

Policy Briefing

Impact of Vietnam's Covid-19 Response on Vulnerable Groups

Our research shows how Vietnam's Covid-19 policy response has influenced Vietnamese migrant workers and counter-trafficking work, particularly in border areas. Vietnam is a major labour exporter and is in the top ten countries that receive international remittances. Examining the impact of the pandemic means taking into account the livelihoods and wellbeing of hundreds of thousands of overseas migrant workers. This briefing considers the impact of Vietnam's policy response to the Covid-19 pandemic on such workers and supports adjustments in policy planning.

Key messages

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 2020–21. However, travel restrictions inevitably impacted many, especially overseas migrant workers; in June 2019, an estimated 540,000 were recorded working legally in 40 countries and territories.

This briefing discusses four findings:

1. Border closures left many overseas migrant workers vulnerable and led them to rely on people smugglers.
2. Suspension of commercial international flights, and a lack of transparency and favouritism in allocating seats on repatriation flights left many stranded.
3. The national pandemic response plan suffered from limitations.
4. Covid-19 policies have led to new trafficking trends and challenges.

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Border closures and the high cost of returning to Vietnam led migrants to rely on smugglers

Borderland communities often pursue cross-border trade and social activities. Unlike urban communities, they have limited means of subsistence, relying on agriculture, forestry, and sometimes illegal activities. Border closures since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic in January 2020 have disrupted social lives and supplies of essential goods, and cut incomes.

Limited alternatives and travel restrictions made it hard to find work in Vietnam, so many paid smugglers to get to China. People smuggling is a booming business; brokers charge US\$500–2,000 per person, sometimes aided by ethnic borderland communities.

When China began deporting undocumented migrant workers due to fears of Covid-19 transmission, many were reluctant to return to Vietnam by official channels because of potentially heavy fines, quarantine costs, and loss of income.

Suspension of flights stranded low-skilled migrant workers abroad – lack of transparency and favouritism in arranging repatriation left them vulnerable

In April 2020, Vietnam suspended commercial international flights, but repatriated Vietnamese citizens stranded overseas, bringing back 200,000 on around 800 flights between January 2020 and January 2022. But many were left abroad without means to return during this period.

Research participants noted a lack of transparency and favouritism in selecting passengers. Although the government published a priority list – such as people with underlying health conditions, seniors, children, pregnant women, people with expired visas – seats were usually reserved for people connected to embassies or who had paid extra.

Ticket prices were five times higher than usual, so many migrant workers remained in host countries, working illegally out of

contract. Some spent 2–3 months' salary on tickets. Others bought cheaper tickets to neighbouring countries – typically Cambodia – then entered Vietnam on foot. In January 2022, four senior Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials were arrested for bribery, accused of using their positions for personal gain when arranging repatriation flights.

One research participant said that their visa expired while they were waiting for a flight to return to Vietnam from Taiwan. They faced high fines if Taiwanese police caught them without a visa. Overstaying without proper documentation made it hard to earn a living and was risky. At sea, at least 1,500 fishers were reported trapped on boats, unable to return home and receiving little support from Vietnamese embassies.

Limitations of the national pandemic response plan

A multi-sector government response addressed socioeconomic impacts. Initiatives included tax breaks, delayed tax payments, zero-interest loans for businesses, and reduced electricity prices and bank interest rates. Two social relief packages targeted vulnerable households. However, critics noted an implementation gap in distributing aid.

First, low-capacity data management infrastructure made it hard for local officials to collect and manage residents' data, meaning help did not reach the right people at the right time. Research participants reported running out of money and seeking additional support elsewhere.

Second, aid was inaccessible to those without legal documentation or who worked in the informal sector, especially migrant workers who do not usually have residential status. The beneficiary list omitted vulnerable groups: migrants without residential status; small or unregistered informal household businesses; homeless people; and people who had lost income due to the pandemic before a certain date. Although the second relief package resolved problems, delays in support exacerbated challenges for many.

Third, bureaucratic delays, low disbursement rates, lack of transparency, and delays of up to several months in distributing allowances were identified as barriers preventing vulnerable people from accessing support; for example, in Hanoi, beneficiaries had to submit a request form and a copy of their residential status or, if not residents, a letter certifying they had not received support in their hometown; this was impractical during lockdown.

