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How Did Covid-19 Affect Food and Nutrition Security of Migrant Workers in Northern Vietnam?

**Ayako Ebata, Nguyen Thi Minh Khue,
Nguyen Thi Minh Hanh and Nguyen Thi Dien**

June 2022

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Summary

This study explored how measures to curtail the spread of the coronavirus (Covid-19) in Vietnam affected the livelihoods and food and nutrition security of internal migrant workers. While Vietnam has made impressive progress towards food security in the past decades, marginalised groups of people such as ethnic minorities and migrants continue to face significant challenges. The project team investigated how the pandemic affected the precarity of these groups' income-generating opportunities and how the level of income generated affected the quality, as well as the quantity, of food consumed by migrant workers in Hanoi, the capital, and the Bac Ninh province, which hosts large industrial zones. Our research shows that income for migrant workers significantly reduced as a result of Covid-19-related lockdown measures. Almost half of the respondents were considered to be either moderately or severely food insecure. Financial support provided by the government hardly reached migrant workers because of the registration system required to receive unemployment benefits. To reduce the vulnerability of migrant workers, we conclude that:

- Short-term crisis responses need to focus on providing nutritious, healthy, and ample food to migrant workers.
- Policies that impose minimum standards of living need to be effectively enforced.
- The coverage of existing social safety nets by the government needs to be expanded.
- A radical reform of labour law is needed to improve labour rights for migrant workers.

Keywords

Food insecure; food security; nutrition security; migrant workers; Vietnam.

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Executive summary

This study was conducted as part of the Covid Collective, funded by the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO). It explored how measures to curtail the spread of the coronavirus (Covid-19) in Vietnam affected the livelihoods and food and nutrition security of internal migrant workers. Access to healthy diets and food security are fundamental human rights. While Vietnam has made impressive progress towards food security in the past decades, marginalised groups such as ethnic minorities and migrants continue to suffer from food insecurity. We investigated how the pandemic affected the precarity of these groups' income-generating opportunities and how that affected the quality, as well as the quantity, of food consumed by migrant workers. We focused on peri-urban and urban areas of northern Vietnam and gathered data from Hanoi, the capital, and the Bac Ninh province, which hosts large industrial zones (IZs).

Our research shows that income for migrant workers significantly reduced as a result of Covid-19-related lockdown measures, particularly for those who worked without formal labour contracts. The most common strategy to reduce everyday expenditure was to cut back on food. As a result, the quality of food fell significantly during the periods of lockdown. This was partly due to the generally precarious and informal nature of migrants' employment and residential status, which makes it difficult for them to earn a decent living and access social protection measures easily. For instance, the government provided financial support to workers who were affected by the pandemic. However, these measures hardly reached those working without formal contracts and were insufficient for those with formal contracts.

To reduce the vulnerability of migrant workers, the following suggestions are made:

1. The government and employers need to make short-term crisis responses nutrition-sensitive and focus on providing nutritious, healthy, and ample food to migrant workers.
2. Policies that impose minimum standards of living need to be effectively enforced to ensure a safe and hygienic environment for migrant workers to prepare meals.
3. The coverage of existing social safety nets by the government needs to be expanded upon to include workers without labour contracts.

A radical reform of labour law is needed to reduce migrant workers' vulnerability to job loss and to increase their bargaining power.

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Acronyms

FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office
FGD	focus group discussion
FIES	Food Insecurity Experience Scale
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
IZ	industrial zone
KII	key informant interview
LMICs	low- and middle-income countries
RQ	research question
VND	Vietnamese dong
VNUA	Vietnam National University of Agriculture

1. Introduction

The right to adequate food is a fundamental human right (OHCHR 1999). Food security is achieved 'when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life' (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO 2021: 190). With economic growth, countries across the world have made significant progress in reducing the prevalence of food insecurity. Vietnam is one such country that has made significant progress in reducing food insecurity and malnutrition. In 2019, the proportion of Vietnamese people considered to be severely food-insecure and moderately food-insecure was 1.8 per cent and 16.1 per cent, respectively (Kim *et al.* 2021).

However, progress towards food and nutrition security is not experienced homogeneously, with marginalised individuals and communities consistently falling behind. In the case of Vietnam, the overall prevalence of undernourishment decreased from 19.7 per cent in 2001 to 6.7 per cent in 2019 (FAO 2021). However, undernourishment tends to be higher in rural than urban areas, and highest in the areas of the Central Highlands as well as the Red River Delta (Kim *et al.* 2021). Similarly, Harris *et al.* (2021) show that malnutrition persists among Vietnam's ethnic minorities while the Kinh majority was able to make significant progress in the past few decades. For instance, stunting rates have decreased from 33.4 per cent in 2000 to 15.2 per cent in 2010 for the Kinh people but for ethnic minorities it reduced from 50.6 per cent to 34.8 per cent during the same period. Poorer and migrant households are more likely to be food-insecure than richer and local households (Vuong, Gallegos and Ramsey 2015).

This study focuses on one group of marginalised people in Vietnam: internal migrant workers – i.e., those moving within a country to earn income. It explores how economic shocks as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic affected this group's income and food and nutrition security. In Vietnam, many people migrate from rural areas to cities and industrial zones (IZs) to earn a living. According to the national census from 2019, a total of 6.4 million people, i.e., 7.3 per cent of the total population in Vietnam, migrate to work in major cities such as Hanoi, Danang, Ho Chi Minh city, and IZs in the Red River Delta and southeast regions (GSO 2019). The push factors in rural areas (e.g. plots of agricultural land too small in size to sustain a livelihood, youth unemployment, and other economic shocks related to climate change and price fluctuations) and pull factors from urban areas (e.g. increased job opportunities, higher incomes, and city lifestyles) encourage migration as an important livelihood strategy in Vietnam as well as in other low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) (Hoang, Dang and Tacoli 2005; Nguyen, Raabe and Grote 2015; Thanh *et al.* 2013; White 2011).

These migrant workers are vulnerable to economic shocks such as the Covid-19 pandemic, as their migrant status prevents them from accessing health care, education, housing, information, and other social security policies. This is due to the *Hộ khẩu* system, or household registration system, which specifies the members of a given household in a specific location. As migrant workers are unable to register themselves in the place of destination, they are not entitled to social protection measures and public services (Le, Tran and Nguyen 2011). Minority ethnic groups in Vietnam tend to be over-represented among migrant workers, who make up only 14 per cent of Vietnam's population but 70 per cent of Vietnam's poor (Demombynes 2013). Covid-19-related lockdowns significantly affected income-generating opportunities for migrant workers and their physical and mental wellbeing (Tran and Nixon 2021).

We emphasise the nutritional aspect of food security, as a diet needs to provide micro- as well as macronutrients for a person to lead a healthy and productive life (HLPE 2020). Deficiency of micronutrients – such as iron, zinc, vitamin A and vitamin C – is associated with poor health, particularly among vulnerable citizens (i.e. young children, pregnant and breastfeeding women, women of reproductive age) (Bailey, West and Black 2015). While Vietnam made impressive progress towards food security (i.e. providing an adequate **quantity** of food), dietary diversity remains poor: 70 per cent of consumption comes from carbohydrates, mostly rice, providing limited micronutrients commonly found in fresh fruit, vegetables, pulses, and animal-sourced food (Kim *et al.* 2021). Poor diet characterised by insufficient or excess calories, lack of diversity, and excess intake of salt, sugar, and alcohol is a major cause of malnutrition in all its forms – undernutrition (stunting, wasting, and being underweight) and overnutrition (being overweight and obesity) (WHO 2020, 2021). Therefore, instead of focusing on any food access *per se*, we evaluate how the quality of diet has changed for migrant workers during the pandemic.

Much of the existing research focuses on the link between migration and food (in)security of remittance-receiving households in rural areas (Abebaw *et al.* 2020; Duda, Fasse and Grote 2018; Nguyen and Winters 2011; Ogunniyi *et al.* 2020). However, studies investigating the food and nutrition security status of migrant workers themselves remain scarce (Crush 2013). Moreover, existing studies investigate the link between migrants' food security and international migration from LMICs to high-income countries or between LMICs (Crush and Tawodzera 2017; Weiler, McLaughlin and Cole 2017). While Crush (2013) provides such an analysis for internal migrants in sub-Saharan Africa, the analysis lacks detailed insights regarding the quality of migrants' diet, sources of vulnerability in generating income during a period of disturbance (i.e. the Covid-19 pandemic), and support structures that migrants relied on to cope with the difficulties, which are the focus points of this article.

In exploring the experience of food (in)security for Vietnamese migrant workers, we adapt a systems approach and examine multiple determinants of food and nutrition insecurity. While existing literature tends to focus on income (i.e. a household's purchasing power to afford healthy food) as a crucial means to access healthy and nutritious food (Crush 2013), access to healthy food depends also on food environments, food prices, and living conditions (HLPE 2020). We will assess how these environmental aspects of food access in addition to migrants' income changed in response to measures to curtail the spread of Covid-19 and how these influenced their food and nutrition security between 2020 and 2021.

We address the following research questions (RQs):

- What measures were put in place by the Government of Vietnam to slow down the spread of Covid-19?
- How did the public health measures affect income-generating opportunities and food environments of migrant workers? How did the change in income and food environments affect food and nutrition security of migrant workers?
- How did migrant workers respond to any loss of income during the pandemic? Which social protection measures helped them to minimise negative effects [of loss of income]?

The rest of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 discusses the data collection and analysis strategies for the study. Section 3 outlines policy measures issued by the government to curtail the spread of Covid-19 (RQ 1). Section 4 discusses the study results regarding migrant workers' income-generating activities as well as food consumption patterns before and during the pandemic (RQ 2) and the support structures that they relied on (RQ 3). Section 5 summarises the findings and presents policy recommendations before concluding in Section 6.

