



Children at the Heart of Viet Nam's New Era: A COMPREHENSIVE VISION FOR CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT TOWARDS 2045

Technical Report on the Comprehensive Development of
Children to Inform Viet Nam 2045 Report

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List of Acronyms

Acronym	Definition
ADB	Asian Development Bank
AI	Artificial Intelligence
ARI	Acute Respiratory Infection
CFCI	Child Friendly Cities Initiatives
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
DPs	Development Partners
EPF	Employment Provident Fund
EPU	Economic Planning Unit
GSO	General Statistics Office
HCI	Human Capital Index
HIC	High-Income Country
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
ILO	International Labour Organization
IT	Information Technology
LIC	Low Income Country/Countries
LFS	Labour Force Survey
LGBTQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning
LMIC	Lower Middle-Income Country/Countries
MDCP	Multidimensional Child Poverty
MIC	Middle-Income Country
MICS	Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey
MOET	Ministry of Education and Training (Viet Nam)
MOH	Ministry of Health (Viet Nam)
MOLISA	Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (Viet Nam)
MPI	Ministry of Planning and Investment
NCDs	Non-Communicable Diseases
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

Acronym	Definition
OOP	Out-of-Pocket Payments
OOS	Out-Of-School
PF4C	Public Finance for Children
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SDGCW	Sustainable Development Goal Indicators on Children and Women Survey
SPG	Social Policy Group
STEM	Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics
U-HCI	Utilization-Adjusted Human Capital Index
UBI	Universal Basic Income
UCB	Universal Child Benefit
UMIC	Upper Middle-Income Country/Countries
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
UNIDO	United Nations Industrial Development Organization
VCCI	Viet Nam Chamber of Commerce and Industry
VHLSS	Viet Nam Household Living Standards Survey
VIDS	Viet Nam Institute for Development Strategies
WB	World Bank
WDR	World Development Report
WASH	Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene
WHO	World Health Organization

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I. Introduction

1.1 Background and context

As the foundational contributors to the country's human capital framework, children represent Viet Nam's most valuable resource to help achieve its vision of becoming a high-income, equitable and sustainable society. Yet, Viet Nam's child population is undergoing a significant demographic transformation. Today, the population of children under age 18 years in Viet Nam is upwards of 28 million, making up roughly one fourth of Viet Nam's 100.4 million population.¹ In 2023, children aged 0-14 constituted 22.2% of the general population (21.9 million), down from 38.3% in 1990 (25.6 million), with projections of further decline to 16.9% (18.1 million) by 2050. Similarly, the share of the population aged 0-19, which fell from 48.5% in 1990 to 27.3% by 2023, is projected to decline to 22.4% of the population by 2050. These shifts bring attention to the need to prioritise investments in children's comprehensive development today, to prepare the country for an increasingly ageing population and shrinking workforce in the future.

As the Viet Nam 2035 report highlighted, the country's *vision for prosperity, creativity, equity, and democracy* substantially hinges on sustained, strategic investments in human capital, inclusive social policies, and resilient governance structures. Reflecting this perspective, Viet Nam's Law on Children of 2016 recognizes a child's right to education, healthcare, and safe housing.² However, challenges remain across these fields, especially in bridging gaps for ethnic minorities and rural populations, where child multidimensional poverty rates have been and remain disproportionately high.³ Attention is also needed to children among the growing ranks of urban poor and increasingly large numbers of migrants, whose access to basic services and protections is limited. Although significant progress in poverty reduction has been achieved, children remain disproportionately affected. Recent analyses on multidimensional child poverty trends from 2002-2024 shows children's multidimensional child poverty has decreased steadily alongside the country's development trajectory since 2002. By 2024, 8.4% of children under 16 years of age in Viet Nam remain multidimensionally poor, defined as the proportion of children lacking at least 3 out of 8 dimensions of basic social services, including education, healthcare, housing, access to clean water, access to improved sanitation, nutrition, and recreation.⁴ Marginalized groups, such as ethnic minorities and rural communities, continue to remain vulnerable, as the multidimensional poverty rate for ethnic minority children is 33.1% compared to just 3.7% for Kinh children.⁵ While the national rate of 8.4% is equivalent to around 2.1 million children, significantly larger numbers of Viet Nam's children continue to experience deprivations

1 United Nations Population Division 2024.

2 THƯ VIỆN PHÁP LUẬT 2016.

3 General Statistics Office unpublished/forthcoming; General Statistics Office of Viet Nam and UNICEF 2021; Roelen, Gassmann, and de Neubourg 2009.

4 The 2024 multidimensional child poverty rate (8.4%) is calculated by the General Statistics Office using data from the 2024 Vietnam Household Living Standards Survey (VHLSS). The measurement framework has evolved over time to reflect Viet Nam's socio-economic development and data availability, with nutrition and recreation being added over time to account for more holistic standards of children's needs, and deprivation thresholds being raised accordingly. The 2024 figure uses a stricter threshold of 3 out of 8 dimensions, whereas previous years often used 2 out of 6-7 dimensions. Baseline figures for the trend analysis include an analysis of 6 dimensions of poverty in 2002, with 72.2% of children deprived in 2 out of 6 dimensions, and 47.3% of children deprived in 3 out of 6 dimensions. See Tổng cục Thống kê (General Statistics Office) 2025.

5 Multidimensional child poverty in 2024 is higher among rural areas (11.2% compared to 3.0% in urban areas), among ethnic minorities (33.1% compared to 3.7% among Kinh majority), and among Southern Midlands and Mountain and Central Highland regions (approximately 20%, compared to under 3% in Red River Delta and Southeast, and under 9% in remaining regions). Tổng cục Thống kê (General Statistics Office) 2025.

in 1 to 2 crucial dimensions of need⁶, including 17-18% of children facing nutritional deficiencies and limited access to health services, and nearly half of all children facing deprivations in access to recreational materials for early childhood development and learning. This is an important point that bears emphasis.

Investing in human capital from early childhood, while reducing gaps throughout the lifecycle, is crucial for Viet Nam to address pertinent challenges such as an ageing population, regional and ethnic disparities, and evolving labour market demands. Ensuring that all children in Viet Nam are able to access high quality education, healthcare, nutrition, and other critical developmental inputs, contributes to inclusive economic growth and prepares future generations for a competitive and rapidly changing global economy.⁷ Recent global development reports emphasise the critical importance of early investments in children's development to build a highly skilled workforce, and remain competitive globally.⁸ With the cost of inaction rising, prioritising children's comprehensive development is vital to drive long-term prosperity, ensure resilience and sustain progress in human development.

The importance of the comprehensive development of children in Viet Nam towards 2045

Children are at the heart of Viet Nam's future, as investments in their well-being will determine the country's ability to meet its long-term growth and development ambitions.

Viet Nam has made impressive strides in economic development and poverty reduction since the Đổi Mới reforms in 1986, transitioning from a lower-middle-income country and setting ambitious targets to reach upper-middle-income status by 2030, and high income by 2045. Within the previous three decades, GDP per capita quadrupled⁹ and average household incomes tripled. Over the same period, monetary poverty rates saw a dramatic decline from 58% in 1993 to 6.4% in 2016, and most recently to 4.2% by 2022.¹⁰ The strategic vision outlined in the Viet Nam 2035 report marked a significant contribution to Vietnam's development¹¹, as it was the first document to comprehensively map-out the country's path towards upper-middle-income status through comprehensive reforms to achieve sustained economic growth, poverty reduction, and strengthened institutional capacity by 2035.¹² Among other ambitious goals, the report envisioned reaching a 7% GDP per capita growth rate, underscoring the importance and transformative role of productivity, equity and innovation in the 20 years since 2016.

Concurrently, there have been important global and national transitions since the launch of the Viet Nam 2035 report in 2016. Rapid advancements in technology, demographic transitions, the impacts of climate change, and crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis present new challenges and opportunities for the country's development trajectory.¹³ Viet Nam is experiencing important sociodemographic changes. While its population has grown from 93.1 million in 2016 to 98.8 million in 2023 and is expected to surpass 100 million by 2025, annual population growth has declined to 0.68%, which will mean Viet Nam is on course to have one the fastest transitions to an ageing population globally. While the country's youth demographic is shrinking, 14.3% (14.1 million in 2023) of the population is aged 60 years and

6 According to recent figures, 26.6% of children under age 16 years continue to experience multidimensional deprivation in 6 out of 8 analysed dimensions. See Ibid.

7 World Bank 2021a; World Bank Group 2024a; World Bank Group 2019.

8 World Bank Group 2019; World Bank Group 2022.

9 GDP per capita increased from USD 588 in 1984, to USD 2,741 in 2016, to 3,659 USD by 2022 (using constant USD 2015). World Bank 2024.

10 Based on the World Bank lower middle-income (LMIC) poverty line (US\$3.65/day, 2017 PPP). At national poverty lines, poverty reduced from 9.2% in 2016 to 4.3% in 2022. Ibid.

11 World Bank and Ministry of Planning and Investment of Vietnam 2016.

12 Ibid.

13 World Bank 2022b.

above, and this proportion is projected to reach 26.5% - over one fourth of the population – by 2050.¹⁴ Viet Nam has already transitioned into an "ageing society" and is on course to become an "aged society" by 2034, just 23 years after crossing the 7% threshold in 2011¹⁵ - faster than in many advanced economies like France and Sweden - and is followed closely by South Korea. This rapid ageing, alongside a declining total fertility rate of 1.9 births per woman, which is below the replacement level of 2.1, and a median age rising from 32.8 years in 2023 to a projected 39.8-40.7 years by 2045-2050, signals the urgent need to address workforce productivity challenges and prepare for increased dependency ratios. The shrinking share of children and youths, and ultimately the working-age population, further emphasises the importance of investing in the younger generation today, to drive and sustain economic momentum and innovation into the future.¹⁶ An additional concern is Viet Nam's persistently high sex ratio at birth, which reflects entrenched gender biases and sex-selective practices. In 2022-2023, Viet Nam's sex ratio at birth stood at around 111 male births for every 100 female births, which exceeds the natural ratio of around 105:100, and is among the highest in the world and the second-highest in East-Asia and the Pacific region among countries with available data in 2022, matching that of China.¹⁷ Left unaddressed, these demographic patterns forewarn of long-term distortions and gender disparities in the workforce and social structure. These evolving dynamics require not only a long-term vision and structural reforms, but a strategic focus which centres the comprehensive development of children as the foundation for socio-economic success and the achievement of national prosperity of the 2045 vision.

Viet Nam's development landscape is also expecting to experience a major structural shift, with the government planning an ambitious administrative reform that will reduce the number of provinces from 63 to 34 and eliminate the district-level of governance.¹⁸ This administrative consolidation aims to streamline the state apparatus and improve service efficiency, while bringing governance closer to the people. This reorganisation also carries significant implications for the delivery of essential social services, especially in education and healthcare, both of which are critical for child development. To ensure these reforms advance inclusive growth and promote human capital, it is essential that safeguards for child-focused planning, investment, and equity are embedded into the design and implementation of governance reforms.

Historically, **investment in human capital has been critical for countries transitioning from middle-income to high-income status.** Of the 101 middle-income countries in 1960, only 13 successfully reached high-income status by 2008, with most others either remaining stagnant or experiencing economic decline.¹⁹ Notable success stories, such as the Asian Tigers (Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore, and Hong Kong), and Ireland, demonstrate a shared trajectory centred on robust investments in human capital – particularly in health, nutrition, and education. These investments have enabled countries to transform their workforces to shift to higher-value-added, creative industries while fostering engaged and capable citizens able to meet the demands of the times.²⁰

While Viet Nam appears well positioned to match such performance, this report sounds a cautionary note and explains why, to achieve its development ambitions, Viet Nam can and must redouble efforts to place children at the centre of its development strategy. Already, Viet Nam has made excellent progress in promoting the population's living standards, including

14 ESCAP 2022.

15 The speed of ageing refers to the number of years required or expected for the percentage of the population aged 65 years and over to increase from 7-14%. ESCAP 2022.