Besides the state social relief package, vulnerable groups received provincial authorities' support; for example, Ho Chi Minh City People's Committee (City Hall) offered three rounds of social relief, regardless of residential status. But support depended on local capacity and resources, exacerbating provincial inequalities.

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) gave emergency aid to vulnerable and marginalised groups. Citizen-led initiatives, such as 'rice ATMs' (**for example, in Hanoi**) and oxygen banks, positively impacted society. But ethnic groups and citizens in remote areas risked exclusion as most support and communication campaigns were in Vietnamese, not ethnic minority languages, and focused on urban areas.

Covid-19 policies have triggered new trafficking trends and challenges

Traffickers have adapted

Before the pandemic, Vietnamese girls and women were trafficked to China for forced marriages. The traffickers have adjusted to the changing times and the difficulty of bringing women across the border by focusing instead on selling their babies in China. However, the number of victims rescued in China increased dramatically as local governments checked households as part of strict Covid-19 control measures.

As border controls made it harder to traffic victims from Vietnam to China, traffickers diversified destinations. They trafficked victims both within Vietnam and to neighbouring countries with looser laws; for example,



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Myanmar, where 45 Vietnamese victims were trafficked in the first half of 2021, up from six victims in 2020. Traffickers have increasingly used the internet, gaming websites, and social media to recruit, advertise, and sell victims; for example, traffickers lured victims of sex trafficking and forced labour through online dating or job offers. Cyber-sex trafficking, in which children are abused on livestreams for paying clients, has also increased.

Covid-19 has disrupted law enforcement rescue efforts and challenged reintegration work

Travel restrictions have made it harder for law enforcement officials to collaborate across borders to identify, rescue, and support trafficking survivors. NGOs must pay higher costs and face longer bureaucratic processes; for example, coordinating between quarantine camps, local health departments, and provincial governments to send survivors home.

Restrictions vary or do not allow travel between provinces; many survivors must wait 3–4 months before being reunited with families. Those without identification papers or vaccination certificates (80–90 per cent of whom are aged under 18) are not allowed into provinces; many experience mental health problems and NGOs have struggled to find them shelter, food, and other necessities. Closure of services and priority hospital treatment for patients with Covid-19 have delayed health check-ups and psychological support. Once home, survivors face additional stigma due to community fears of Covid-19 infection. Without 'victim certificates', survivors could not receive support designed for them; desperate to find work, many risk being re-trafficked.

Policy recommendations

- **Digitalise and modernise social services:** lack of a centralised data management system for vulnerable households and individuals has delayed disbursements and complicated the registration process (e.g. beneficiaries must be verified with additional documents), taking administrators and beneficiaries extra time, making systems prone to errors, and risking excluding marginalised groups (e.g. undocumented migrant workers). Also, distribution systems rely heavily on cash payments, increasing the risk of corruption. System designs should consider beneficiaries' privacy and security.
- **Ensure inclusion and participation of vulnerable groups in policy responses:** vulnerable groups (e.g. undocumented migrant workers, ethnic minorities) risked being excluded from government social support. Most communication campaigns were in Vietnamese; ethnic minorities could not access information on Covid-19 policies and measures in their own

languages. Social support, including financial and in-kind assistance, was highly concentrated in urban areas, and remote or rural areas were neglected. Equal distribution and attention must be considered in resource allocation. Migrant workers and fishers stranded overseas are vulnerable groups that need extra support from local governments or Vietnamese representatives abroad to ensure their basic needs and rights.

- **Improve transparency and accountability of support systems:** media and local people have reported corruption scandals during the pandemic, such as increased charges to transport commodities across borders and officials taking advantage of repatriation flights for personal gain, negatively impacting citizens' trust in government. Publicising information, regulating markets – in particular, monitoring the black market – and maintaining checks and balances are measures that would improve government transparency and accountability to citizens. ■

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Further reading

Freedom Collaborative (2020) **How the Global Health Crisis Has Triggered New Trafficking Trends in Vietnam**, Global Newsletter, 6 October

UN Viet Nam (2020) **UN Assessment of the Social and Economic Impact of Covid-19 in Viet Nam**, Hanoi: United Nations Viet Nam

UNDP (2021) **Rapid Assessment of the Covid-19: Socio-Economic Impact on Vulnerable Households in Viet Nam**, New York NY: United Nations Development Programme

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2020) **Covid-19: Victims of Human Trafficking Left Unemployed in Vietnam**

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