2. Study sites and data collection strategies

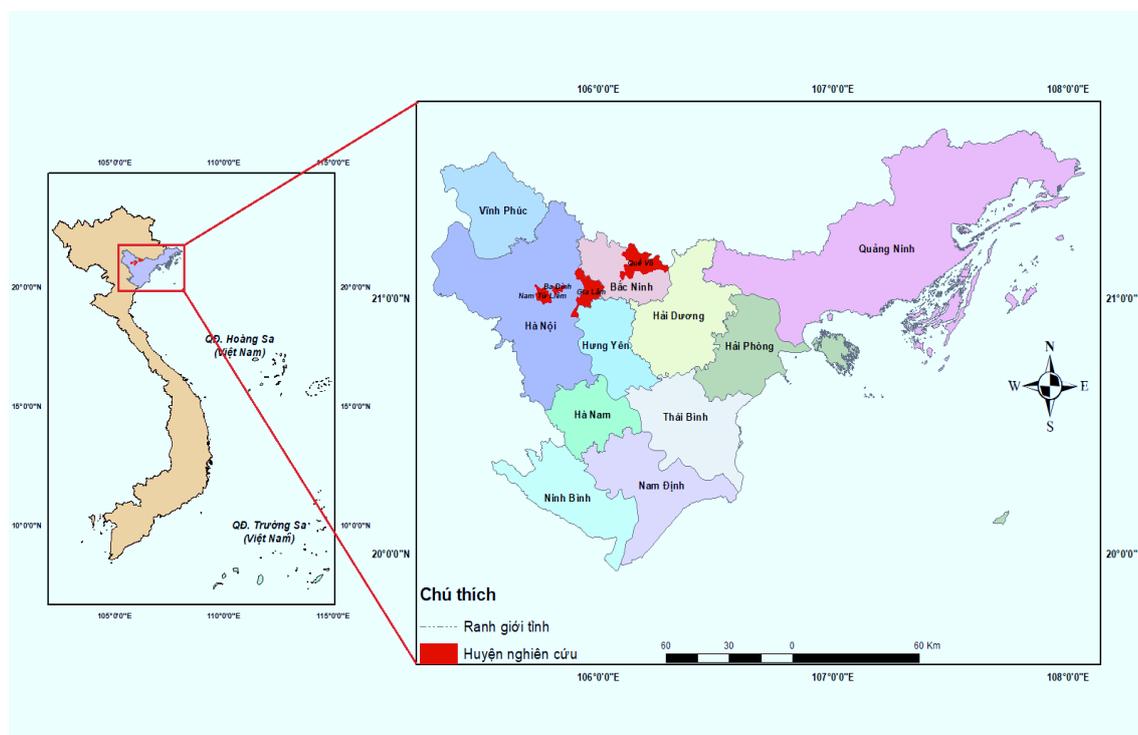
2.1 Study sites

Hanoi capital and the Bac Ninh province in the Red River Delta region were selected as the research sites (Figure 2.1). We conducted fieldwork with two distinct groups of migrants: (1) from the informal sector – or so-called ‘free labourers’¹ who are not officially contracted; and (2) from the formal sector – i.e. migrant workers in IZs. In Hanoi, we selected free labourers in the informal sector, and workers in IZs in the Bac Ninh province.

Migrants in the informal sector are diverse; we focused on transporters in the wholesale markets, construction workers, and street vendors as they are considered to be the most vulnerable groups and have been vastly affected by the pandemic (ILO 2020a). Transporters and street vendors stay in the centre of Hanoi while construction workers live in the peri-urban or new urban centres of Hanoi because they are key development areas. Therefore, to conduct the fieldwork, we selected three districts in Hanoi: Gia Lam (east of Hanoi, with an area of 116.71km² and 290,900 inhabitants); Nam Tu Liem (a new central district in the west of Hanoi, with an area of 32.19km² and 274,200 inhabitants); and Ba Dinh (a central district in Hanoi, with an area of 9.21km² and 225,600 inhabitants) (GSO 2019).

In the Bac Ninh province, Que Vo IZ in Que Vo district was selected for study as the oldest IZ in the province. Thousands of migrant workers stay in the villages surrounding the IZ to work for the companies there. Located in the east of Bac Ninh province, about 50km from the centre of Hanoi, Que Vo district has 21 communes. The high density of industrial companies in the IZ also provides local residents with an opportunity to generate income through providing migrant workers with essential services such as food and housing. In Que Vo district, migrant workers commonly live in Phuong Lieu, especially in the village of Giang Lieu within this commune: the local village has 5,000 inhabitants while there are an estimated 20,000 migrant workers within its surrounding area of 3km². This commune was also heavily affected by Covid-19-related measures, as lockdown was imposed first and lasted the longest in the Bac Ninh province.

¹ Since free labourers are migrants from other provinces, they are also called ‘outside province labourers’.

Figure 2.1 Map of study sites

Source: Adapted from a map held by the Provincial administration with their permitted reuse.
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2.2 Data collection

2.2.1 Secondary data

We collected official statistics, policies, newspaper articles, other media reports, and academic articles relevant to the measures to control the spread of Covid-19, to migrant workers and their livelihoods, as well as to the implementation of key policies in the research sites. Although the research on impacts of the pandemic on migrant workers in Vietnam was scarce, the secondary data allowed us to gather an overview of the issues, and to capture the main impacts of the pandemic on jobs, income, food, and nutrition security of migrant workers. The secondary data and information also provided insights into the socioeconomic and cultural contexts that affected how migrant workers were able to respond (or more often were prevented from responding) to the difficulties they faced during the pandemic.

2.2.2 Primary data

Three of the authors collected primary data through key informant interviews (KIIs), focus group discussions (FGDs), and a quantitative survey from October 2021 to January 2022. All participants were compensated for their time.

We adhered to the ethical guidelines of the Vietnam National University of Agriculture (VNUA), project partner of the study in Vietnam, and obtained informed consent from participants.

Through KIs, we explored the perceptions of key informants on the lives of migrant workers, local contexts where the migrant workers stay and work, the situation of the Covid-19 pandemic, the regulations and measures to fight the disease, and implementation of these at the research sites. KIs also allowed us to understand how migrant workers responded to the lockdown measures and their effect on livelihoods and nutrition security. In total, we conducted 24 KIs in Hanoi and Bac Ninh (Table 2.1).

Table 2.1 Key informants interviewed

Types of key informant	Total	Hanoi	Bac Ninh
Experts on migrant workers	2	1	1
District leaders	4	2	2
Commune leaders	4	3	1
Village/town chiefs	4	3	1
Representatives of Covid-19 community group	4	3	1
Owners of migrants' residences	2	1	1
Migrant workers	4	2	2
Total	24	15	9

Source: Authors' own.

In addition, we conducted 12 FGDs (each with about ten participants) in both Hanoi and Bac Ninh. The participants were strategically selected based on the industry they work in and their socioeconomic characteristics, to capture the differentiated impacts of the pandemic on their income and support systems – such as gender, and whether they migrate with or without family members. Moreover, the distance to hometowns of migrant workers might affect their support networks, especially in the supportive provision of food.

The topics for FGDs included: the effects of Covid-19 on their job and income; their experiences of obtaining food before and during the lockdown periods; challenges in obtaining healthy and nutritious food specifically; their strategies to overcome these challenges; and the mechanisms that helped them to mitigate the effect of the pandemic on their access to nutritious food.

In addition, we conducted an in-person quantitative survey with 205 migrant workers in study sites. We employed a stratified random sampling technique and selected participants from the two targeted groups of migrant workers: free labourers and those in IZs. We obtained the list of migrant workers from the

village/town chiefs and randomly selected participants from the lists, for which they were paid a small stipend for participating.

The questionnaire addressed five main topics:

1. The demographic characteristics of migrant workers.
2. Migrants' jobs and income sources, changes in jobs, income and expense due to Covid-19.
3. Their living and food environments.
4. Their experience in obtaining food and having meals, their difficulties related to access to nutritious food during the pandemic.
5. Their strategies and supportive network in accessing healthy and nutritious food.

In understanding the level of food security, we employed the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES) questions developed by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO 2013). The FIES is calculated based on respondents' answers to a set of eight questions (Table 2.2) that explore an individual's experiences of food (in)security.

Table 2.2 FIES questions

No.	During the last 12 months, because of a lack of money or other resources, was there a time when you...
1	... were worried you would not have enough food to eat?
2	... were unable to eat healthy and nutritious food?
3	... ate only a few kinds of foods?
4	... had to skip a meal?
5	... ate less than you thought you should?
6	... and your family ran out of food?
7	... were hungry but did not eat?
8	... went without eating for a whole day?

Source: FAO (2013)

Based on FAO (2013), we calculated the FIES score by simply adding up the answer to all questions. Individuals are moderately food-insecure when they eat less than they think they should and/or skip meals because of a lack of money or resources. Likewise, individuals are considered severely food-insecure when they experience hunger as they run out of food, do not have anything to eat despite feeling hungry, and/or have to forgo meals for an entire day.

2.3 Data analysis

KIIs and FGDs were recorded and transcribed, and authors extracted emerging themes from the qualitative data to understand the three main areas of research:

1. The effects of Covid-19 on migrant workers' jobs and income.
2. Access to healthy and nutritious food, and food insecurity.
3. Mechanisms that helped them to mitigate the effect of the pandemic on their access to nutritious food.

The quantitative data from the survey was cleaned and analysed in SPSS and STATA. The combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis allows us to understand the extent to which migrant workers experienced changes in income, expenditure, and food insecurity due to the pandemic; factors that led to challenges in maintaining access to healthy and nutritious food; and social mechanisms that helped them to mitigate the negative effects of the pandemic.