16 World Bank 2021a; World Bank 2024.

17 General Statistics Office 2025; United Nations Population Division 2024.

18 Lao Dong 2025; THƯ VIỆN PHÁP LUẬT 2025a; THƯ VIỆN PHÁP LUẬT 2025b.

19 Development Research Center of the State Council and World Bank, 2013.

20 Rozelle and Hell 2020; Wang 2007; Ashton et al. 2002; Bourguignon, Fournier, and Gurgand 2001.

those of children. Viet Nam's Human Capital Index (HCI) score²¹ improved from 0.66 in 2010 to 0.69 by 2020²². This reflects the country's impressive progress in building human capital and making key investments in children's survival, education and health, with many of the HCI's separate component indicators and complementary indicators ranking well-above both regional averages and average scores for other lower-middle-income countries, including the probability of children's survival to age 5 (98%), learning-adjusted years of school (10.7), and the rate of participation in organised learning among children one year younger than the official primary school entry age (100%). However, it also highlights the need for renewed focus on investments in children to meet their comprehensive needs across the lifecycle.²³ The score of 0.69 suggests that a child born today and provided optimal conditions for development will achieve only 69% of their potential productivity in the future, underscoring the critical need for targeted investments to close persistent gaps and unlock the full potential of future generations.

1.2 Scope and objectives of the technical report

The objective of this technical report is to assess current child development policies and make strategic recommendations to inform the Viet Nam 2045 Report. The report focuses on key sectors essential to upholding children's rights as outlined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child – education, healthcare, nutrition, WASH, social protection, child protection, and cross-cutting issues (including equity and climate change). It thus takes a rights-based perspective to advocate for holistic, child-centred strategies, as part of Viet Nam's broader economic and labour strategy, towards achieving long-term national resilience and prosperity.

In line with the aspirations outlined in the Viet Nam 2035 and Viet Nam 2045 reports, this report proposes an integrated, cross-sectoral approach that positions children's rights and well-being at the heart of Viet Nam's development strategy. By investing in children today, Viet Nam can create a future workforce equipped for the demands of a modern economy, while fostering a society that values equity, resilience, quality and sustainable growth. This report underscores that sustainable national progress depends not only on economic growth but on ensuring that all children receive the opportunity to survive, thrive and contribute to Viet Nam's prosperous future.

Key findings from this report will be integrated into select chapters of the Viet Nam 2045 Report, to align with socio-economic strategies in Viet Nam's broader vision for 2045. The report adopts a forward-looking approach, anticipating future needs to equip children for success in a changing global environment.

While this report aims to provide a comprehensive overview, it is not exhaustive in covering all possible indicators and issues across sectors. Some level of sectoral deepening would be beneficial, but given the breadth of topics, this cannot be fully addressed within a single report. Many sectoral developments require a more detailed stocktaking and policy analysis, which falls beyond the scope of this study. In several cases, more in-depth analysis would be necessary to generate specific, actionable policy recommendations at the sectoral level. Future research and sector-specific assessments will be essential to complement this work, ensuring a more granular understanding of challenges and opportunities in child development policies.

21 The HCI measures the human capital potential a child born today can achieve by age 18, based on health and education risks in their country. The index ranges from 0 to 1, reflecting expected productivity relative to full education and health, in the context of development accounting. The HCI is not intended for cross-country rankings, as small score differences can artificially exaggerate gaps between countries, and such rankings further obscure absolute progress made by each country. For more information, see World Bank 2020.

22 Human Capital Project 2020; Human Capital Project 2023.

23 World Bank 2024; World Bank Group 2019; Human Capital Project 2023.

1.3 Structure of the report

Following the introduction and descriptions of the methodological underpinnings, the report makes the case for comprehensive child development from a theoretical perspective and for the context of Viet Nam. Each subsequent chapter of this report will cover trends, challenges, and recommendations in specific areas important for the comprehensive development of children in Viet Nam:

1. Education - Trends, challenges, and recommendations for equipping children with future-ready skills.
2. Health and Nutrition - Addressing persistent health disparities and nutrition gaps to ensure children's survival, thriving, and development.
3. Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) – Ensuring equitable access to safely managed water and sanitation services, particularly for rural and vulnerable communities.
4. Social Protection and Children's Rights – Strengthening safety nets and legal frameworks to protect children and their families.
5. Child Protection – Building strong systems to address abuse, exploitation, and neglect in a rapidly urbanising and digitising society.
6. Cross-Cutting Issues - Intersections of climate change, equity, and other issues of inclusivity in policy sectors and interventions.

Each chapter concludes with targeted recommendations for 2025–2030 and 2031–2045.

The future of Viet Nam hinges on the investments made in its children today. By addressing the structural and systemic challenges that impede equitable development, Viet Nam can build a resilient, adaptive, and prosperous society. This report lays the groundwork for evidence-based policies and actionable solutions, enabling Viet Nam to realise its vision of becoming a modern, inclusive, and thriving nation by 2045.

2. Methodology

This report employs a multi-faceted approach to review existing evidence on progress made for children in Viet Nam to date, and for developing evidence-based and forward-looking policy recommendations for the comprehensive development of children in Viet Nam going forward. The methodology integrates literature review, secondary data analysis, an equity and gender-sensitive lens, and stakeholder and expert consultations to ensure robust and inclusive findings.

2.1 Literature review

The foundation of this report is a thorough analysis of existing legal frameworks, policies, and reports on child development across child-relevant sectors in Viet Nam, including education, healthcare, social protection, and child rights. National studies were contextualized with international research to identify gaps and opportunities in the country's landscape for child development and child-focused social investments. Additionally, the review considers emerging national and global trends to ensure that policy recommendations are forward-looking, adaptable, and resilient to current and future challenges.

This report further draws on key child-related datasets to provide a quantitative foundation for the analysis and ensuing recommendations. This secondary analysis focuses on identifying trends and disparities in child-related indicators, such as school enrolment, child health outcomes, and access to social protection, to inform targeted interventions. Publicly available and validated data sources used as the evidence base for this report include the Viet Nam Sustainable Development Goal Indicators on Children and Women (SDGCW) Survey 2020–2021, the Viet Nam Household Living Standards Surveys of 2016-2022 (VHLSS), and the Labour Force Surveys of 2016-2022. Additional public data on education, health, and nutrition were further gathered from the General Office of Statistics of Viet Nam, the World Bank, UNICEF, UNFPA, and the International Labour Organisation.

2.2 Equity and gender lens

An equity and gender-sensitive lens is applied throughout the analysis to ensure that the needs of marginalized and vulnerable groups are addressed and to ensure that the recommendations proposed promote inclusivity and reduce existing disparities across socioeconomic and demographic groups. These vulnerable groups included children with disabilities, rural and ethnic minority children, children of migrant parents, boys and girls.

2.3 Expert and Stakeholder consultation

The findings and recommendations were refined through extensive consultations with key stakeholders, including UNICEF, the National Institute for Economics and Finance (NIEF) under the Ministry of Finance, development partners, and sectoral experts. The consultative process is to further include workshops and roundtables, promoting discussions with technical experts, development partners, and policymakers to align the findings with national development priorities, to ensure that the analysis and subsequent recommendations were not only evidence-based but also in alignment with the broader objectives of Viet Nam's 2045 vision.



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3. The Case for Investing in Comprehensive Child Development

Theories on economic growth and human capital formation emphasise that sustained economic growth is driven by strategic, high-quality, and timely investments made in children's education, health, and well-being. Comprehensive child development is not merely a moral or social imperative but also an essential economic strategy, as investments in both the quantity and quality of the labour force – through improvements in their health, education and skills – improve worker productivity and therefore maximise the potential for long-term economic growth and output.²⁴

Research by Heckman and a vast array of other authors demonstrates that timely investments in early childhood, especially in the first 1,000 days of life, yield high returns as they enable and promote individual learning, skills development and productivity later in life.²⁵ Ensuring proactive early interventions – such as prenatal care, proper nutrition, immunisation, and early childhood development and education, social protection and clean water and sanitation – and preventing early life deprivations and disparities, ensures that returns on early investments are realised.²⁶ Not only do they ensure positive developmental outcomes for children, but these investments have also been shown to deliver significant economic and social dividends by reducing future costs associated with poor health, low educational attainment, and unemployment.

The private and public returns to investing in children are multifaceted and yield benefits for the economy, businesses, the public, children and future generations, while also advancing sustainability goals.²⁷ A healthy, educated, and protected population enables the development of a more skilled and adaptable workforce, increases productivity, and fosters innovation. Further, a healthy and well-educated population strengthens the consumer market and ensures a more stable and sustainable business environment, while reducing social costs such as healthcare expenses and poverty alleviation programmes.²⁸ Achieving Viet Nam's 2045 vision will require a transformative shift in the workforce towards advanced skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, digital literacy, and adaptability, which are cultivated through the comprehensive development of children. Investing in comprehensive child development today prepares children for the demands of a digitized and green economy, driving sustained, inclusive, and equitable economic growth.

Please refer to Annex I, p. 123 for further details on the underlying theories, evidence, and the Heckman Curve, which illustrate that early investments in interventions for children yield the highest returns. These returns place investments in children as a high priority and strategic economic move for both public and private sectors, reinforcing the importance of prioritising child development for Viet Nam's future growth and prosperity.

24 See Cobb and Douglas 1928; Solow 1956; Denison 1967; Maddison 1984.

25 Heckman 2006; Heckman, Pinto, and Savelyev 2013; Samson, Fajth, and François 2016; Van Damme et al. 2023.

26 Doyle et al. 2009; Heckman 2006.

27 Van Damme et al. 2023; Currie 2009; Fink et al. 2016.

28 Akseer et al. 2022; Heckman and Masterov 2007.

4. Education Reform for Children up to 2045

Education is key to Viet Nam's efforts to become a high-income country by 2045. As emphasised in research on the experiences of middle-income countries and high-growth economies in East Asia and beyond, effective education policies are essential for human capital development, and can support productivity, innovation, and economic resilience.²⁹ Viet Nam's performance in education has been very strong in basic education but has been lacking in such key areas as early childhood education and post-secondary education.

This chapter examines the performance of Viet Nam's education system, identifies key trends, challenges, and offers policy recommendations drawn from Viet Nam and other country contexts.

4.1 Why Invest in Education?

Early and age-specific investments in education provide the foundation for economic growth, social equity, and long-term resilience. Empirical research consistently finds that investments in education promote positive individual life outcomes, higher earnings, social cohesion, and drives national productivity and innovation.³⁰ Investments in high quality education at all levels, starting from early childhood programmes, yield long-term dividends.³¹ For example, a study of 139 countries from 1950 to 2014 reports a 9% return on GDP per capita for every additional year of schooling, with even higher social and private returns for girls and women, and for secondary and tertiary education.³²

Evidence indicates that early childhood education (ECE) is one of the most cost-effective means to improve life outcomes. Neuroscientific studies emphasise the critical role of early brain development in shaping cognitive and emotional skills in especially the first 1,000 days of life.³³ Policies focusing on early interventions, such as universal preschool education and improving child nutrition, have proven instrumental in closing achievement gaps for disadvantaged children and in improving school readiness.³⁴ Compelling international evidence by Garcia, Heckman, and other authors, on the economic and societal returns of high-quality ECE programmes reveals a 13% annual return on investment (ROI), which includes long-term benefits in improved educational outcomes, health, labour market outcomes, and public safety.³⁵ The "two-generation effect" of ECE programmes further suggests that these programmes both improve children's outcomes which allow them to become more productive in the future workforce, while also enabling parents, especially mothers, to join the workforce and boost household incomes and opportunities for upward mobility.

29 Rees, Chai, and Anthony 2012; McGuinness et al. 2021; Jimenez, Nguyen, and Patrinos 2012; Hanushek and Woessmann 2020a.

30 Samson, Fajth, and François 2016; Psacharopoulos and Patrinos 2018.

31 Cannon et al. 2017; Rees, Chai, and Anthony 2012.

32 Psacharopoulos and Patrinos 2018.

33 Bick and Nelson 2016; Welsch and Zimmer 2009.

34 Samson, Fajth, and François 2016; Freund et al. 2023.

35 García et al. 2017.

The quality of education significantly determines these returns³⁶, underlining the importance of improving learning outcomes alongside expanding access and inclusivity in education. Human capital theory³⁷ and endogenous growth theory³⁸ identify the transformative role education can play in equipping people with the skills and knowledge necessary for economic and social participation in the context of the emerging challenges facing Viet Nam. For countries like Viet Nam, the transition to high-income status necessitates a skilled workforce that is able to adapt, innovate, and thrive in response to technological advances and economic shifts. Studies have shown that middle-income countries struggle to transition to high-income status due to inadequate investments in education and skills development to meet the demands of a changing labour market and require a strategic focus on improving human capital quality and aligning education systems with the demands of innovation-driven industries.³⁹

Countries in the region such as South Korea and Singapore provide a model for how prioritising investments in universal primary and secondary education, vocational training, and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM)-focused curricula can help to grow a talent pipeline to promote technology-driven sectors and ultimately economic growth and development.⁴⁰ Both of these countries have faced adverse economic conditions post-independence, but achieved strong economic growth through strategic investments in education and research, presenting models of transition from traditional and industrial to eventually knowledge-driven economies.⁴¹ Among countries with incomes comparable to Viet Nam, impact of secondary education on economic growth, e.g., across ASEAN, has also been identified as a key driver of economic growth, particularly when enrolment exceeds specific thresholds (e.g., 83% for Thailand and 71% for Indonesia), at which point the impacts on both tertiary education outcomes and economic growth become particularly strong.⁴² Similarly, tertiary education was also found to play a critical role in driving economic growth in ASEAN, with positive impacts becoming more pronounced when enrolment rates surpassed thresholds, such as 49.5% in Thailand and 64.1% in Singapore. While both education levels contributed to economic growth, secondary education enrolment served as a multiplier for the economic impact of tertiary education – as better-prepared students enter the higher education system, investments in secondary education indirectly increased the returns on tertiary education, amplifying the positive impact of tertiary education on economic growth.

