routes for migration were inaccessible to them (because of institutional hurdles and high costs).

In Vietnam, a majority of workers work in informal sectors where labour laws are difficult to enforce. When businesses were forced to close and people were made to stay at home, workers lost jobs and had to make difficult decisions about how to abide by regulations and also earn enough to survive. We have documented that Vietnam included provisions to support workers who faced disruptions to livelihoods, but – especially in the fourth wave – these were often not experienced as sufficient, especially for workers in informal sectors.

For Vietnamese workers abroad, interacting with the host countries' Covid response often left them stuck between a host country government insisting that they leave and the Vietnamese government which was not prepared to help

them return. Many ended up being caught by host country authorities, jailed, and/or deported. Many had to pay out of pocket – including fines, flight tickets, and quarantine costs – to return. Still others opted to remain in the host country, taking on greater risks, facing diminished bargaining power with employers, transitioning to informal/illegal migration status, and facing the constant threat of detection by authorities.

For people living in Vietnamese borderland areas, Covid response meant more expensive inputs, less profitable agricultural outputs, diminished livelihood opportunities, and more restricted abilities to migrate for work exactly when faced with an even greater need to migrate. This has resulted in much less migration overall, but also much riskier migration when it does occur. Migrants crossing the border into or out of Vietnam have become much more likely to face exploitation and abuse from traffickers, and even when they successfully smuggle themselves across, they face much higher costs (for brokers and bribes) than previously, with less chance of finding a good job on the other side.

We have shown that patterns in trafficking have also shifted as a result of Covid response policies. As it became more difficult to cross borders, and as the number of people desperately seeking work within Vietnam increased, trafficking and labour exploitation within Vietnam increased. Over the pandemic period, when the Vietnamese border was more stringently closed – especially between Vietnam and China – cross-border trafficking cases appeared to decline. However, trafficking has increased between Vietnam and other, more accessible destinations; especially Myanmar. It was also much more difficult for counter trafficking efforts to monitor at-risk groups, to identify victims, and to provide effective support services to victims once identified.

Survivors of trafficking have faced additional hurdles in their reintegration journeys. In addition to the institutional challenges of being identified as a victim of trafficking and accessing services through referral mechanisms, which were already made more difficult by the impact of Covid response, additional challenges emerged relating to the need to document vaccine status, to quarantine, and to return to one's place of origin. In some cases, victims experiencing trauma had to quarantine in larger groups of the general public. Further, standard support services for reintegration after trafficking include livelihood training. Vietnam's response to Covid meant that, especially during the fourth wave, victims were not able to attend training sessions and few, if any, jobs were available to them.

The picture painted by this research is of a country that has been remarkably successful (especially early on in the pandemic) at limiting the spread of the virus and thus the direct impact of the pandemic on public health. However, despite reasonable efforts to provide social support to those directly impacted by Covid

response measures, vulnerable groups such as migrant workers and survivors of trafficking – and especially those living and working in informality and facing intersecting forms of exclusion – have found themselves excluded from support and facing disproportionate harm.

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