3. Policy measures against Covid-19

3.1 Response to the pandemic

3.1.1 Restriction measures

At the national level

By March 2022, Vietnam had experienced four waves of the pandemic and implemented its first containment measures nationwide between January and May 2020.

The strictest policy was its quarantine measures against those contracting or suspected of having contracted Covid-19. Before the Safety, Flexibility, and Effective Control of Covid-19 Epidemic policy² was introduced, quarantine at centralised facilities was mandated for those who visited Covid-19-infected areas or had close contact with confirmed cases: they are referred to as 'F-1' cases in policy documents. For people who had a close contact with F-1 cases, home quarantine was mandated and monitored by local commune health staff.³ In cases of community transmission, measures were put in place including contact tracing, commune-level lockdowns, and widespread local testing to prevent wider transmission. The measures have been eased recently following the high rate of vaccination in Vietnam.⁴

Other anti-Covid-19 measures were regulated under Directive No. 15/CT-TTg dated 27 March 2020 and Directive No. 16/CT-TTg dated 31 March 2020 (see Table 3.1). Directives 15/CT-TTg and 16/CT-TTg became the 'standards' for application of Covid-19-related restriction measures at local levels.

² Under Resolution No. 128/NQ-CP of the government dated 11 October 2021 on safety, flexibility, and effective control of the Covid-19 pandemic.

³ Directive No. 15/CT-TTg of the Prime Minister dated 27 March 2020 on climax stage of Covid-19 control effort; Directive No. 16/CT-TTg of the Prime Minister dated 31 March 2020 on implementation of urgent measures for prevention and control of Covid-19; Decision No. 878/QD-BYT of the Ministry of Health dated 12 March 2020 promulgating the Guidance on Covid-19 Quarantine at Quarantine Facilities.

⁴ Official Letter No. 762/BYT-DP of the Ministry of Health dated 21 February 2022 on quarantine/isolation for Covid-19 cases and close contacts.

Table 3.1 Key directives to control the spread of Covid-19

Directives	Imposed measures
Directive No. 15/CT-TTg of the Prime Minister dated 27 March 2020 on climax stage of Covid-19 control effort (Directive 15/CT-TTg)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Restrictions on mass gatherings. – All cultural and recreational activities banned. – Suspended business operations, excluding those providing essential goods or services. – Movement restrictions, especially from infected provinces to other localities.
Directive No. 16/CT-TTg of the Prime Minister dated 31 March 2020 on implementation of urgent measures for prevention and control of Covid-19 (Directive 16/CT-TTg)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Social distancing imposed nationwide – 2m distance required during communication. – Ban of public gatherings of more than two people. – Temporary shutdown of non-essential businesses. – Citizens advised to stay at home and only go out when strictly necessary (e.g. food purchases).

Source: Authors' own.

At provincial levels

Since the second wave (July–October 2020), as the pandemic's effects varied across different areas, provincial authorities have been given discretion on anti-Covid-19 measures, requiring prompt response to prevent transmission while maintaining economic activities. Therefore, applied measures depended upon local situations, and changed quickly.

Hanoi and Bac Ninh are two provinces that were severely hit during the fourth wave (May 2021–March 2022). During this period, non-essential businesses (such as dine-in services, barbershops, street vendors, and civil construction works) were frequently closed in Hanoi due to rising case numbers.⁵ Businesses that were operating needed measures to ensure safety such as: providing

⁵ Official Telegram 05/CD-UBND of Hanoi People's Committee dated 2 May 2021 on strengthening Covid-19 prevention in Hanoi after Victory Day (April 30) and Labour Day (1 May); Official Telegram No. 14/CD-CTUBND of the Chairman of Hanoi People's Committee dated 12 July 2021 on implementation of measures to prevent and control the Covid-19 epidemic in the face of complicated developments of the pandemic across the country; Official Telegram No. 15/CD-CTUBND of the Chairman of Hanoi People's Committee dated 18 July 2021 on urgent measures for Covid-19 prevention and control; Decision No. 3642/QD-UBND of Hanoi People's Committee dated 21 July 2021 on implementation of policies to support employers and employees affected by the Covid-19 pandemic.

personal protective equipment to staff; measuring temperature upon arrival; arranging adequate facilities and supplies for handwashing and disinfecting; and ensuring distance when in contact.⁶

During the period of social distancing in Hanoi (24 July–21 September 2021), people were asked to stay at home unless strictly necessary. Restrictions on individual mobility took place in a number of coercive ways to reduce contact, such as limiting shopping to two to three times a week per household and requiring travel permits (issued and certified by employers or local authorities) for those wishing to pass through checkpoints located in every commune.⁷

Policies also influenced the ways in which people purchased food. Accordingly, shopping malls, supermarkets, and wholesale and local markets in the city could only sell necessities and had to keep a minimal distance between people, reduce the number of customers at any one time, ensure the implementation of the '5K' message,⁸ minimise close contact when trading, and use online delivery services when possible. For food and beverage businesses with a risk of direct infection, it was mandatory to keep a distance of at least 2m between people or a distance of at least 1m with a shield between sitting positions. In case of failure to fully meet the requirements, their operation would be subject to suspension until the conditions were satisfied. When local infection was increasing, only food takeaways were allowed.

In Bac Ninh, from the beginning of the fourth wave, the vast majority of infections were among workers in IZs. Therefore, in addition to restriction measures applied generally to the public, Bac Ninh implemented a number of policies particularly targeting workers in IZs. Specifically, production, business, and services establishments with IZs/clusters were required to follow pandemic safety protocols (measure body temperatures; ensure the wearing of facemasks; ensure the frequent use of hand sanitiser; ensure a minimum distance of 1m between people; divide production and meal shifts; clean and disinfect the environment daily, after each work or meal shift; and ensure food safety). They also had to assess the risk of Covid-19 infection on a daily basis.⁹ They were requested to proactively develop plans and scenarios to maintain production if the factory was forced to lock down, turning the factory into an isolation unit for infected cases. Workers also had to register with the local authorities (where

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Directive No. 17/CT-UBND of Hanoi People's Committee dated 24 July 2021 on social distancing in Hanoi for Covid-19 prevention and control; Official Letter No. 2434/UBND-KT of Hanoi People's Committee dated 29 July 2021 regulating the form of travel permits during the time of social distancing.

⁸ The '5K' message was launched by the Ministry of Health, featuring five protective measures against contracting and transmitting Covid-19, including: *Khau trang* (facemasks); *Khu khuan* (disinfection); *Khoang cach* (distancing); *Khong tu tap* (no gathering); and *Khai bao y te* (health declaration).

⁹ Directive No. 07/CT-UBND of Bac Ninh People's Committee dated 6 May 2021 on urgent measures for Covid-19 prevention and control; Dispatch No. 2561/UBND-XDCB of Bac Ninh People's Committee dated 16 August 2021 on implementation of measures for Covid-19 prevention and control at enterprises in industrial zones in Bac Ninh province.

workers resided; and where factories, enterprises, agencies, and so on, are located) for daily shuttle buses, commit to strictly follow the pandemic safety protocols at the places of residence, minimise going out of work and home, and be screened by specialised authorities.¹⁰

In food-related matters, Bac Ninh authorities encouraged businesses to arrange for workers to eat three full meals at the company.¹¹ Companies arranged reasonable working time and shifts so that workers did not have to cook or go to the market when they returned to their dormitories. Workers who stay at rented residences when not working were even required not to leave the residences, except for special cases approved by local authorities. The residence owner and the community Covid-19 team would assist workers to purchase food and other necessities.¹²

3.1.2 Safety, flexibility, and effective control of the Covid-19 epidemic

In mid-October 2021, following widening vaccine coverage among the Vietnamese population and with countries across the world easing restrictions, the government promulgated provisional regulations on Safety, Flexibility, and Effective Control of Covid-19 Epidemic.¹³ This resolution allowed communal authorities to determine the level of risk of Covid-19: from low (green) to very high (red). Given the high vaccination coverage in Hanoi¹⁴ and Bac Ninh,¹⁵ almost all localities in the two provinces have been classified as 'green' or 'yellow' zones with very few or no restrictions imposed on production, service provision, and individual mobility.

3.2 Support system

To ensure social security and mitigate the negative effects of Covid-19, the government promulgated several policies to support those affected by the disease, under which contract and non-contract workers were entitled to payment with different rates determined by their labour status.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ If their shifts did not overlap with meal times, factories were asked to consider arranging meals for workers to take home.

¹² Dispatch No. 1566/UBND-KGVX of Bac Ninh People's Committee dated 27 May 2021 on control of mobility of workers during out-of-work time; Dispatch No. 2561/UBND-XDCB of Bac Ninh People's Committee dated 16 August 2021 on implementation of measures for Covid-19 prevention and control at enterprises in IZs in Bac Ninh province.

¹³ Under Resolution No. 128/NQ-CP of the government dated 11 October 2021 on safety, flexibility, and effective control of Covid-19 pandemic.

¹⁴ [Hanoi Covid Map](#).

¹⁵ [Bac Ninh Covid Map](#).

Table 3.2 Key policies to support workers affected by the Covid-19 pandemic

Resolutions	Measures
Resolution No. 68/NQ-CP of the government dated 1 July 2021 on policies to support employees and employers affected by the Covid-19 pandemic	Employees whose labour contract is suspended or terminated due to Covid-19 shall receive a one-off payment ranging from about VND 1.8–3.7m* per person depending on specific circumstances.
Resolution No. 116/NQ-CP of the government dated 24 September 2021 on policies to support employees and employers affected by the Covid-19 pandemic from Unemployment Insurance Fund	Employees affected by Covid-19 are financially supported from the Unemployment Insurance Fund with an amount ranging from VND 1.8–3.3m depending on the length of insurance participation.