For Vietnam's 2045 vision, aligning secondary education outcomes with tertiary education requirements is essential. While individuals enrolling in tertiary education tend to fall outside of children's age brackets, the economic significance of tertiary education highlights the need to prepare children early for future success throughout secondary and tertiary education. This preparation should include career guidance, skills development, and aligning earlier educational outcomes – such as those at the primary and secondary levels – with the demands and expectations of tertiary education, thereby creating an education pipeline to maximise both individual and national economic and social returns.

Concurrently, investing in tertiary education alone will not be sufficient to meet Viet Nam's future workforce needs. Developing highly skilled workers, scientists, engineers, and innovators requires early and sustained investment across all stages of education and learning, starting from early childhood. Foundational skills such as literacy, numeracy, problem-solving, and

36 Hanushek and Woessmann 2008; Hanushek and Woessmann 2020a; Hanushek and Woessmann 2020b.

37 World Bank Group 2024a.

38 Aghion et al. 1998; Howitt 2000.

39 Jimenez, Nguyen, and Patrinos 2012; Cm, Hoang, and Yarram 2023; Cm, Hoang, and Yarram 2024.

40 Wang 2007; Tan 2017; Maneejuk and Yamaka 2021; Han and Lee 2020; Ashton et al. 2002; Fekih Zguir, Dubis, and Koç 2021; Koh 2006.

41 Csizmazia 2017.

42 Maneejuk and Yamaka 2021.

creativity are developed from early childhood and must be strengthened throughout.⁴³ Without these, inequalities are likely to compound and limit children's ability to succeed in higher levels of education and fully participate in the economy.

4.2 Trends, Challenges, and Opportunities

Improving Spatial Distribution and Accessibility of Education

Viet Nam has made significant strides in advancing inclusive and equitable education across all levels, contributing to the realisation of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4). As of February 2025, the government of Viet Nam has announced a nationwide tuition fee exemption for all public school students from kindergarten to high school, starting in the 2025-26 school year, and expecting to benefit around 23.2 million children.⁴⁴ This progress reflects the government's sustained efforts to expand educational opportunities and address barriers to enrolment, particularly for marginalised groups. These include the 2019 Law on Education, which defines the national education system, its institutions, and stakeholders, emphasising the comprehensive development of Vietnamese people "to enhance public intellect, develop human resources, nurture talents, and meet the requirements of nation building, defence, and international integration".⁴⁵ Public primary school students are exempt from paying tuition fees, which has contributed to progress in the sector between 2016 and 2022. Further, the planned reorganisation of administrative boundaries and provincial and local governance, including the reduction of provinces from 63 to 34 and the elimination of district-level units, will further have significant implications for education governance. While these changes may improve resource allocation and oversight, they also pose new risks of disruption to planning, staffing, and equitable service administration and delivery, particularly in remote or newly merged communes.⁴⁶ Transition support, inter-governmental coordination, and updated education financing mechanisms will be critical to help mitigate any potentially negative impacts on children's learning.

Between 2016 and 2022, Viet Nam has maintained and improved its near universal primary net enrolment rate in primary education, achieving 95.8% in 2022, and universal transitioning of students from primary school to secondary school (Figure 1). Gender parity in enrolment at the primary and lower secondary levels has reached near-ideal levels, ensuring equitable participation for boys and girls (Figure 3).⁴⁷ Between 2016 and 2022, Viet Nam made steady progress in improving education access at all levels, though challenges remain. Gross enrolment rates (GER) for primary education consistently exceeded 100%, reflecting strong access but also some over-age or under-age enrolment, with a slight decline to 99.8% by 2022, potentially linked to the impact of COVID-19 on educational access. Lower secondary GER remained stable at around 95%, while upper secondary GER showed significant improvement, rising from 74.7% in 2016 to 84.1% in 2022. Net enrolment rates (NER), reflecting age-appropriate enrolment, peaked at 98.1% for primary education in 2020 but dropped slightly to 95.8% in 2022. Lower secondary NER improved from 90.4 in 2016 to 93.4% in 2020 but declined to 90.5% by 2022, while upper secondary NER rose from 68.6% to 77.2%. These trends highlight the need to address persistent barriers to secondary education, especially for disadvantaged groups, to support Viet Nam's 2045 vision of an inclusive, equitable, and skills-oriented education system.

43 Heckman 2006; García et al. 2017; Heckman, Pinto, and Savelyev 2013.

44 VnExpress 2025b.

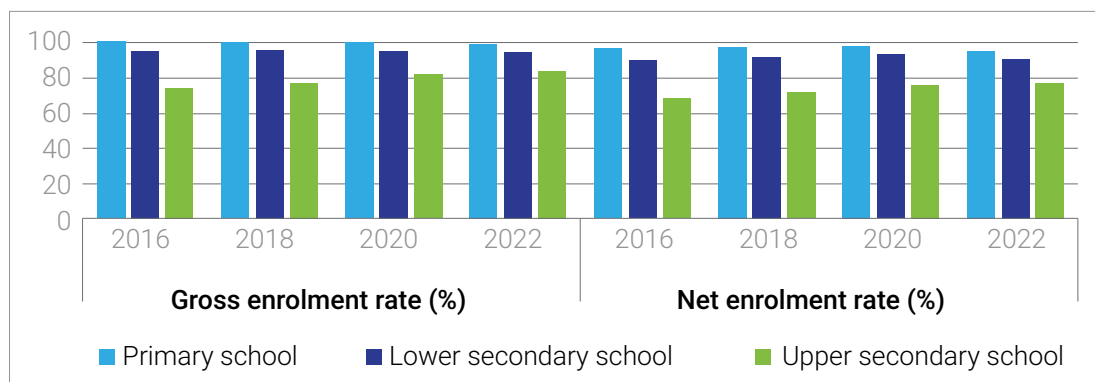
45 The National Assembly of Viet Nam 2019.

46 Lao Dong 2025; THƯ VIỆN PHÁP LUẬT 2025a; THƯ VIỆN PHÁP LUẬT 2025b.

47 General Statistics Office (GSO) 2023; Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI), German Development Agency (GIZ), and United Nations (UN) Viet Nam 2023.

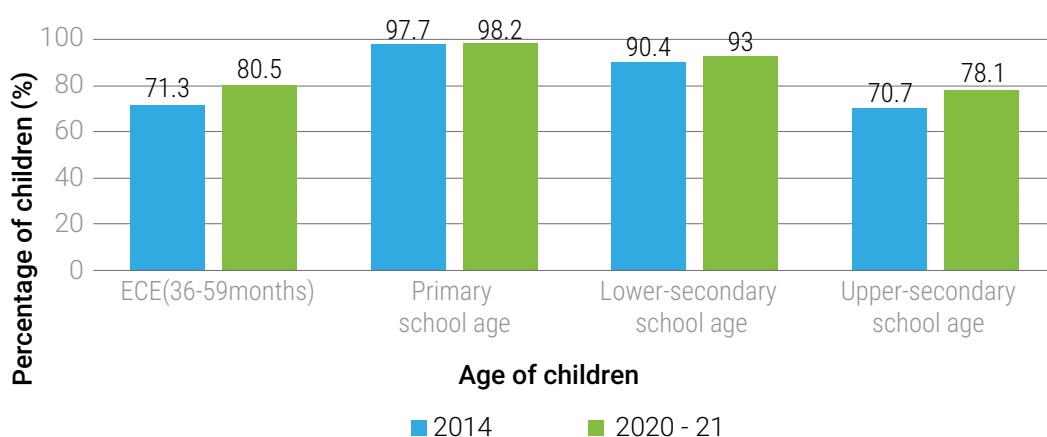
Net attendance at the primary school level age⁴⁸ has remained consistently high, increasing slightly from 97.7% in 2014 to 98.2% in 2020-21 (Figure 2). Attendance among children of lower secondary school age rose from 90.4% in 2014 to 93% in 2020-21, showing the success of previous policies aimed at ensuring every child receives a foundational education. Attendance at the upper secondary school ages also increased from 70.7% in 2014 to 78.1% in 2020-21, marking noteworthy progress in retention at higher levels of education.

Figure 1 Gross and net enrolment rates of children at primary, lower-secondary, and upper-secondary schooling levels between 2016-2022



Source: VHLSS 2018, VHLSS 2022

Figure 2 School attendance (%) among children of early childhood, primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary age in 2014 and 2020-21*



Source: MICS 2014 and SDGCWS 2020-21⁴⁹

*Attendance rates presented for primary, lower-secondary, and upper-secondary school age refer to adjusted net attendance rates,

48 School attendance here refers to the adjusted net attendance rate. Among children of primary school age, the rates are "adjusted" since they include not only primary school attendance, but also lower and upper secondary school attendance in the numerator. Among children of lower and upper secondary school age, the rates include also attendance to higher education levels in the numerator. Among children See General Statistics Office and UNICEF 2021.

49 General Statistics Office of Viet Nam (GSO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) 2015; General Statistics Office of Viet Nam (GSO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) 2021.

Attendance at the preschool level increased significantly over this period, from 71.3% in 2014 to 80.5% in 2020-21 based on SDGCWS data.⁵⁰ Attendance among children aged 5 years remained nearly universal between 2016-17 and 2021-22, according to data from the Ministry of Education, at above 99%.⁵¹ These figures of progress reflect targeted efforts to improve early childhood education access, which is critical for cognitive and social development. Preschool attendance in Viet Nam increased significantly across both the poorest and richest households between 2014 and 2022 referring to both VHLSS and SDGCWS data for this period.⁵² The rate of children aged 36-59 months who were developmentally on track in health, learning, and psychosocial well-being was 88.7% in 2014 and 78.2% in 2020-21 (measured in 2020-21 for children aged 24-59 months).⁵³

Despite general progress in universal education access, disparities persist with recent research suggesting this being linked to decentralised funding systems that vary significantly across provinces.⁵⁴ Differences in salary-to-non-salary ratios and allocation practices at the province level may hinder equitable outcomes.

Challenges particularly remain in achieving equity and retention at especially, lower secondary, and upper-secondary levels (Figure 3). Disparities at all levels of education further exist between urban and rural areas, by sex at the upper-secondary level, and across socio-economic regions and ethnic minorities, with the Highlands and Mekong Delta regions consistently showing lower rates of enrolment.⁵⁵ However, these gaps are not solely geographical or economic but are also deeply rooted in intergenerational mobility constraints, social exclusion, and long-standing structural barriers, particularly for ethnic minority communities. Addressing these disparities requires contextualised, long-term investments in early childhood education, culturally relevant curricula, bilingual education initiatives, and financial incentives to break cycles of educational disadvantage.

50 General Statistics Office and UNICEF 2021.

51 Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI), German Development Agency (GIZ), and United Nations (UN) Viet Nam 2023.