Source: Authors' own.

Note: * For employees without an employment contract (the self-employed, free labourers), provincial, instead of national, authorities develop criteria and determine the beneficiaries and the support amounts, based on the specific circumstances and budget capacity. But the support rate is not less than VND 1.5m¹⁶ per person per time or VND 50,000 per person per day based on the actual number of days of suspension (Resolution 68/NQ-CP (1 July 2021)).

¹⁶ Vietnamese dong (VND); as of March 2022, US\$1 = VND 22,872. Taken from [xe.com](https://www.xe.com).

4. Results

4.1 Socioeconomic characteristics of migrant workers

4.1.1 Migrants' demographic characteristics

In this sub-section, we describe the main demographic characteristics of migrant workers and discuss the difference between free labourers and IZ workers.

In terms of gender (Table 4.1), the proportion of women participating in the survey was higher than men (57.6 per cent and 42.4 per cent, respectively). At the national level, studies show that the number of female migrants has increased over time (Anh *et al.* 2012; Coxhead, Nguyen and Vu 2015). Overall, in Vietnam, women represent 52.4 per cent of all Vietnamese migrants (GSO 2016).

Table 4.1 Gender difference of respondents

	IZ workers N=111		Free labourers N=94		All N=205	
	N	N %	N	N %	N	N %
Male	46	41.4	41	43.6	87	42.4
Female	65	58.6	53	56.4	118	57.6

Source: Authors' own.

In terms of age (Table 4.2), the majority of migrants are around 30, with 57.6 per cent of the entire sample aged 18–34 years. The age group 35–59 accounts for 34.6 per cent of the sample while those aged 17 and under and 60 years and over account for only 3.9 per cent each. The average age of free labourers is 40.7, which is remarkably older than 27.7 years of the IZ workers, and the national median age of 27.8 (GSO 2019). This is because companies in the IZs prefer young labour as they can endure long working hours. We observed some people (8.5 per cent) who are older than 60 years, the age for retirement according to Vietnamese law. These older workers continue because they cannot rely on pensions and other social safety nets to survive. The majority of free labourers are in the age range of 35–59 – the age period in which people are still productive but are usually excluded from the IZs.

Companies in IZs reportedly conduct so-called 'soft firing', where they dismiss workers who are older than 35 years, many of whom are female (Nguyen 2017;

Thuy 2017). Indeed, according to the Vietnam General Confederation of Labour (ILO 2017), approximately 2.8 million workers across nearly 300 IZs all over Vietnam work in the zones for six to seven years. Companies operate in this way because work in IZs does not require special skills and therefore prefer to hire low-skilled labourers (i.e., younger workers) for a short period of time before their wages increase as they gain experience in the factories. This phenomenon of firing factory workers by the age of 35 makes workers concerned about the precarity of their jobs, encouraging them to seek an alternative livelihood option.

Table 4.2 Age difference of respondents

		IZ workers N=111		Free labourers N=94		All N=205	
		N	N %	N	N %	N	N %
Age range	<18	2	1.8	6	6.4	8	3.9
	18 – <35	91	82.0	27	28.7	118	57.6
	35 – <60	18	16.2	53	56.4	71	34.6
	>=60	0	0	8	8.5	8	3.9
Mean age		27.70		40.71		33.67	

Source: Authors' own.

In terms of ethnicity (Table 4.3), most of the respondents are Vietnamese (or Kinh), followed by Muong, Thai, and Tay people (56.6 per cent in comparison with 13.2 per cent, 13.2 per cent, and 10.2 per cent respectively). While most respondents in Bac Ninh (i.e., the IZs) are ethnic minorities (65.8 per cent), most free labourers are of Kinh ethnicity (83 per cent). Due to the development of transport infrastructure in northern Vietnam, it became easier for ethnic minorities from the mountainous regions to migrate for work. Interviews with village and commune leaders also revealed that companies prefer ethnic migrants and migrants from outside provinces because they are perceived not to engage in gambling, heavy drinking, and fighting, unlike Kinh and local people. Kinh people from the Red River Delta, on the other hand, moved from IZs in Bac Ninh to IZs in their own hometowns.

Table 4.3 Ethnicity of respondents

Ethnicity	IZ workers N=111		Free labourers N=94		All N=205	
	N	N %	N	N %	N	N %
Kinh	38	34.2	78	83.0	116	56.6
Muong	18	16.2	9	9.6	27	13.2
Thai	26	23.4	1	1.1	27	13.2
Tay	18	16.2	3	3.2	21	10.2
Khmer	3	2.7	1	1.1	4	2.0
Nung	4	3.6	0	0	4	2.0
Other	2	1.8	2	2.1	4	2.0
Hmong	2	1.8	0	0	2	1.0

Source: Authors' own.

Regarding education levels (Table 4.4), 9.3 per cent of migrant workers reached primary level, 35.1 per cent reached lower secondary, 48.3 per cent reached higher secondary, and 7.3 per cent have a university degree or higher. The two groups tend to have a similar proportion of higher education-level respondents but there is a notable difference in the lower level of education. Higher proportions of free labourers reached only primary level (19.1 per cent vs 0.9 per cent of IZ workers) and lower secondary education (46.8 per cent vs 25.2 per cent of IZ workers). In contrast, more IZ workers received higher secondary school education (65.8 per cent) than free labourers (27.7 per cent). This is likely because companies in IZs require workers to have a high school education.

Table 4.4 Education level among respondents

Education level	IZ workers N=111		Free labourers N=94		All N=205	
	N	N %	N	N %	N	N %
Primary	1	0.9	18	19.1	19	9.3
Lower secondary school	28	25.2	44	46.8	72	35.1
Higher secondary school	73	65.8	26	27.7	99	48.3
Training school	2	1.8	0	0	2	1.0
College/ university	7	6.3	6	6.4	13	6.3

Source: Authors' own.

In terms of marital status (Table 4.5), most respondents are married (58 per cent). More than a third (35.1 per cent) of these married people live with a family member, most often their partner. Almost half of IZ workers (49.5 per cent) are unmarried, due to their age, while only 26.6 per cent of free labourers are unmarried. This reflects the migration lifecycle of many Vietnamese migrants, especially women. The youth migrate and work in the IZs when they are single. When they get married, they spend a few years in their hometown until their children can stay with their grandparents. The men may continue to migrate and send remittances (Khue 2019). However, couples often move together and send remittances for grandparents to raise their children in the home provinces (Khue 2019). This is because the cost of living is cheaper in rural than urban areas. Also, due to the *Hộ khẩu*¹⁷ system, migrating parents cannot receive social welfare where they migrate. Therefore, couples often stay in cities as migrants until their children grow up and need help with their own children and/or their older-age parents need assistance. Often, women move back to their hometowns and take on these responsibilities.

Table 4.5 Marital status of respondents

		IZs workers N=111		Free labourers N=94		All N=205	
		N	N %	N	N %	N	N %
Marital status	Married	52	46.8	67	71.3	119	58.0
	Unmarried	55	49.5	25	26.6	80	39.0
	Divorced	4	3.6	2	2.1	6	2.9
Living with family member		32	28.8	40	42.6	72	35.1

Source: Authors' own.

¹⁷ *Hộ khẩu* is a complex household registration system in Vietnam, which records and regularly updates the births, deaths, marriages, divorces, and moves of all members of the family. *Hộ khẩu* is considered as 'a measure of administrative management by the State to determine the citizens' place of residence, ensure the existence of their rights and obligations, enhance social management, and maintain political stability, social order, and safety' (Decree No. 51/CP issued on 10 May 1997 and Circular 06/TT/BNV). The possession of a rural registration document entitled the holder to receive agricultural land and housing plots. People holding an urban registration would be allocated land-use rights for their house and gardens (Hardy 2001). During the war in Vietnam, and the period when the national economy was centrally planned and managed, *Hộ khẩu* was an effective mechanism that helped the government to mobilise people for national objectives because it was linked to government subsidies, rations, and access to certain necessities and services.

4.1.2 Migrants' occupations

Free labourers

Among our respondents, most engaged in construction work in Gia Lam and Ba Dinh districts. They tend to move from one locality to another every six months or less. As a result, they are not entitled to social protection measures. As they typically work without a contract, they are not guaranteed to have safe working conditions, social insurance, unemployment insurance, or other legal benefits that come with contracted labour. They often do not have a direct labour contract with the employer but go through a contractor (*caithầu*). As a result, migrants are highly dependent on their contractors.

Another common occupation is a physical labourer in Long Bien market. Long Bien market is one of the largest wholesale markets in Hanoi, supplying fruit, agricultural products, and seafood. The market operates mainly at night when goods are delivered. Free labourers in the market help to load and unload produce from 7pm to early morning. Due to the characteristics of loading and unloading, hauling goods often requires two people, so the subjects of this group of freelance workers are many couples, middle-aged, and with lower secondary education.

Workers in IZs in Bac Ninh

There are two types of workers in IZs: (1) those with formal and long-term contracts; and (2) non-contracted short-term or seasonal workers. The second group is assigned jobs through brokers and is considered the most vulnerable group of workers – described as *trên đe dưới búa*, or 'above the anvil under the hammer'. Their employers – i.e., companies in the IZs – could fire them any time and they are not entitled to any allowance or support from the company or social insurance, including during the pandemic. Moreover, brokers had numerous ways to undercut their daily wages.

Their working hours are divided into two modes: normal working hours (eight hours per day) and overtime (depending on company). The Labour Code of 2019 (Article 107 (2)) (Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs 2019) aims to ensure that workers are not exploited through policies that require workers' consent and impose limits on overtime hours to no more than four hours per day and 40 hours per month. However, workers consider overtime pay as a crucial way to improve their income:

My salary is really low, sister. If I do not take the overtime shift, I only receive VND 5m per month. If I carried all the overtime divided, I would earn VND 9.8m per month, but it means I need to work 12 hours per day and 26 days per month. Some of my colleagues are competitive for that but I feel exhausted that way.
(Worker in IZ)

Overtime work is also physically demanding. One male migrant worker who has been in the IZ for 15 years indicated that he intends to work one to two more years in the IZs in Bac Ninh and then return to his hometown:

Firstly, I've been away for many years, I could not vagabond forever. I must go home. The second is my health does not permit me to work overtime. If you don't work for overtime shift, your salary is limited, but working overtime when you are aging is unbearable.

(Worker in IZ)

Unlike free labourers, workers in IZs have fixed working hours, but are divided into shifts: morning shift (8am–5pm) and night shift (8pm–5am), or combined (two weeks working the morning shift, two weeks working the night shift). If they work the morning shift, their daily routine (eating, sleeping) is normal. However, if they work at night, they return home at about 6am or 7am, sleep continuously until 4pm or 5pm, then wake up to cook, eat, and then return to work.

4.2 Impacts of Covid-19 on the livelihood and income of migrant workers

4.2.1 Job and working hours

In this sub-section, we explore how Covid-19-related lockdown measures affected migrant workers' working patterns and income.

Overall, 68.3 per cent of migrant workers lost their jobs, with 81 per cent among free labourers and 58 per cent among workers in IZs (Figure 4.1). During the pandemic, some companies in IZs, especially those working in export or import industries, needed to reduce the number of workers or amount of work. Some workers were kept on by the same companies but not given any work while others chose to resign or change jobs. In IZs, many agents – so-called 'manpower supplying' companies – provide recruitment services and assist migrant workers in finding a new job.

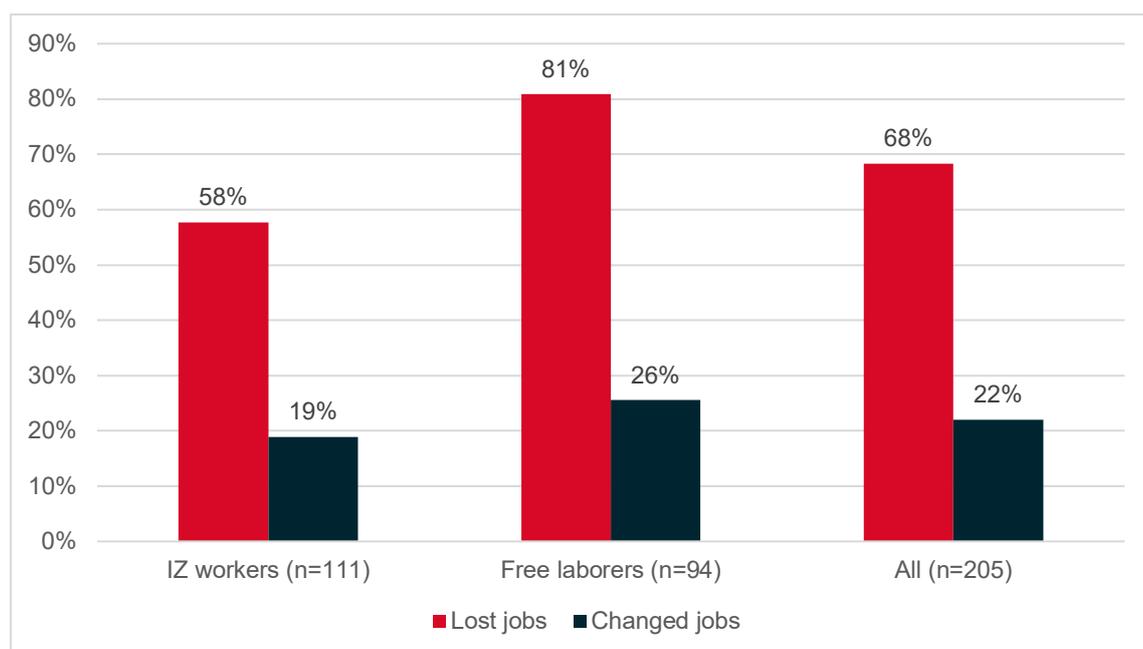
According to Article 36 (1, c) of the Labour Code of 2019 (Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs 2019), in the event of a natural disaster, major epidemic, or unforeseen circumstances that resulted in downsizing the company's operation, the employers may lay off their employees without their prior consent. Our evidence suggests that workers were fired for trivial reasons:

In the context of economic downturn, layoff is their [employer's] preferable tool. My company requests worker to write his/her name on the mask to identify the worker wearing mask. Someone forgot to do so and got fired the day after. Someone else was detected to

throw [their] mask into the trash but not to roll it up in accordance with the company's regulations; he/she got dismissed too.
(FGD in IZ)

The situation of free labourers was more precarious than those in IZs due to the lack of work contract. In the case of free labourers in construction, they lost income because their employers had their building contracts cancelled or delayed by their clients because of the pandemic. Street vendors struggled to adapt to the unexpected and sudden changes of government policies. Transporters in Long Bien wholesale market revealed that the number of trucks and the volume of products trading at the market decreased a lot in the last year due to market closures. As a result, the amount of work was reduced.

Figure 4.1 Change in jobs in the last 12 months



Source: Authors' own.

In addition to losing jobs, migrant workers had to change working patterns during the lockdown. The Vietnamese government's 'Zero Covid' policies since the beginning of the pandemic in April 2020 significantly affected the working hours of migrant workers. Table 4.6 shows the changes in weekly working hours during the three lockdown periods (April 2020–October 2021). While only 4 per cent of respondents indicated that their working hours had decreased in the first wave of the lockdown, during the second and third waves, 53.3 per cent and 91.2 per cent, respectively, reported that was the case.

Table 4.6 Changes in working hours by respondents

		IZ workers N=111		Free labourers N=94		All N=205	
Change of weekly working hours		N	%	N	%	N	%
1st wave	No change	96	90.6	84	90.3	180	90.5
	Decrease	4	3.8	4	4.3	8	4.0
	Increase	6	5.7	5	5.4	11	5.5
2nd wave	No change	58	54.7	28	30.1	86	43.2
	Decrease	43	40.6	63	67.7	106	53.3
	Increase	5	4.7	2	2.2	7	3.5
3rd wave	No change	7	6.3	9	9.6	16	7.8
	Decrease	104	93.7	83	88.3	187	91.2
	Increase	0	0.0	2	2.1	2	1.0

Source: Authors' own.

4.2.2 Income and expenditure

Overall, the average income is about VND 7–8m per month (Table 4.7), which is similar to that of a worker without higher education or special skills in Vietnam. Because working hours decreased during the pandemic, migrant workers' income has decreased. Specifically for those in IZs, the opportunity to work overtime decreased, which reduced their income. While the government provided unemployment payments to workers with contracts (details in Table 4.14), they only received 70 per cent of their basic salary,¹⁸ which is significantly lower than their pre-pandemic pay. This quote demonstrates how their income changed:

I have worked in the industrial zones for eight years since 2014. My company produces the headphone[s] and device[s] for Bluetooth. It is Korean company. My monthly income before Covid-19 normally is VND 12m including the wage for extra working time. However, since last year until now, we have not many [sic] extra work so I receive only VND 9.6m per month. During the lockdown in May and

¹⁸ The basic salary is the amount of money that the worker in the organisation, institution, or company receives and does not include other incentives, additional or extra salary. This basic salary is not lower than the regional minimum salary defined by the government which should be sufficient for daily food consumption of workers in that region and is not based on the level of competence and experience of workers.

June, I had to stay at the dormitory and I received 70 per cent of my basic salary. It is about VND 4.3m per month only. Then in October, I received total VND 2.1m of the unemployment insurance at once.

(Worker in IZ)

Table 4.7 Change in income by respondents

	IZ workers N=111	Free labourers N=94	All N=205
Monthly income	Mean (VND)	Mean (VND)	Mean (VND)
Before April 2020	7,696,634.60	7,123,707.90	7,432,435.20
The latest lockdown Hanoi: July–September 2021 Bac Ninh: May–July 2021	3,316,363.60	1,004,301.10	2,257,142.90
Present	7,822,727.30	5,922,043.00	6,951,970.40

Source: Authors' own.

Free labourers did not receive any wage during the lockdown period because of the lack of jobs. It is evident from Table 4.7 that free labourers particularly suffered from the loss of income. There are a few reports of employers voluntarily providing food and extra work for free labourers.

Because of the loss of income, migrant workers reduced their expenditure significantly (see Table 4.8). Many, especially middle-aged workers, migrate to urban areas to send remittances to support their families. Young workers, on the other hand, save for their future: to establish a family, buy land, build a house, or invest.

Table 4.8 Expenditure by respondents

Expenditure type*	IZ workers N=111		Free labourers N=94		Total N=205	
	Now	Lockdown	Now	Lockdown	Now	Lockdown
Housing	781,802	662,613	921,222	546,154	844,229	610,149
Food	1,821,622	1,605,405	1,513,000	1,114,286	1,683,433	1,384,158
Remittances	2,306,306	333,333	2,493,548	189,362	2,391,667	267,317
Savings	1,390,991	289,189	339,560	54,348	917,327	182,759
Other	550,000	254,505	290,110	83,696	432,921	177,094
Total	6,850,721	3,145,045	5,557,440	1,987,846	6,269,577	2,621,477

Source: Authors' own.