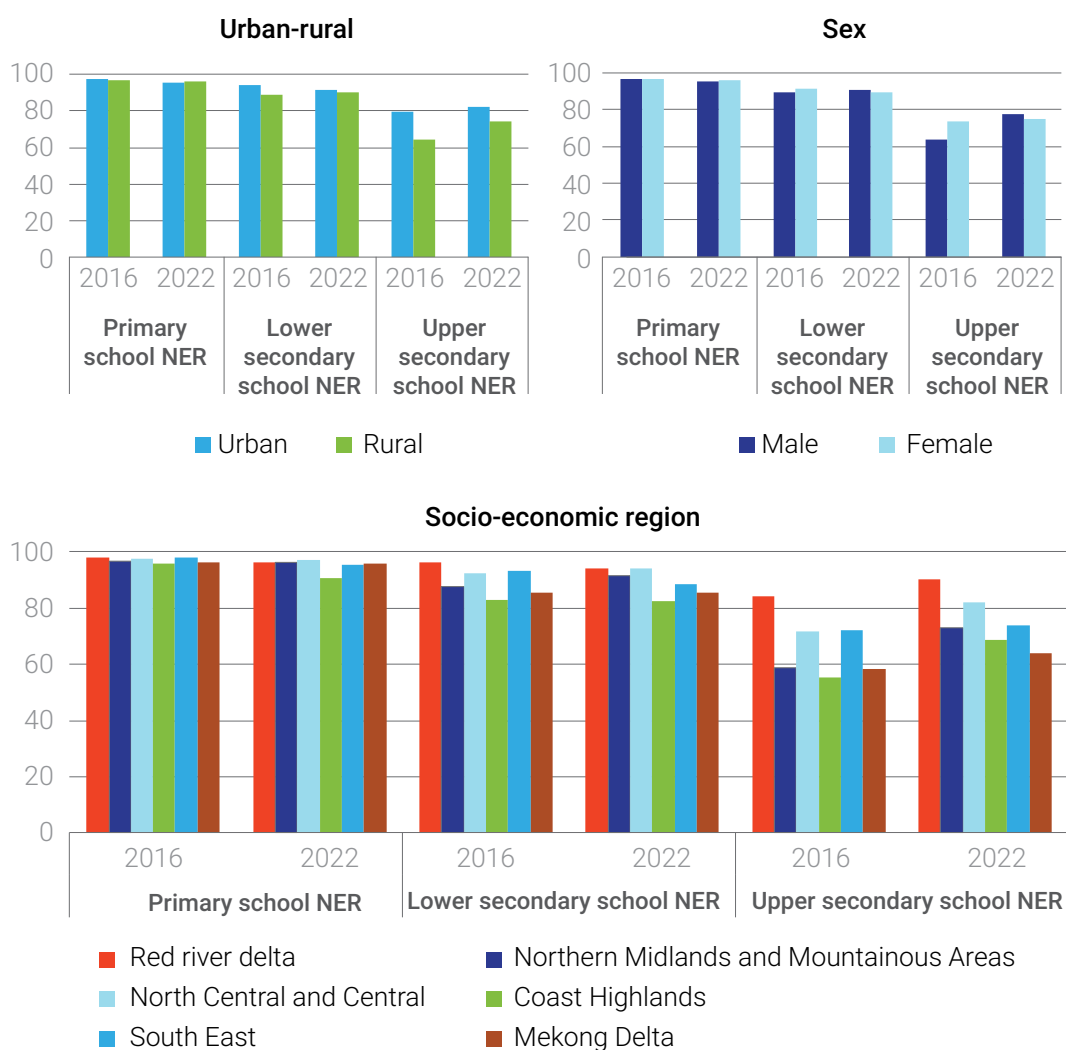
52 General Statistics Office of Viet Nam (GSO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) 2015; General Statistics Office (GSO) 2023; General Statistics Office of Viet Nam (GSO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) 2021.

53 General Statistics Office of Viet Nam (GSO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) 2015; General Statistics Office of Viet Nam (GSO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) 2021.

54 {Citation} Nguyen-Hoang, 2024.

55 Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI), German Development Agency (GIZ), and United Nations (UN) Viet Nam 2023; General Statistics Office of Viet Nam (GSO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) 2021; General Statistics Office of Viet Nam (GSO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) 2015.

Figure 3 Net enrolment rates at primary, lower-secondary, and upper secondary education in 2016 and 2022, by urban-rural area, sex, and socio-economic region



Source: VHLSS 2016 & 2022

Disparities in Early Childhood Education (ECE) attendance similarly persist across Viet Nam's regions, highlighting inequities that require targeted interventions. Data from 2020-2021 shows significant regional variations in ECE attendance, with the Mekong River Delta lagging far behind other regions at 47.6%, despite improvements from 39% in 2014.⁵⁶ In contrast, the Northern Midlands and Mountainous Area achieved one of the highest attendance rates, increasing from 83.8% in 2014 to 95.1% in 2020-2021.

⁵⁶ General Statistics Office of Viet Nam (GSO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) 2015; General Statistics Office of Viet Nam (GSO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) 2021.

Gaps also remain in enrolment for the youngest children, particularly among the poorest households, comparing figures between 2016 and 2022 (Figure 4). Slight regressions in the rate of children enrolled in primary school, lower secondary school⁵⁷, suggest persistent challenges since the school closures and access gaps brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic in the education retention and completion rates across the education pipeline.⁵⁸

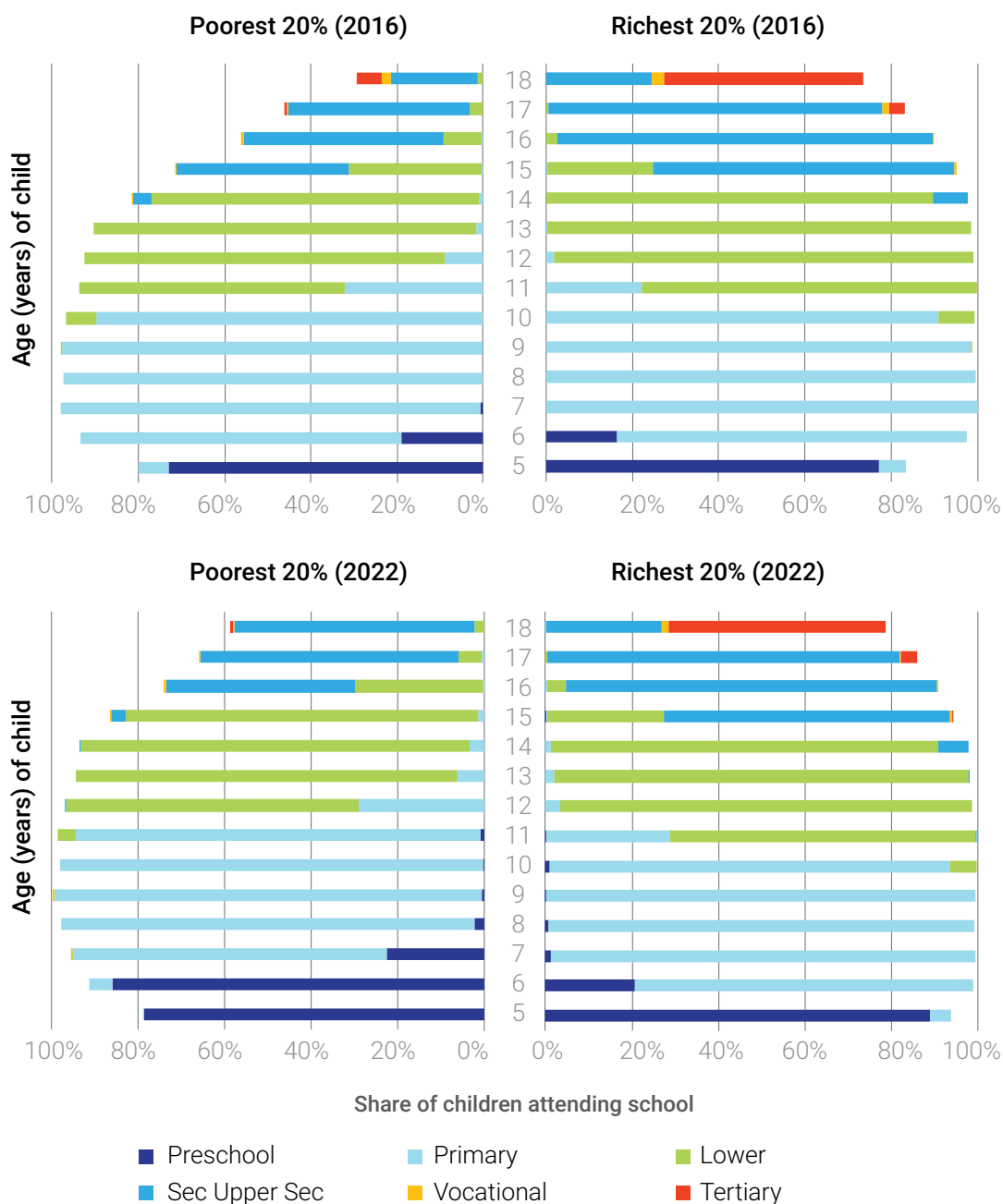
Upper secondary enrolment still lags behind other education levels and disparities remain, particularly for children living in rural areas, from ethnic minority and low-income households.⁵⁹ Disparities emerge clearly at higher levels of education (Figure 4). Attendance in upper secondary education remains significantly lower among the poorest households, with only 59.6% of 16-year-olds attending in 2022, compared to 86% among the richest households. Similarly, transitioning to tertiary education has improved for the poorest, increasing from 6% to 17.2% at age 18, but a substantial gap persists when compared to the 50% attendance rate among the richest. These patterns highlight both the progress and ongoing challenges in ensuring equitable access to education, especially at higher levels, and highlight the need for targeted interventions, including financial support, to bridge the gaps in secondary and tertiary education.

57 Primary school net enrolment reduced from 98.1% in 2020 to 95.8% in 2022, while the share of five-year-old children attending kindergarten dropped slightly from 99.9% in 2018-19 to 99.5% by 2021-22. General Statistics Office (GSO) 2023.

58 Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI), German Development Agency (GIZ), and United Nations (UN) Viet Nam 2023; General Statistics Office (GSO) 2023; United Nations Children's Fund 2020b; UNICEF Viet Nam 2022a.

59 General Statistics Office of Viet Nam (GSO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) 2021.

Figure 4 Disparities in education attendance rates between children in the lowest and highest income quintiles in 2016 and 2022

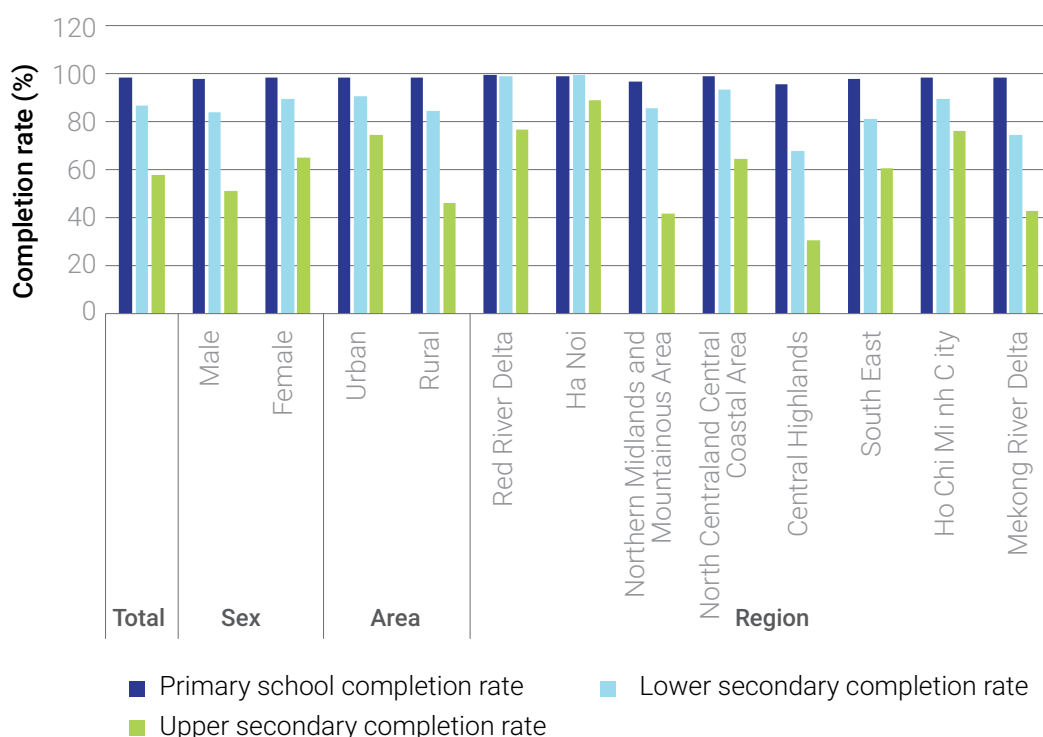


Source: Calculations based on VHLSS 2016 and VHLSS 2022

In terms of school completion, recent years show Viet Nam has achieved strong completion rates at the primary level (98.3%), with evident decline at the lower and upper secondary school levels (86.3% and 58.1%, respectively) (Figure 5). These rates provide further evidence of persistent disparities by sex, area and region of residence, as well as ethnicity and household