Note: * Mean averages in VND.

From Table 4.8, we can see that remittances are the largest expense now, i.e., when economic activities are mostly back to pre-pandemic levels, which accounts for one third of workers' income. Despite having lower expenditure overall, free labourers send higher proportions (and absolute quantities) of remittances to their families than workers in IZs because they are more likely to have families to support in their home provinces. During the lockdown, remittances decreased because they earned just enough to stay in the urban areas. Some sent money home because their families were in need and, as a result, they borrowed from friends or took their salary as an advance from their employer. It is also evident that food expenditure decreased during the lockdown.

4.2.3 FIES score

Table 4.9 presents the proportion of respondents who answered 'yes' to individual questions that make up FIES. Overall, 66 per cent indicated that they were worried about not having enough food to eat in the last four weeks, while 69 per cent reported to have eaten only a few kinds of foods. Almost half of the respondents (46 per cent) reported eating less food than they thought they should due to lack of money or other resources. In addition, 2 per cent reported not eating at all for the whole day, 22 per cent did not eat even though they were hungry, and 29 per cent reported running out of food. On average, our 205 respondents reported 3.35 FIES (on a scale of between 0 (food-secure) and 8 (severely food-insecure)).

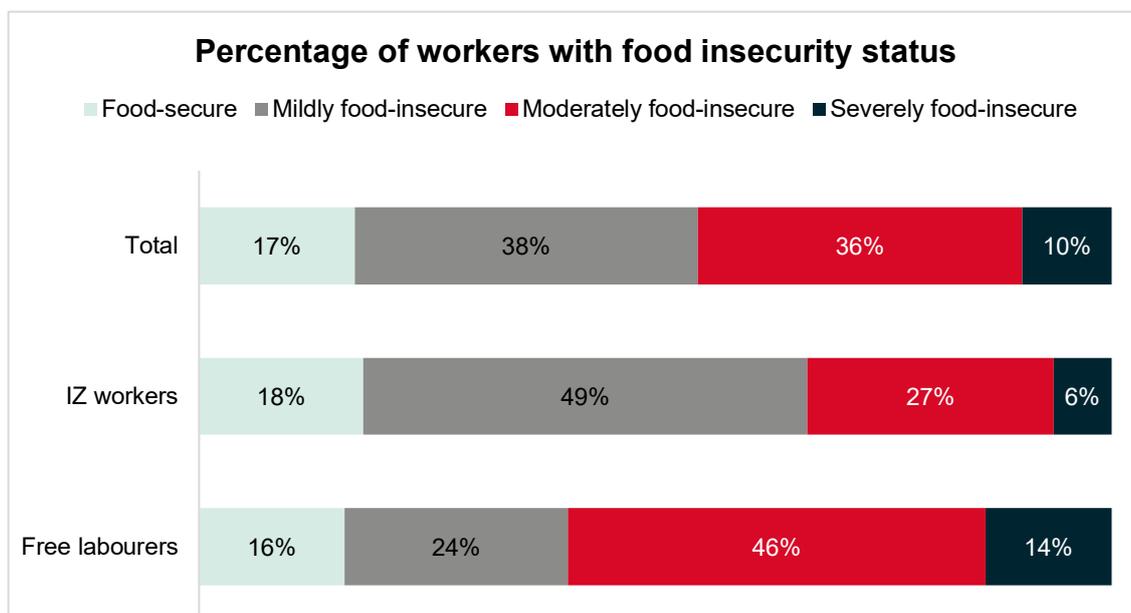
Table 4.9 Response to FIES questions (N=205)

FIES individual questions	IZ workers (%)	Free labourers (%)	Total (%)
Because of a lack of money or other resources, during the last four weeks, was there a time when...			
You worried about not having enough food to eat?	65	68	66
You were unable to eat healthy and nutritious food?	61	64	62
You ate only a few kinds of foods?	69	68	69
You had to skip a meal?	31	46	38
You ate less than you thought you should?	34	60	46
You ran out of food?	19	41	29
You were hungry but did not eat?	14	32	22
You went without eating for a whole day?	0	5	2

Source: Authors' own, based on FAO (2013).

According to the FAO's (2013) categorisation of 'moderate' and 'severe' food insecurity, Figure 4.2 indicates that 17 per cent of respondents are food-secure, 38 per cent are mildly food-insecure, 36 per cent are moderately food-insecure and 10 per cent are severely food-insecure.

Figure 4.2 Level of food security among migrant workers (N=205)



Source: Authors' own.

4.2.4 Living environments

As individuals' food environments are key to healthy eating, we evaluate respondents' living and cooking environments (Table 4.10). On average, migrant workers lived in a space of 17.4m² with 2.67 roommates. Regarding facilities, 77 per cent of respondents reported having a toilet inside their rooms. Most workers were equipped with cooking facilities – a wood stove (5.9 per cent), gas stove (81.4 per cent), electric stove (9.3 per cent) or other (2 per cent) – and only 3 per cent of the respondents indicated that they had no cooking equipment at their residence. Importantly, only 34 per cent reported that they had a refrigerator. Access to water was satisfactory: 74 per cent had running water, 32 per cent had a well, and 14 per cent could get water in a container.

Table 4.10 Facilities available at home

Indicators	N	Mean
Living environment		
Size of room (m ²)	204	17.42
# roommates	203	2.67
Toilet (yes=1, no=0)	204	0.77
Kitchen equipment (yes=1, no=0)		(%)
No kitchen	3	1.47
Wood stove	12	5.88
Gas stove	166	81.37
Electric stove	19	9.31
Other cooking facilities	4	1.96
Fridge	204	34
Sources of water		(%)
Running water	204	74
Well	204	32
In water container	204	14
Don't know	204	3

Source: Authors' own.

Most workers in IZs stay in multistorey houses in villages surrounding the IZs: these houses were built in response to rapid demand for housing for migrant workers. Some live with partners, friends, or siblings to save money and share food. Workers in IZs usually rent a dormitory room of between 12m² to 15m² for two people. Each room has its own toilet, and electricity and water meters. Room prices ranged from VND 900,000–1.5m per month, depending on the location of the room to rent. A room upstairs is cheaper than one below. Although living conditions are relatively modest, they are considerably better than for free labourers. However, because the rooms are in high-rise buildings, they lack outdoor living space as well as a place to dry clothes and have almost no sunlight. The 12m² space was where they quarantined during lockdowns.

Free labourers in construction sites have worse living conditions. Their housing and living facilities are organised by their contractors. They live in non-permanent settlements. Some of them live on the first floor of the construction sites where they work. As a result, their toilet facilities are also non-permanent and unhygienic. Another residence we observed was a four-storey house of 20m², regardless of whether the occupant was a couple or single, male or female, with one shared toilet, one bathroom, and one kitchen without any amenities. Only two beds were provided for the whole group, so most slept on the floor (Figure 4.3). During the lockdown in summer in Hanoi where the

temperature goes beyond 40 degrees Celsius, they were not allowed to go out, and were suffering from anxiety and physical and mental misery.

Figure 4.3 Room for 25 construction workers, Hanoi



Photograph of survey conducted as part of the project work being undertaken (2022).

Photographer: © Trinh Thi Ngoc Anh. Reproduced with photographer's permission. [Open Government Licence v3.0](#). Reproduced with permission.

Construction workers explained their living situation in an FGD:

We live in a non-permanent house next to the construction site. Most construction workers live like that. We build it when we start working for that owner. It is about 25m². The materials are available because we are the constructing workers. We live together [with] 18 persons, some of them are a couple. We do not have a separate toilet, but we use the non-permanent toilet of the owner. We can also move to the first floor of the building house while we work on the second floor. For cooking, there is a woman, she is a wife of our colleagues who will cook for us. The kitchen is also simple too. We do not have a fridge; the food is bought for daily consumption so we don't need a fridge. Only during the lockdown, we cannot go out every day for buying food so we need to store food for several days, but we do not have money to buy a

lot of food. We could ask the owner or friend to help, and they would go to the market to buy food for us.

(FGD in Hanoi)

Street vendors and market transporters live in a slum next to the Long Bien market by the Red River. The room is only 5m² with a metal roof, which becomes hot in the summer. Most share a room with friends or relatives and a toilet with other residents in the house. The overall living condition is poor: a female migrant, who has worked as a market loader for 20 years, shared this:

This house is encroached on alluvial land along the river, so there are many rats and mice. The mouse is a genius. It's the size of a calf, anyone with dirty feet sleeping will still be bitten by it to bleed.

(Worker in Hanoi)

However, in comparison to other groups of migrant workers, people in the slum have significantly more outdoor space, which helped them to cope with anxieties and uncertainties arising from Covid-19. This outside space is next to the Red River and is where they prepare meals in a firewood kitchen. Some long-term residents were able to afford air conditioners and fridges.

Standards applied to rental rooms have already been regulated under the Law on Housing of 2014, and specifically prescribed in the Circular No. 20/2016/TT-BXD of the Ministry of Construction dated 30 June 2016 on development and management of social housing. According to Article 3 and 4 of Circular No. 20/2016/TT-BXD, minimum standards in terms of usable area for the whole room and per person, ventilation and natural lighting, fire safety, supply of clean water, and so on must be met to qualify as a rental property. Given this background, our evidence highlights the lack of law implementation in practice, resulting in poor living conditions of migrant workers in exchange for a low rental price.

4.2.5 Food consumption patterns and dietary quality

Table 4.11 shows that food expenditure during lockdown – i.e., when workers were unable to generate income as factories and other workplaces were closed – was significantly lower than after lockdown measures were lifted. The amount spent on breakfast did not change significantly while expenditure for lunch and dinner show a difference of approximately VND 6,000 (US\$0.26). It is noteworthy that expenditure on meals is generally extremely modest: a typical meal on the street of Hanoi would cost between VND 25,000 and VND 35,000 per person.