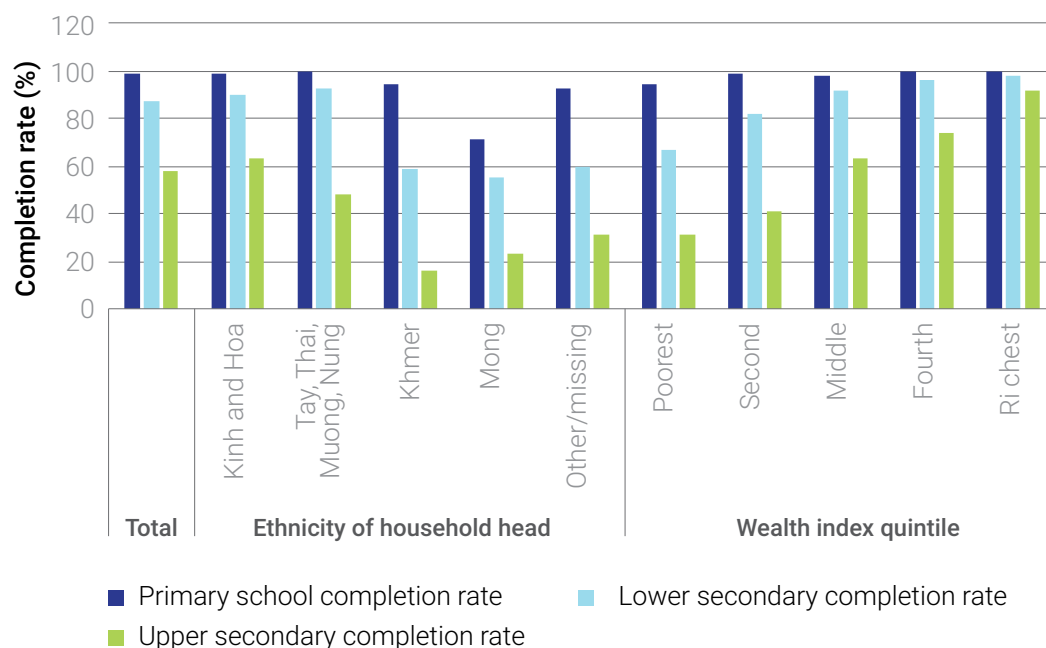
wealth. Girls have a higher likelihood of completing education, particularly at secondary levels. The urban-rural gap similarly widens at secondary levels, likely due to differences in access to schools, divergent economic barriers and incentives, and other social factors present in rural areas. Urban students (74.8%) are much more likely to complete upper secondary education, compared to rural students (46.4%). Similarly, urbanised regions such as Ha Noi, Red River Delta, and Ho Chi Minh City, show strong educational performance, while mountainous, remote, and rural regions such as the Central Highlands show a significant drop in completion rates, particularly at the upper secondary level. Ethnic minorities (especially Mong and Khmer) face severe educational disadvantages, likely due to poverty, language barriers, and school accessibility (Figure 6). Household wealth also appears to have a strong association with school completion, particularly for upper secondary education, with poorer students (31-40.6%) far less likely to complete upper secondary education compared to the students in the two richest quintiles (73.5-91.8%). These trends in general completion rates at the secondary levels, coupled with these aforementioned disparities, risk exacerbating income inequality, limiting social mobility, and deepening a gap in skills in an increasingly competitive labour market. Left unaddressed through such interventions as education-sector investment and inclusive social protection measures, disadvantaged and marginalised groups may face difficulty accessing higher education and quality employment.

Figure 5 Primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary school completion rates, by sex, area, and region (2020-21)



Source: SDGCWS 2020-21

Figure 6 Primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary school completion rates, by ethnicity of the household head and wealth index quintile (2020-21)



Source: SDGCWS 2020-21

The 2035 report emphasised equity as a cornerstone of Viet Nam's development, particularly for ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, and urban migrants. Persistent gaps in equity and inclusion in education, particularly for children with disabilities, children of ethnic minorities, urban migrants, and other marginalised groups undermine recent progress in education and the potential for harnessing the full human capital of Viet Nam's future workforce.⁶⁰ Based on 2022 data, persistent accessibility gaps remain for students with disabilities. Only a limited share of schools having suitable facilities and materials for students with disabilities, at respectively 37.1%, 28.9%, and 19.9% of schools at the primary, lower secondary, and high school levels.⁶¹

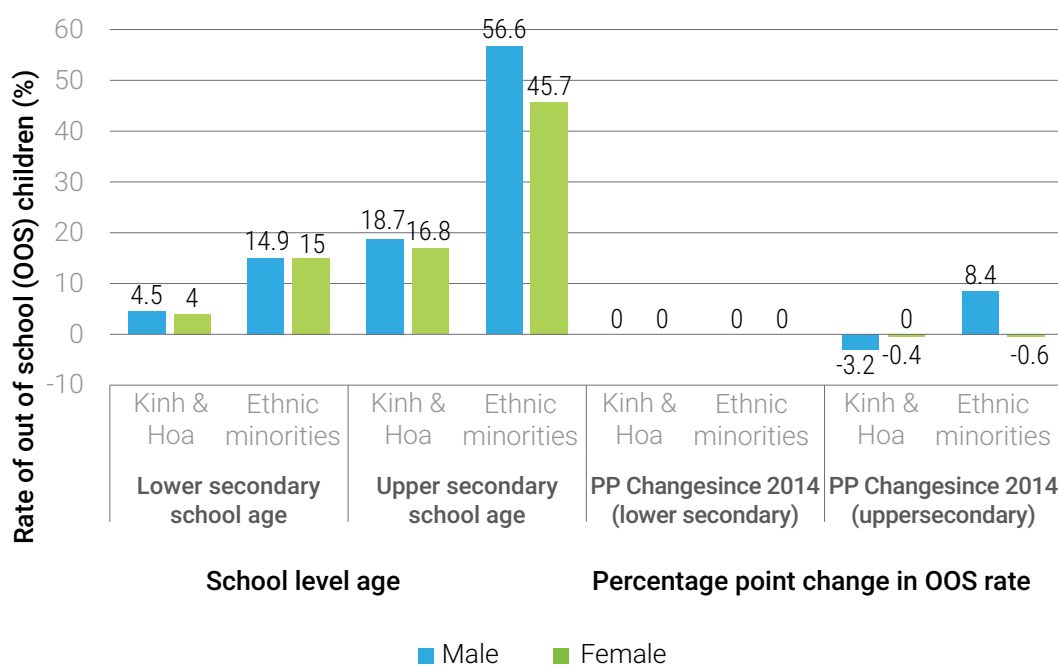
For both lower and upper secondary school levels, out-of-school rates for ethnic minority children are substantially higher than those for Kinh and Hoa children (Figure 7). This gap is substantially larger at the upper secondary level, highlighting major dropout rates and barriers faced by minority students in continuing their education beyond lower secondary. There has been no percentage point change in the out-of-school rates for either Kinh and Hoa or ethnic minority children at the lower secondary level since 2014, showing that interventions to address out-of-school rates at this level have had a limited impact for improving equity. For ethnic minorities, the rate for girls decreased slightly, while the rate for boys increased by 8.4 percentage points, indicating worsening educational access for boys from ethnic minorities at the upper secondary level.⁶²

60 World Bank and Ministry of Planning and Investment of Viet Nam 2016; General Statistics Office of Viet Nam (GSO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) 2021; UNICEF Viet Nam 2022a; United Nations Children's Fund 2020.

61 Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI), German Development Agency (GIZ), and United Nations (UN) Viet Nam 2023.

62 General Statistics Office of Viet Nam (GSO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) 2015; General Statistics Office of Viet Nam (GSO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) 2021.

Figure 7 Out of school rates at lower and upper secondary school for boys and girls by ethnicity of household head in 2020-21



Source: SDGCWS 2020-21

These disparities indicate that despite improvements in access across all levels of education, marginalised groups are significantly more likely to be left out of the education system, particularly at the secondary level. There is an opportunity to focus interventions on these groups, including providing targeted financial incentives and community-based outreach programs to ensure these children go to and stay in school. Although 2020-21 data suggests generally low dropout rates of 1% between grades 1-7, these rates rise to 4%, 3%, and 4% for grades 8, 10, and 11, respectively.⁶³ Among children who have dropped out of school, they tend to live in rural areas (67% compared to 33% in urban areas), live in households belonging to the poorest, second-poorest, or middle wealth quintiles (24-33% compared to 6-8% among the two wealthiest quintiles).

Capitalising on technology to bridge existing disparities offers a promising solution for expanding access for marginalised groups such as ethnic minorities and rural populations. Expanding access to digital tools, online learning platforms, and tailored e-learning programs can help mitigate barriers to education for disadvantaged communities. Moreover, policies that prioritise equity in resource allocation and targeted support for underserved groups would ensure that all students benefit from Viet Nam’s educational advancements, laying the groundwork for a more inclusive and resilient society. However, Viet Nam’s low scores in infrastructure and data readiness in an analysis of national AI readiness underscore systemic barriers to integrating digital technologies into education.⁶⁴ The lack of standardised and shared data resources, coupled with limited digital infrastructure, hampers the effective implementation of technology in schools. Policies should focus on expanding internet access, equipping schools with digital

⁶³ MICS-EAGLE 2022; General Statistics Office of Viet Nam (GSO) and United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) 2021.

⁶⁴ KAS and Vietnam Institute for Development Strategies 2024; Oxford Insights 2023.

tools, and creating data-sharing frameworks that align with Decree No. 47/2020/ND-CP.⁶⁵ Efforts to improve accessibility of education and digital infrastructure should also target rural and underserved areas, where the digital divide exacerbates existing inequities in education access. By addressing these gaps, Viet Nam can ensure equitable access to digital learning and support its transition to a knowledge-driven economy.

Despite state tuition reduction policies, households still bear a significant share of out-of-school expenditures.⁶⁶ Such expenses add to the burden on families, particularly in rural areas where household income is lower, therefore highlighting the need for public investment to offset these hidden costs and ensure equitable access to education. Out-of-pocket (OOP) expenditures represent a significant financial burden for Vietnamese households. Between 2016 and 2022, household expenditure on schooling and training increased from around 5,459,000 VND to 7,001,000 VND, with wide gaps between urban and rural areas, where expenditures in 2022 were at 10,112,000 VND and 5,078,000 VND respectively. On average, households spent 35.1% of their educational expenses on tuition fees, 17.5% on extra classes, and 26.6% on other educational expenses, such as school contributions and uniforms. These costs disproportionately affect low-income households, where the burden of out-of-school expenditures exacerbates existing disparities in educational access and retention. For instance, high-income households can allocate more resources to private tutoring and supplementary learning, while low-income families struggle to meet even basic educational costs.

While private tutoring is widely accepted across all income groups in Viet Nam, financial constraints mean that low-income families often cannot afford the same quality of supplementary education as their wealthier counterparts.⁶⁷ This further deepens inequalities in academic outcomes, limiting social mobility and reinforcing existing socio-economic divides. Between 2016 and 2022, average expenditures on education per schooling person over 12 months rose from VND 5,459,000 to VND 7,001,000. In 2022, expenditures on school fees made up the largest share of these expenditures (40.3%),⁶⁸ followed by other expenses (19.3%), and extra classes (16.6%). OOP education expenditures, especially on extra classes, are disproportionately larger in urban areas compared to rural areas, and across income quintiles. For example, while in 2022, expenses on additional classes made up 11-16% of average expenditure on education and training per schooling person in all five wealth quintiles, the absolute amount spent is much larger in the richest quintiles (VND 13,672,000) compared to the poorest (VND 2,492,000). Additionally, teachers increasingly rely on providing private tutoring to supplement their low public school salaries. A 2024 study in Binh Thuan, Tay Ninh, and Hau Giang provinces found that over 44% of teachers reported feeling financially pressured, and that 25.4% provided extra lessons in school while 8.2% provided private tutoring outside of school, amounting to an average of 8.6-14.9 weekly across schooling levels.⁶⁹ Recent research also suggests that teachers may withhold learning content during schooling hours, incentivising pupils to attend extra private classes to succeed in school.⁷⁰ Concurrently, parents across all income levels see private tutoring as necessary for their children, with wealthier parents being willing to pay more than those of low-income families.⁷¹ This has led to the creation of an informal education market which favours children whose families are able to afford these hidden costs for higher quality education.

This highlights the urgent need for increased public investment to offset these hidden costs and ensure equitable access to education and future opportunities for all children, particularly

65 LuatVietnam 2020.

66 General Statistics Office of Viet Nam (GSO), 2021.

67 Nguyen et al. 2021.

68 General Statistics Office (GSO) 2023.

69 VietNamNet 2024.

70 Nguyen et al. 2021.

71 Ibid.

among low-income families who often struggle to meet even basic educational expenses. Despite the public education system being largely free, the widespread reliance on private tutoring has led to a hidden form of privatisation, as families are increasingly pressured to pay for extra classes, school-related fees, and supplementary learning materials, effectively making quality education inaccessible for lower-income students. Addressing these financial barriers is critical to ensuring that education remains an equitable public good rather than a market-driven service.

The recent decision to exempt all public-school students from tuition fees from the 2025-2026 school year represents a significant step toward achieving universal access to education in Viet Nam, and will particularly benefit low-income families. However, while this policy reduces direct costs for families, it does not eliminate other financial burdens such as school contributions, learning materials, private tutoring, and transport costs. The Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) has made multiple regulatory attempts to address this issue, including Circular No. 17/2012/TT-BGDĐT, which stated that extra classes should be voluntary and not coerced, but which did not reduce the pressure felt by students to attend these classes.⁷² The government has recently introduced Circular No. 29/2024, which introduces stricter regulations on these practices.⁷³ Under this new policy, schools can only provide free extra classes in limited cases: students with weak academic performance; students selected for gifted training; and final-year students preparing for key examinations.⁷⁴ Additionally, teachers are now prohibited from collecting extra teaching fees from their own students. These changes aim to improve transparency and fairness in education, but enforcement will be critical to ensure compliance, especially in urban areas where private tutoring has become deeply embedded in the education culture.

Ensuring equitable access to education in Viet Nam further involves addressing both physical and systemic barriers, including those related to mental health. Mental health is intrinsically linked to students' ability to engage in learning, build social relationships, and thrive academically and personally. Mental health interventions in schools can lead to improved educational outcomes, as students with better mental health are more likely to engage positively in their learning environments.⁷⁵ However, mental health challenges are prevalent among Vietnamese students, as approximately 26% of Vietnamese adolescents are at moderate to high risk for mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and behavioural disorders, while government and independent estimates suggest approximately 15-30% of the population require mental health care services.⁷⁶ Girls are disproportionately affected by anxiety and depression, while boys are more prone to behavioural challenges. Vulnerable populations, such as ethnic minorities and LGBTQ youth, face compounded risks due to discrimination, family rejection, and marginalisation.⁷⁷ Despite existing frameworks like the School Health Programme (2021-2025), gaps in implementation persist. Most schools lack trained counsellors, comprehensive mental health education, and mechanisms for early identification of at-risk students, compounded by general lack of awareness of stigma in broader society. This inconsistency results in missed opportunities for prevention and intervention. Failure to address adolescent mental health challenges undermines efforts to achieve equity in education, as these issues disproportionately affect marginalized groups, compounding existing disparities and hindering the ability of all students to fully benefit from educational opportunities. Integrating mental health into Viet Nam's education policies and practices is essential for preparing students to thrive in an increasingly complex and competitive world.

72 Thanh Nien 2024.

73 VOV 2025.

74 VnExpress 2025a.

75 Fazel et al. 2014; Shonkoff et al. 2012.

76 UNICEF 2022a.

77 Ibid.

Strengthening Education Standards, Assessments, and Oversight

Beyond expanding access to education, improving the quality of education across all levels is essential. Resources for investments in schools and education sector workforce vary considerably across and within regions. Curricula and teaching methods in Viet Nam's education system may face challenges in aligning with the demands of a competitive and rapidly changing global economy, highlighting the need for ongoing modernisation and adaptation.

Improving the quality of education and teacher standards

While nearly all teachers met training standards at the upper secondary school level in 2022, between 2018-19 and 2021-22, the share of teachers achieving teaching standards at the primary school and lower secondary levels in accordance with the 2019 Education Law regressed from nearly universality to 75% and 87%, respectively.⁷⁸ This is likely linked to the change in the Education Law of 2019 compared to the 2016 Education Law, but also suggests lasting challenges with teacher quality and qualifications, and may also be indicative of the lasting mark of the pandemic and the need for further investments in expanding teaching capacity and quality, especially in the context of education digitalisation.⁷⁹

At the ECE level, recent progress suggests improvements in education quality, with an increasing number of qualified preschool teachers. 89.3% of preschool teachers met training standards under the 2019 Education Law, a 1.9 percentage point increase compared to the previous year.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, recruitment of these teachers remains slow and insufficient due to low attractiveness of the profession, migration patterns, and strategic planning challenges at national and local levels. Teacher attrition is also an issue, with 1,600 preschool educators leaving the sector between August 2023 and April 2024.⁸¹

Need for expanding oversight in early childhood education

Private ECE services have played an important role in reducing overcrowding in public facilities, particularly in provinces like Bac Giang, Binh Duong, Ho Chi Minh City, and Da Nang, where authorities have facilitated land access, tax exemptions, and investment incentives to encourage private education development. However, in densely populated urban areas, industrial zones, and export processing hubs, children of low-income working families as well as migrant workers often rely on private independent preschool facilities with limited and divergent quality standards. This remains a significant challenge because these facilities often operate with limited oversight, inadequate infrastructure, and unqualified caregivers, raising serious safety and developmental risks for enrolled children. Reports of incidents in unlicensed childcare centres highlight the need for stricter regulations, improved training for staff, and stronger monitoring mechanisms to ensure that all children, regardless of socio-economic background, receive safe and high-quality early education.⁸²

This is particularly critical in the context of the rapid expansion of Viet Nam's industrial and urban areas, including projected rapid development of industrial parks between 2024 and 2030 in 221 urban district-level units, which will further increase demand for high quality, affordable, and accessible preschool education for children of workers in urban industrial parks.⁸³ Private

78 Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI), German Development Agency (GIZ), and United Nations (UN) Viet Nam 2023.

79 UNICEF Viet Nam 2022a.

80 Dai Doan Ket 2024.

81 Ibid.

82 Ibid.

83 Viet Nam currently has 431 industrial parks across 59 provinces, spread across its 184 urban district level units and employing 4.16 million workers. Xuân Kỳ and Thủy Quỳnh 2024.

independent facilities currently service 56.9% of pre-school aged children of these workers.⁸⁴ Many of these facilities lack adequate facilities, play areas, trained teachers, and basic teaching materials, leading to substandard care and education quality, that has not kept pace with the rapid development of these areas and growing demand for child-relevant services. This mismatch between rapid population growth, urbanisation, and education infrastructure is further exacerbated by inconsistent implementation of policies and funding mechanisms to support the development of preschool education, leaving low-income families with limited quality options. The shortage of affordable care for children under 36 months also highlights the need for stronger government support, better teacher training programmes, and financial incentives to help close the remaining gaps in ECE.

Digitalisation and technology in the education sector

The integration of technology in education has become a defining trend worldwide, having been necessarily accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic and resultant school closures. The shift to online learning has required increased availability and adoption of digital tools and platforms, to close access gaps during potential schooling interruptions, and making digital literacy essential for both educators and students.⁸⁵ In line with global best practices, this trend emphasises the importance of equipping schools with the necessary technological infrastructure and training teachers to effectively utilise these tools.⁸⁶ The Vietnamese government has recognized the need for Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in education and has made policy efforts to promote ICT application in the educational sector.⁸⁷

However, recent data suggests that less than one-third of individuals aged 15-49 years had basic ICT skills⁸⁸ in 2021, with significant disparities between ethnic groups.⁸⁹ Moreover, the current curricula in Viet Nam often do not adequately address the skills demanded by modern industries, particularly in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). As technology continues to reshape and re-define global and national job markets, including more recently the widespread use of artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) technologies, there is an urgent need to reform Viet Nam's education system to prioritise critical thinking, creativity, and digital literacy, and adaptability.⁹⁰

Because AI and other emerging technologies will continue to expand rather than disappear, children and youth must be equipped with the foundational knowledge to navigate and thrive in this rapidly evolving environment. These advancements are set to redefine not only the way students learn but also the skills they must master to remain competitive in a technology-driven world.⁹¹ Without these updates, graduates at all levels – whether from primary, secondary, or tertiary education (including professional, vocational and academic training) – may struggle to meet labour market expectations, limiting their employability and economic contribution.

The accelerating pace of technological development, driven by the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), is reshaping economies, labour markets, and societal structures worldwide. On the other hand, Viet Nam's current ranking of 59th out of 193 countries in the 2023 Government AI

84 Ibid.

85 UNICEF Viet Nam 2022a.

86 Nguyễn, Cao, and Trương 2023.

87 Thi Thanh Hai and Nguyen 2020.

88 These skills and basic standards are defined according to the Circular No. 03/2014/TT-BTTTT of the Ministry of Information and Communications and include basic understandings and use of 1) information technology; 2) computer use; 3) word processing; 4) spreadsheets; 5) slideshows; 6) internet.

89 General Statistics Office of Viet Nam (GSO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) 2021.

90 OECD 2017; World Bank 2021b.

91 Özkızıtan and Hassel 2021.

Readiness Index highlights a critical gap in the country's preparedness for the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR).⁹² While Viet Nam has a strong governmental vision for AI, scoring 69.04 out of 100 in the "Government" pillar, significant weaknesses remain in technology maturity (28.38), infrastructure (33.72), and human capital (38.7).⁹³ These gaps reflect the urgent need for education reform to prioritise STEM education, digital literacy, and advanced technological skills such as AI, blockchain, and big data. However, technology integration in education must be purposeful, structured, and aligned with broader education quality management goals. Education policies must focus on equipping students with not just technical proficiency but also the adaptability, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills needed in an era of rapid technological disruption. Viet Nam's education system must prepare its workforce for a future driven by artificial intelligence, robotics, and automation. Integrating STEM education, digital literacy, and emerging technologies such as machine learning into the curriculum is critical for aligning with global trends. The IR4.0 market, projected to grow exponentially, presents an opportunity for Viet Nam to position itself as a hub for innovation, provided its workforce is equipped with the necessary skills for this. Case studies from regional leaders like Singapore (ranked 2nd globally in AI readiness⁹⁴) demonstrate the value of early integration of AI and digital technologies in curricula to prepare students for future labour markets.

As global priorities shift toward sustainability and environmental stewardship, Viet Nam's education system must also integrate green economy principles into its curricula. Preparing students for careers in renewable energy, circular economies, and sustainable development will not only enhance their employability but also contribute to Viet Nam's transition toward a green and inclusive economy. Education policies should emphasise environmental science, resource efficiency, and sustainable practices across all levels of education, aligning with global best practices and supporting Viet Nam's commitment to achieving its net-zero targets.⁹⁵

Aligning Education with Labor Market Demands and Global Trends

Workforce readiness in the context of the current education system

Disruptions in traditional labour markets, spurred on by technological advancements and demographic shifts, highlight the urgency of prioritising lifelong learning, skills development, and vocational training in Viet Nam. There is an increasing recognition of the importance of career guidance within the education system in Viet Nam to prepare students for diverse career pathways including technical and vocational education and training (TVET), alongside an emerging emphasis on skill development (e.g., critical thinking, creativity, digital skills). However, challenges in general education structure, outdated teaching methods, and exam pressures threaten to widen these skill gaps.⁹⁶ Challenges in the current system include a rigid and overly theoretical national curriculum, which exerts high exam pressures, yet lacks practical applicability and does not foster the development of creative and practical problem-solving skills. These challenges facilitate an increasing mismatch in education and training to employment and labour market demands, limiting the ability for Viet Nam to develop a globally competitive labour force.

To sustain Viet Nam's economic growth and support its transition towards a high-income economy by 2045, it is crucial to enhance workforce preparedness through education-sector reform and transformation. This would involve aligning educational policies with labour market needs by expanding technical and vocational education and training (TVET), improving career guidance, and fostering stronger linkages between industry and education. Additionally, Viet

⁹² KAS and Vietnam Institute for Development Strategies 2024.

⁹³ Ibid.; Oxford Insights 2023.

⁹⁴ Oxford Insights 2023.

⁹⁵ KAS and Vietnam Institute for Development Strategies 2024.

⁹⁶ Giáo dục Việt Nam 2021.

Nam must address skills gaps in digital technologies, critical thinking, and socio-emotional intelligence to ensure competitiveness in the global economy.