Table 4.11 Food expenditure (VND)

Time period	Meals	N	Mean	S.D.	Min.	Max.
During lockdown	Breakfast	146	12,705.48	11,383.09	3,000	99,000
	Lunch	205	18,428.74	7,287.29	0*	30,000
	Dinner	198	19,727.27	6,636.03	3,000	60,000
After lockdown	Breakfast	183	12,535.52	5,027.14	0**	30,000
	Lunch	199	25,090.45	10,806.46	0**	99,000
	Dinner	200	25,490.00	8,924.02	0**	60,000

Source: Authors' own.

Notes: * During the lockdown, 0 indicates that respondents did not eat; ** After the lockdown, companies offered workers food for free. Therefore, 0 includes those who did not eat and did not pay for food.

A majority of respondents bought food from wet markets (75 per cent during lockdown and 92 per cent after lockdown measures were lifted). The most significant difference in the pattern of food purchase was how often they went to the market and the quantity of food they bought at a time (Table 4.12). Because access to markets was restricted during the lockdown, workers purchased food only a few times a week unlike after the lockdown period when they could go to the market every day. As a result, they bought sufficient food for a few days.

Table 4.12 Food purchasing patterns

How often do you buy food?	During lockdown	After lockdown
Daily	27	139
A few times/week	119	37
Once/week	46	17
Less than once/week	2	1
How much food do you buy typically? Enough...		
For 1 day	27	141
For a few days	133	45
For a week	34	7
For a month	1	1

Source: Authors' own.

Because only 34 per cent of respondents had access to a fridge (Table 4.10) even before the pandemic, how people stored their food did not change between the periods of lockdown and afterwards. Most migrant workers stored fruit, vegetables, and meat at room temperature while some were allowed to use the fridge that belonged to the owner of their residence.

As noted above, however, workers could not go grocery shopping daily, which is common in Vietnam. Moreover, because the lockdown period coincided with the summer months in northern Vietnam, they mostly purchased food items that could be stored at room temperature such as instant noodles, which significantly reduced food quality choices. One owner of a migrant workers' residence noted:

They [migrant workers] tended to eat much tofu, dry food, eggs, instant noodles... but less meat and vegetables. They were still full with rice, because there was no shortage of rice. But they had limited conditions to access nutritious foods, such as fresh meat and fish; generally speaking, they hardly had any fresh food. They mainly eat dry food for survival.

(Residence owner, Bac Ninh)

When markets were closed in Hanoi and the city was under lockdown – for a total of 45 days – migrant workers living in a room as small as 6m² or shared with many others had limited space even to store food and relied exclusively on dried food.

Workers in the IZs could buy meals at the companies for VND 17,000–25,000 per meal up to three meals a day. However, they reported lower quality of meals during the lockdown, possibly because of the reduced revenue due to the pandemic and the urge to save costs:

My company provides all three meals if we work overtime, some of my colleagues eat all three meals at the company to save money. But I only eat one time and very little to continue working because the food is too greasy and difficult to swallow for me.

(Worker in IZ)

As a result, workers in IZs, like free labourers, reported in interviews and FGDs that they mostly consumed long-shelf-life items such as rice, dried and salted fish, instant noodles, nuts, and eggs; these significantly increased while the consumption of fresh and perishable – yet nutritious – food such as meat, vegetables, and fruits decreased. Some reported buying vegetables and meat for the day of consumption and cooking these items on the day to preserve them to be consumed the day after. Some cooked with salt so that perishable items can be stored for longer, while others used Styrofoam boxes with ice to store these items.

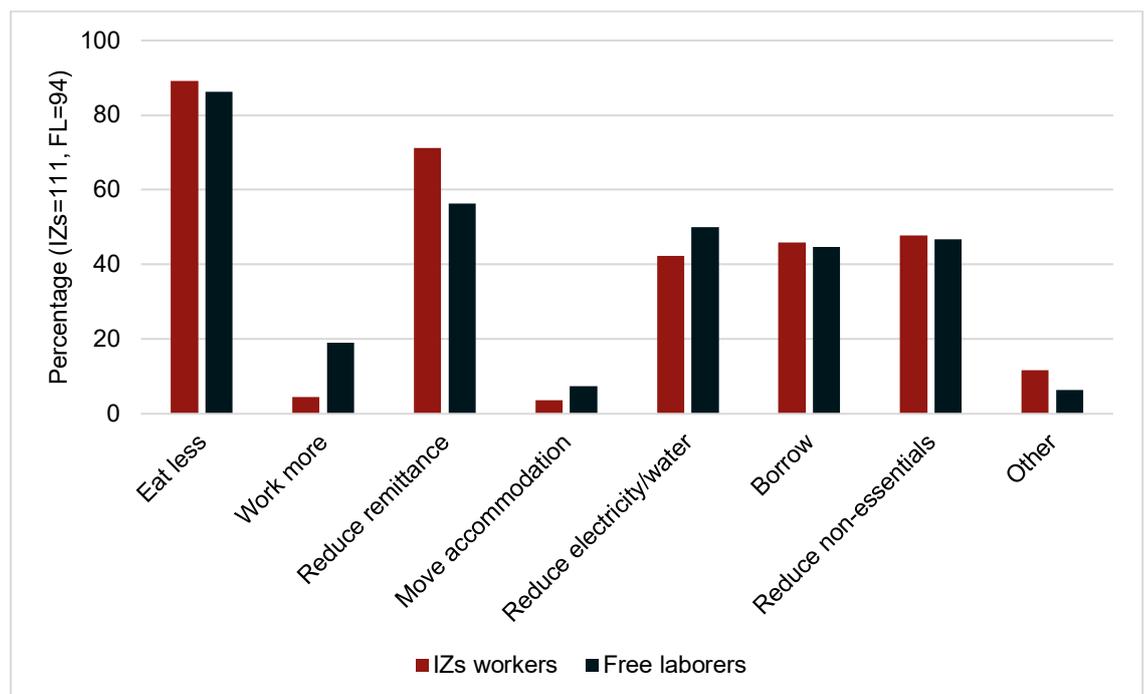
4.3 Adaptive strategies

In this section, we explore how migrant workers managed the loss of income in living environments that were not suitable for long-term quarantine and food storage.

4.3.1 Internal strategies

As a result of the significant reduction in income (Table 4.7), workers cut back on food, electricity, water, and non-essential expenditures (Figure 4.4). Strikingly, across both groups of migrant workers, the most common strategy was to reduce food intake. Residence owners confirmed that migrant workers minimised living expenses in urban areas to save as much as they could. Most migrant workers ate less and sent fewer remittances home. Normally, they send about one third of their income to support family but during the lockdown, the remittances sent home were only a small amount and only a few migrant workers reported that they could send remittances home (Table 4.8).

Figure 4.4 Response to income loss



Source: Authors' own.

Our data revealed many desperate strategies by migrant workers to cope with food insecurity. One respondent sold his mobile phone to buy noodles and eat only lunch for the whole day, while another took up a mortgage on his identity card to borrow money for survival during the lockdown. Transporters in Long Bien collected leftover fruit, vegetables, and other foods in the market for their meals. Construction workers forwent their occasional meals at restaurants and meals with rice, vegetables, and meat, and resorted to eggs for an entire week.

4.3.2 External support structure

Multiple actors – including the government, trade unions, community organisations, charity groups and individuals – implemented interventions to mitigate the social and economic issues faced by workers. Table 4.13 shows that the majority of migrants received support from the government (62.7 per cent) and others, including friends and family (72.2 per cent). Notably, fewer people received support from employers (45.4 per cent). Moreover, more workers in IZs were able to access support than free labourers.

Table 4.13 Sources of support for respondents

Source of support	Workers in IZs N=111		Free labourers N=94		Total N=205	
	N	N %	N	N %	N	N %
Government	94	85.5	34	36.2	128	62.7
Employers	69	62.2	24	25.5	93	45.4
Others	95	85.6	53	56.4	148	72.2

Source: Authors' own.

Government support

As described in Section 3, the government implemented policies to financially support people with suspended or terminated contracts (Resolution 68/NQ-CP dated 1 July 2021). Also, employees who became unemployed because of Covid-19 are also supported by the Unemployment Insurance Fund depending on the time of payment, with the support amount ranging from VND 1.8m to VND 3.3m (Resolution 116/NQ-CP). However, the extent to which these policies benefited migrant workers crucially depended on other actors such as residence owners and employers, who provided documents verifying that workers lived in areas heavily affected by Covid-19 or under Covid-19 restrictions, which enabled workers to access the fund. In the case of Bac Ninh, the paperwork for the first phase of provincial support was announced quite quickly and therefore residence owners needed to provide documents quickly to resident migrant workers so that they could receive support. On the other hand, residence owners' willingness to support migrant residents became a key area of consideration for new and returning migrants when selecting where to stay.

Most, especially free labourers, found the documentation procedure to receive government support time-consuming and complicated to access; they were required to obtain verification of their employment status, income, and proof of both their temporary and permanent residences. In order to do so, owners of their temporary residences had to support workers with an information

declaration and other verification. This is described by the two following workers interviewed:

I registered to receive support at my temporary residence. I had to go back to my hometown and then to the temporary residence's committee two to three times to get the verification and it was costly.

(Worker in Hanoi)

We followed the procedure guidance and submitted the paper in my first working place, but I needed to wait and when they paid, I have already moved somewhere else.