Strengthening TVET to address skill gaps

The Vietnamese labour market continues to face a mismatch in skills, where workers are either overqualified or underqualified for their jobs. Recent reporting indicates that 84.6% of college graduates and 66% of intermediate-degree holders work in jobs that do not utilise their full skill set, while 44.5% of workers lack sufficient qualifications for the jobs they hold.⁹⁷ This mismatch leads to workforce inefficiencies, job dissatisfaction, and higher turnover rates among employees, as well as labour shortages in especially technical fields, digital services, and green industries. Reporting on figures from the Department of Labor, War Invalids and Social Affairs of Ho Chi Minh City, 88% of job losses occurred among university graduates and unskilled workers.⁹⁸ In contrast, vocationally trained workers faced significantly lower unemployment, reinforcing the importance of job-focused skills training. Additionally, employers report that many university graduates lack practical skills, requiring additional workplace training to meet industry standards. Businesses increasingly prefer candidates with soft-skills, and practical, hands-on experience, making it difficult for new graduates to secure employment without prior exposure to similar environments.⁹⁹ Without structural reforms to integrate internships, workplace simulations, and applied learning into tertiary and vocational education, Viet Nam's workforce will struggle to meet employer expectations.

The share of the trained workforce in Viet Nam grew from 20% in 2015 to 26% in 2022.¹⁰⁰ However, as seen in Figure 4, vocational education uptake remains underutilized across income groups despite government efforts to expand TVET, with minimal increases in participation, particularly among the poorest, and limited shifts in these patterns between 2016 and 2022.¹⁰¹ There are also a gender and geographic gaps in vocational education – while 9.8% of the trained workforce received vocational training in 2022, female workers made up a mere 5% to their male counterparts at 14%, and rural workers were half as likely to enter vocational training (7.2%) compared to their urban counterparts (14.1%). Compared to workers in the Red River Delta (13.7%), only 4.3% of workers in Mekong River Delta received vocational training and the region also had the lowest share of trained workers who received university or higher education.¹⁰² Data limitations point to the need for generating evidence on gender imbalances in the share of women and men in STEM, which favour men, to help guide programmatic actions.¹⁰³

There remains limited provision of career guidance, an insufficient focus on vocational and technical education, and a lack of linkages between education and training and industry. Education policies must provide opportunities for workers to reskill and upskill in areas such as digital services, creative industries, and green technologies. Expanding TVET programs will be essential for bridging the skills gap and ensuring that Viet Nam's workforce is equipped to meet the demands of a knowledge-based and innovation-driven economy. However, significant challenges remain, as TVET, despite government efforts to expand its reach, is often perceived as a second-tier option compared to general and higher education. Addressing this perception through enhanced career guidance would be critical to help promote TVET as a viable and

97 Dang Cong San 2023.

98 Công An Nhân Dân 2023.

99 Lao Dong 2022; Giáo dục Việt Nam 2021.

100 Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI), German Development Agency (GIZ), and United Nations (UN) Viet Nam 2023; General Statistical Office 2023.

101 General Statistical Office 2023.

102 Ibid.

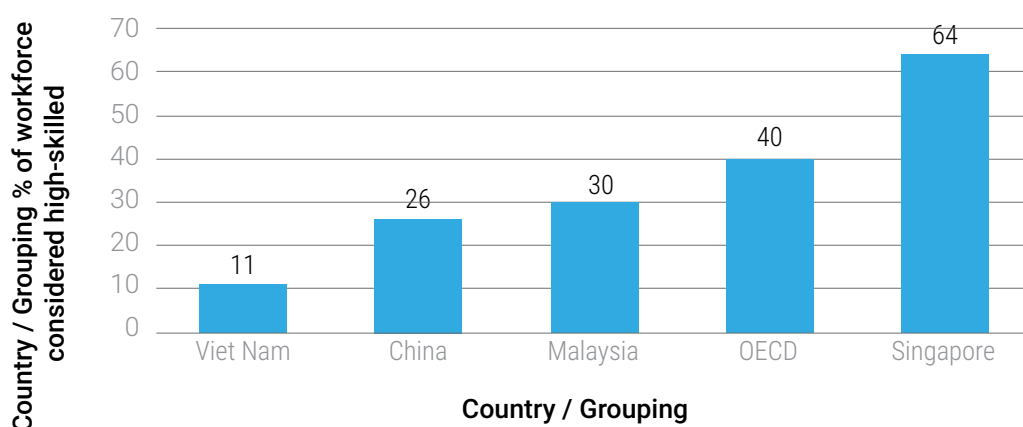
103 Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI), German Development Agency (GIZ), and United Nations (UN) Viet Nam 2023.

valuable pathway, and expand TVET options. Integrating career guidance that emphasizes the benefits of TVET and its potential to lead to stable, high-demand careers, can help shift societal attitudes and increase participation. Equally important is fostering stronger linkages between industry and educational institutions to align training with labour market needs. Despite increased efforts to promote career guidance, many students and workers still struggle to access reliable job market information, leading to poor career choices and mismatches between training and employment.¹⁰⁴

Ensuring equitable access to higher education and workforce preparedness

While secondary education has achieved near universality, expanding access to tertiary education in Viet Nam may be a crucial step to prepare a workforce equipped for a competitive, knowledge-based economy. The current merit-based system disproportionately limits access to higher education for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, perpetuating inequities and undermining human capital potential. While high-performing students access quality tertiary education, many others with untapped potential are being left behind due to systemic barriers which widen existing equity gaps. The impact of these inequalities is visible in labour market outcomes. Despite progress in education, translating educational attainment into high-quality employment remains a pressing challenge.¹⁰⁵ In 2023, only around 11% of the workforce in Viet Nam was classified as high-skilled (Figure 8). This is well below the average of 40% in OECD countries, and well behind the share of high-skilled labour in upper-middle-income countries in the region such as Malaysia (30%) and China (26%), or high-income neighbouring Singapore (64%).¹⁰⁶ This also reflects the need for targeted policies that improve workforce preparedness, particularly in fields such as AI, data science, and green technologies. Approximately 20% of firms surveyed in 2019 cited an inadequately educated workforce as a key constraint to their growth, pointing to systemic challenges in preparing students for modern, high-skilled jobs.¹⁰⁷

Figure 8 Percentage of the labour force aged 15+ classified as high-skilled in Viet Nam, China, Malaysia, OECD Countries, and Singapore



Source: ILOSTAT, LFS¹⁰⁸. Note: Figures do not include unclassified employment status.

Shifting from a strictly merit-based model to one that recognizes diverse aptitudes and student

¹⁰⁴ Dang Cong San 2023.

¹⁰⁵ World Bank 2022b.

¹⁰⁶ General Statistical Office 2023; International Labour Organisation (ILO) 2024.

¹⁰⁷ World Bank 2021b; World Bank 2022b.

¹⁰⁸ General Statistical Office 2023; International Labour Organisation (ILO) 2024.

potential would widen pathways to higher education, enabling more equitable access and fostering a workforce with varied skills to meet the demands of an evolving labour market. This approach aligns with global trends emphasising inclusive education as a driver of economic resilience and innovation. Facilitating greater upward economic mobility for Viet Nam's youth also involves unlocking their full human capital potential through high-quality education, effective training, and improved job opportunities to align with the growing aspirations and abilities of the current generation.

Despite Viet Nam's high HCI score (0.69) and high employment levels, only a small share of these are in higher-skill jobs, which are reflected in the country's lower Utilisation-Adjusted HCI (U-HCI) of 0.56.¹⁰⁹ This suggests that children born today will only achieve 56% of their potential productivity as adults, assuming optimal health, education, and full employment.¹¹⁰ This is significantly lower than the full potential, and highlights the underutilisation of human capital resources, particularly due to gaps in education, skill development, and mismatches between the current status of educational achievement and skills training, and labour market demands. The rapid pace of technological changes further exacerbates this gap, requiring a shift toward teaching students skills like digital literacy, socio-emotional intelligence, and advanced technical expertise as part of modernised school curricula, stronger collaboration between educational institutions and industries, and through policies fostering lifelong learning.

Breaking out of the middle-income trap requires a workforce equipped with advanced skills to transition from low-value-added industries to higher-value-added, innovation-driven sectors. Education is the cornerstone of this transformation, fostering productivity, innovation, and social mobility. However, it is not merely increased access to university-level education that will promote progress towards the Vision 2045 goals; rather the alignment of skills taught across all educational levels alongside (changing) labour market demands is key. Early childhood education and primary education lay the groundwork for critical thinking, literacy, and numeracy, which are essential for success at the secondary level, where students begin to develop more advanced competencies. These foundational skills are critical for navigating tertiary education and, eventually, entering the labour market with the requisite technical and cognitive abilities. Studies underscore the importance of vertical coherence within education systems, noting that disparities or weaknesses at earlier stages often ripple through the entire system, undermining the potential for graduates to meet modern labour market demands.¹¹¹ Current global trends emphasise the increasing need for digital literacy, socio-emotional skills, and adaptability at all educational levels.¹¹² Countries like Finland and Singapore, which have consistently ranked far above the OECD average in PISA scores¹¹³, have implemented curricula designed to progressively build technological and creative capabilities from early schooling onward, ensuring students are well-prepared for both higher education and employment in high-skilled sectors.¹¹⁴

109 Where the HCI is useful for assessing foundational investments in health and education, the U-HCI provides a pragmatic view of how these investments translate into productive economic contributions, adjusting for the employment rate, thereby focusing on both development investments and economic integrations to assess the actual utilisation of human capital in the economy. See Pennings 2020.

110 Gender disparities in human capital further emphasise persistent challenges – while HCI for girls (0.73) is higher than for boys (0.65), the U-HCI for both genders drops to 0.56 for boys and 0.57 for girls, reflecting broader systemic challenges in transitioning educational attainment into productive employment. See Human Capital Project 2023.

111 Hanushek and Woessmann 2011.

112 World Bank 2022b.

113 The average of the 80 countries who participated in the PISA 2022 tests, were 438.7 for math, 448 for science, and 436 for reading. Against these, Viet Nam ranked above average, with respective scores of 469, 472, and 462, totalling 1403. In comparison, Singapore ranked first among all 80 countries, with an overall score of 1679, followed closely by China, Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea. Finland ranked 12th, with 1485.

114 Bărnuțiu-Sârca and Ciascai 2022. See OECD 2023b.

Despite Viet Nam's overall strong performance in education, as evidenced by 2022 PISA tests, these latest figures also highlight socio-economic disparities in educational performance which must be addressed as part of the transformation of the education landscape in the country. 2022 OECD data suggests that Vietnamese students in the bottom quarter of the Economic, Social, and Cultural Status (ESCS) index had an average mathematics score of 434.4, compared to 512.6 for students in the top quarter, which is a gap of nearly 80 points.¹¹⁵ 42.4% of students in the bottom ESCS quarter fail to reach basic proficiency in mathematics, compared to only 13.4% in the top quarter, suggesting that nearly half of disadvantaged students struggle with foundational mathematical skills.¹¹⁶ This disparity is indicative of structural inequities in Viet Nam's education system, with wealthier students taking advantage of greater access to high-quality schools, private tutoring, and educational resources. Cross-cutting factors, including the long-term educational outcomes linked with the cumulative effects of investments in early childhood nutrition (stunting), parental involvement, and learning environments, may further widen this gap. While socio-economic background appears to remain a key determinant of student performance, a small proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds outperform expectations. 12.7% of socio-economically disadvantaged students in Viet Nam were classified as "resilient students", having scored in the top quarter of mathematics performance within their country,¹¹⁷ This percentage is lower than in regional peers such as Uzbekistan (19.6%) and Cambodia (18.2%), highlighting the need for educational support for high-achieving students from low-income and disadvantaged backgrounds. These findings provide evidence of socio-economic disparities in education which reinforces the notion that expanding access to education alone is not enough, but that quality and equity deserve priority attention, and that early investments in children's learning and health are critical to maximise their potential later in life.

Closing the digital skills gap

The lack of human capital development in emerging technology fields is a critical bottleneck for digital transformation in education specifically and in Viet Nam in general. Only 37.82 out of 100 points were scored for Viet Nam's technology pillar in an analysis of the country's AI readiness, reflecting limited expertise in areas such as AI, cloud computing, and data analysis.¹¹⁸

The evolving demands of the global labour market underscore the need for a transformative approach to skill development in Viet Nam. Traditional sensory and manual skills are being de-prioritised by the rising importance of cognitive abilities, creativity, and socio-emotional intelligence.¹¹⁹ As industries evolve, students must be prepared for roles that require advanced reasoning, digital fluency, and a capacity for lifelong learning. Policies must focus on upskilling teachers in digital competencies and integrating AI, coding, and data science into the curriculum at all education levels. Embedding these competencies into Viet Nam's education system will ensure that graduates remain competitive in a fast-changing global economy and contribute to the nation's aspirations of achieving high-income status by 2045.