(Worker in IZ)

Support from employers

Our analysis reveals the difference between workers in IZs and free labourers (Table 4.14). In fact, 98.9 per cent of workers in IZs with formal labour contracts all shared that they had received support from the Unemployment Insurance Fund. They were entitled to 50–70 per cent of the salary depending on the company, which was the employer's responsibility (Labour Code, or Article 99 (3)). Companies provided wage compensation for 30 days during lockdowns. In addition, IZ workers received the Unemployment Insurance Fund according to the social insurance law based on the number of months they had worked. Most workers in IZs received monetary support from their employers automatically in their bank accounts.

Table 4.14 Mean value of monetary support (VND)

	Workers in IZs N=111	Free labourers N=94	Total N=205
From government	405,320.43	52,941.20	311,719.70
From employers	3,475,781.25	964,705.97	2,948,765.45

Source: Authors' own.

Free labourers, however, did not receive monetary support so easily as some had difficulty with internet banking. Construction workers were not paid by the contractor at all or on time. Sometimes the contractor would support their team workers with VND 30,000–50,000 per day per person. But in most cases, the workers reported that they had no support from their own employer, except for the daily meal cost, which is about VND 20,000 per day per person. This is obviously insufficient to provide them with nutritious food as explained by their cook:

It is impossible to cook for one with VND 20,000 per day, but I cooked for 25 people so even though it is very difficult, but I had to manage. We also cut the breakfast, but we did not do heavy work as normal, so it was acceptable.

(A cook for construction workers)

Both free labourers and migrants in the IZs borrowed from their colleagues, their friends, or relatives to cover their own expense and remittances. Free labourers also borrowed from their contractors or employers:

I had borrowed money from my boss to send back home. My children stayed in the hometown [and] still go to school, and the whole family needs my wage for survival. But how could I borrow from my friends? They all ran out of money as me.

(Worker in Hanoi)

Another difference between free labourers and migrants in IZs is that the latter received Covid-19 vaccinations through their companies earlier than free labourers. Companies in IZs were required to vaccinate their employees, which not only protected their health but also enabled them to move easily back and forth between their places of origin and Bac Ninh.

Support from social organisations

In general, other associations, including the Fatherland Front, the Women's Union, the Youth Union, and the Farmers' Union, cooperated to support people in need. These organisations actively provided workers with updates about the pandemic and prevention procedures, supported essentials and basic medical supplies (masks, hand sanitiser). In particular, the communal-level Fatherland Front was a key organisation that receives donations (either money or in-kind) from other organisations and individuals and distributes them to individuals in need. The Women's Union advocated for landlords to reduce accommodation rent and electricity bills and coordinated with social organisations or businesses to provide cash assistance to workers.

Both groups of migrant workers received support in-kind (e.g., rice, instant noodles, eggs, other dried food and, sometimes, vegetables), although the frequency and value of support varied because of the implementation logistics. As Fatherland Front worked with donations, it was unable to predict what would be available by how much and when. When they received a donation, they informed the local Covid-19 protest team groups who would generate a list of people in need of donations. Sometimes, they needed to distribute the donated food quickly, so it was difficult to prioritise depending on recipients' needs. While Fatherland Front recognised that migrants were more vulnerable than local residents because of the precarity of their jobs and poor living conditions, their distribution effort did not distinguish between the two groups.

Residence owners

In general, residence owners had a great influence on the workers during the pandemic. Firstly, they acted as a bridge between workers and authorities when there was an announcement of food assistance during the lockdown and listed the names of people needing support.

When support came, the village headman called out to distribute to people who needed support. I, as the owner of the inn [residence], was responsible for making the list of tenants in difficult situations, and sent it to the village leaders, thereby they decided to distribute.
(Residence owner in Hanoi)

Second, when the migrant workers could not go out to the market, the owners would do so for migrant workers. Third, they would reduce the rent by 30–100 per cent in the quarantine time. In most cases, the relationships between the owners and workers were reported to be very supportive.

5. Discussion and recommendations

In summary, our research highlights four key points. First, the level of food insecurity was high among migrant workers: 36 per cent and 10 per cent of our respondents were moderately and severely food-insecure respectively. This compares to Kim *et al.* (2021), who report only 16.1 per cent and 1.8 per cent moderate and severe food insecurity, respectively, among Vietnam's general population. Second, reducing food expenditure was the most common strategy for migrant workers to cope with the significant income drop because of the pandemic. Third, not only the quantity but also the quality of meals significantly suffered, shifting the consumption of fruit and vegetables to cheaper items high in salt and low in micronutrients (such as instant noodles). This is consistent with several studies, documenting high levels of food insecurity and reduced dietary quality – and therefore micronutrient intake – due to Covid-19-related measures (FAO 2020; Headey and Ruel 2020). Fourth, free labourers have less of a social and economic safety net to fall back on when their livelihood activities are affected by Covid-19 (GSO 2021; ILO 2020a; 2020b). Their wellbeing also depends on support from others – such as residence owners and employers – which decreases their agency.

Based on our findings, we propose the following measures to tackle systemic factors that led to food insecurity among migrant workers during the pandemic.

First, our recommendation is for employers to provide ample, nutritious, and safe meals as well as wages, particularly for free labourers in the informal sector, when their livelihoods are under the greatest strain. While it is understandable that migrant workers reduced food expenditure to maximise remittances, this strategy reduced food quality for migrant workers. Also, the government needs to set a minimum standard regarding the volume, nutrition, and safety of meals for migrant workers and ensure that employers or meal providers adhere to this standard. This will ensure nutrition security for migrant workers, and thereby will aid long-term health and work productivity. Physical and mental health support can be mobilised through social organisations – for example, by providing fitness and entertainment programmes to improve workers' health.

Second, living conditions for migrant workers, particularly among free labourers in Hanoi, need to be improved. Many of them live in a small room shared with other workers with limited kitchen equipment (such as a fridge), clean toilet, and even beds. The lack of fridge is particularly challenging to keep perishable yet healthy items, such as meat, fruit, and vegetables, particularly in the summer. Therefore, we suggest the government should enforce the existing regulation that imposes a minimum standard for rented spaces for migrant people through, for instance, stricter sanctions on those landlords who violate standards as

regulated by law. This measure needs to be coupled with an effort to control rental prices so that these types of accommodation remain affordable for migrant workers.

Third, the government needs to enable migrant workers to access social safety nets. As indicated in the research, all support (from the government and other actors) was temporary, which helped workers in the short run but was insufficient for migrant workers to sustain a healthy life and recover after the crisis. Furthermore, this kind of support proved costly for governments, even for developed countries (OECD 2020). Therefore, we need to shift from crisis response to resilience-building for migrant workers by broadening the range of social protection measures for contracted workers to, for instance, partly recover income loss during work suspension (by employers) and receive unemployment payment (through social insurances). Meanwhile, non-contractual workers are entirely out of the public social security scheme, and voluntary social insurance remains unaffordable and provides a limited range of benefits (Mai *et al.* 2021). Therefore, we recommend to reform further the social security system to extend the coverage and benefits to the most vulnerable people.

Finally, we need to take steps towards making work for migrant workers decent – in terms of pay, working conditions, and employee rights. Although contracted workers enjoyed more safety nets in terms of social protection, economic shocks from Covid-19 worsened their vulnerability in the workplace due to arbitrary decisions by employers to lay them off. This vulnerability is due to the lack of bargaining power for workers where employers easily dismissed workers by arguing ‘layoff due to recession’ (under Article 36 – The Labour Code of 2019 (Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs 2019)). We therefore recommend formulating clearer legal grounds and conditions for decisions by employers during disasters, crises, or other unforeseen circumstances that may affect the welfare or job security of workers. Moreover, more power should be vested in their collective organisations (i.e., trade unions) in order to reduce the vulnerability of migrant workers. For non-contracted workers, regulations are needed to mandate labour agents to treat workers fairly. This may prompt the government to develop a strategy that formalises the informal sector, which accounted for an estimated 38.7 per cent of all employment in Vietnam in 2019 (ILO 2020b).

6. Conclusion

Access to healthy diets and food security are fundamental human rights. Vietnam has made impressive progress towards food security. However, marginalised groups of people – ethnic minorities, migrant people, and poor households – still suffer from food insecurity. Our research explored how the measures to curtail the spread of Covid-19 in Vietnam affected internal migrants' income-generating opportunities in peri-urban and urban areas of northern Vietnam and their food and nutrition security.

Our research shows that income for migrant workers significantly reduced as a result of Covid-19-related lockdown measures. Free labourers (i.e., those without official labour contracts) were more vulnerable to the economic shock than workers in the IZs. Respondents reduced food intake, remittances, and non-essential items in order to save money. The government implemented policies to provide income compensation, while owners of migrants' residences and local authorities provided them with food, reduction in rent, and other essential items. These support structures benefited workers in IZs more than free labourers as they were able to provide a proof of unemployment due to Covid-19.

Also, our analysis reveals the generally precarious and informal nature of migrants' employment and residential status, which makes it difficult for them to earn a decent living and access social protection measures easily. Migrants need to provide documentation to prove their new residence in order to become entitled to social services, health care, education, and unemployment benefits. Those who work in the informal sector, but also in the formal sector in the IZs, are subject to exploitation, which leads to economic vulnerability among migrant workers.

Based on our findings, we propose four measures to reduce the vulnerability of migrant workers. First, the government and employers need to make short-term crisis responses nutrition-sensitive and focus on providing nutritious, healthy, and ample food to migrant workers. Second, policies that impose minimum standards of living need to be effectively enforced to ensure a safe and hygienic environment for migrant workers to prepare meals. Third, the coverage of existing social safety nets by the government needs to be expanded to include free labourers in particular. Fourth, a radical reform of labour law is needed to reduce migrant workers' vulnerability to job loss and to increase their bargaining power.

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