Enhancing Teacher Quality and Professional Development

The success of Viet Nam's education reform efforts, under Resolution 29-NQ/TW, which was adopted in 2013 to ensure "fundamental and comprehensive innovation" in the education sector, is fundamentally tied to teacher quality. Teachers are key determinant of education quality

¹¹⁵ OECD 2023b.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸

¹¹⁹ KAS and Vietnam Institute for Development Strategies 2024.

and the most valuable asset in the transformation of the education sector, yet Viet Nam faces significant and systemic challenges in recruitment, retention, and professional development of its teachers.

Most recent assessments of teacher quality and professional development focus on most assessments focus on teacher shortages, the uneven quality of the teachers across regions, and lack of qualifications of many teachers according to the Education Law 2019. Further, while nearly all upper secondary school teachers met training standards in 2022, compliance declined at the primary and lower secondary levels after the implementation of the 2019 Education Law. This suggests that new training standards were difficult to meet, requiring additional support for teachers transitioning to updated qualification frameworks. As of 2022, 25.2% of primary school teachers had not met the required training standards—the highest rate across all levels, compared to 13.9% at the lower secondary level, and 0.1% at the upper secondary level.¹²⁰ While new and more rigorous training standards under the 2019 Education Law and the implementation of the 2018 General Education Program are beneficial in the long term, they appear to have created significant short-term challenges, including teacher shortages in key subject areas. Teachers who previously met qualifications now require additional training, which many may struggle to complete, particularly in disadvantaged regions, without official guidance on how to fill teaching gaps when the training of existing teaching staff does not meet regulated requirements.

While education reform has aimed to improve teacher quality, the persistent shortage of teachers has weakened these efforts. Despite high training standards, the low attractiveness of the profession, workforce migration patterns, and inadequate incentives, among other factors, has led to persistent high-quality teacher shortages, particularly in early childhood and general education levels and in rural and remote areas. By the end of the 2022-2023 school year, Viet Nam faced a shortage of more than 118,253 teachers across all levels, which is expected to increase by the 2023-2024 school year.¹²¹ The largest gaps are at the preschool level, with a gap of 52,000 teachers, and at the primary school level, at 33,000 teachers.¹²²

This shortage across educational institutions at all levels and across the country has led to teacher-to-class ratios being below regulated levels (Figure 9). It has also led to increased teaching loads, unqualified instructors filling teaching gaps, and in some cases, students missing key subjects. Certain localities have also faced difficulties in recruiting teachers to match nationally regulated standards, due to mismatches between these standards and local needs in terms of teacher-to-class and pupil-to-class ratios. Limited autonomy for local education departments in recruitment has resulted in mismatches between teacher demand and supply, contributing to shortages in some regions and oversupply in others.¹²³ Ethnic minority teachers are particularly underrepresented, with their proportion decreasing at higher education levels (13% in primary schools, 8% in lower secondary, and 6% in upper secondary), and with disproportionately higher representation in public vs private schools.¹²⁴ Few policies specifically support ethnic minority teachers, apart from a 70% salary allowance for those working in especially disadvantaged areas, as per policy directive 61/2006/NĐ-CP.¹²⁵

The largest teaching gaps are in newly introduced subjects such as English, IT, and Fine Arts, where teacher recruitment has not managed to keep pace with the actual and proposed curriculum expansions. Student-teacher ratios have also increased since the 2016-2017 school year, averaging from 18.1 to 22.7 students per teacher across all levels (Figure 10). In

¹²⁰ Nguyễn 2022.

¹²¹ Based on Ministry of Education and Training data and reported in Mai 2023.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Viện Khoa học Giáo dục Việt Nam 2022.

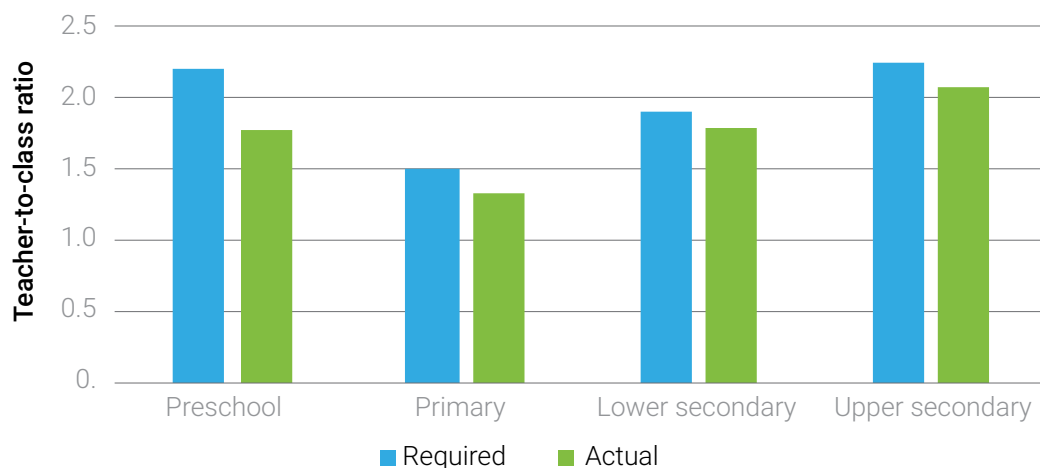
¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

comparison, the average pupil to teacher ratio for OECD countries are 15 at the pre-primary level, and between 13 and 14 at primary to upper secondary levels.¹²⁶ Unless action is taken, these shortages will continue to undermine education reform and transformation goals.

Teacher shortages have been linked to both lack of new recruitments as well as high attrition rates, with more than 10,000 public school teachers expected to retire and 9,300 expected to quit in the 2022-2023 school year.¹²⁷ Low salaries, increasing workload, and limited career progression opportunities have been cited as key reasons for attrition, particularly in rural, remote and disadvantaged areas. Attempts by local governments to offer financial incentives have not been successful in combating these trends.¹²⁸ Teachers in remote and underserved areas also often face overwhelming workloads which exceed regulated standards, due to both teacher shortages and additional administrative burdens.¹²⁹ This creates conditions that lower the quality of instruction, increase teacher burnout, and further disincentivise potential new recruits. Significant gender disparities in the education sector also suggest a lack of career advancement opportunities for female educators, despite their high participation in the education-sector workforce, with 66.2% of school administrators being women (including 99.8% of preschool principals, which drops to 21.4% at higher education levels).¹³⁰ Without better workforce distribution and improved working conditions, these issues will persist, which therefore brings attention to the urgent need for salary reform, professional and financial incentives, and improved working conditions, especially to close recruitment gaps in rural and disadvantaged communities.

Figure 9 Required and actual teacher-to-class ratios in the 2022-2023 school year, by level



Source: Ministry of Education and Training as reported by Mai (2023).

126 OECD 2024.

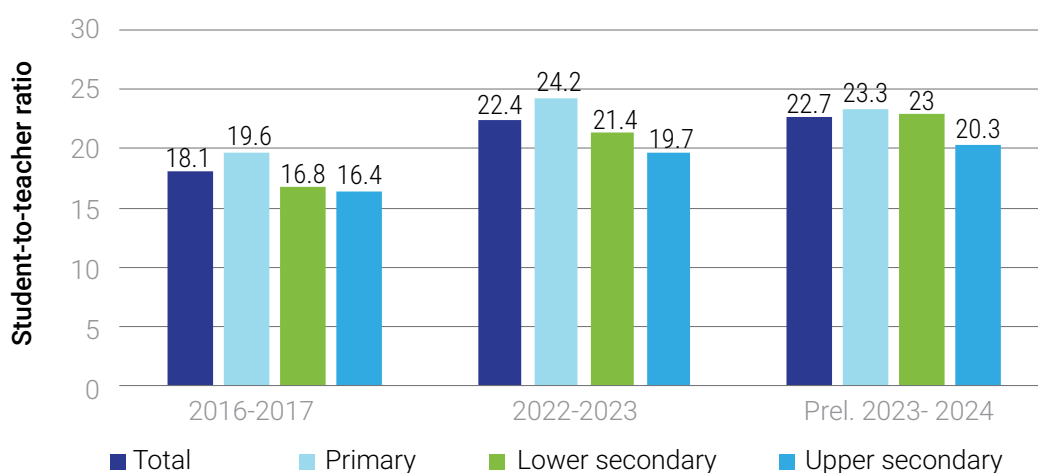
127 Mai 2023.

128 Ibid.

129 Viện Khoa học Giáo dục Việt Nam 2022.

130 Ibid.

Figure 10 Average number of pupils per teacher of general education, by school year and level



Source: GSO (2025)

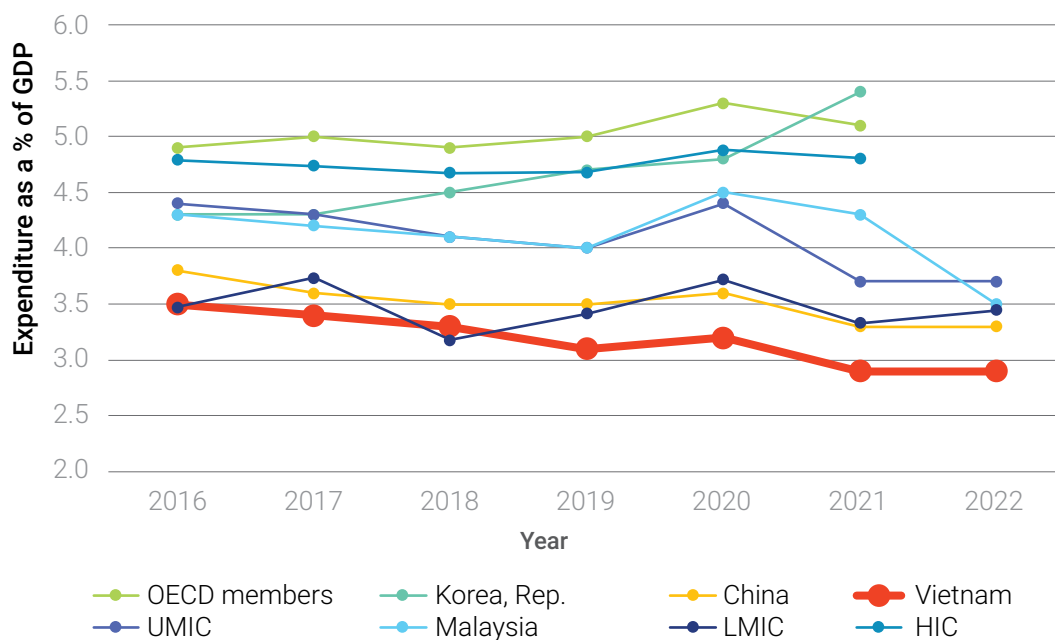
A stronger focus on pedagogical innovation, including student-centred learning and interdisciplinary approaches, is also essential to equip teachers with 21st-century instructional techniques. The digitalisation of education has accelerated the need for teacher upskilling in digital literacy, AI, and technological tools. However, many educators lack proficiency in using digital platforms effectively in the classroom. This necessitates a focus on teacher training programs that equip educators with the skills to deliver courses in these areas. Policies should include professional development opportunities for teachers in digital competencies and AI-specific tools, ensuring they are prepared to guide students through evolving technologies. Additionally, incentivising partnerships with international organisations to bring global best practices into teacher training can address gaps in expertise. By improving teacher capacity, Viet Nam can better align its education system with global technological advancements. International examples, such as Finland’s focus on inquiry-based STEM learning, provide valuable lessons for modernising Viet Nam’s teacher training programs and ensuring the education system keeps pace with global technological trends.

State budget allocation and public expenditure for education

Public investment in education is a critical determinant of educational access, quality, and outcomes, and ultimately serves as a metric for a country’s commitment to building human capital. Sufficient funding is essential to ensure high-quality education systems. Among OECD countries, education investment typically ranges from 3% to 4% of GDP for primary and secondary education, with some nations, such as Colombia, allocating over 5%.¹³¹ Between 2016 and 2022, Viet Nam’s education and training expenditure as a percentage of GDP decreased from 3.5% to 2.9% (Figure 11). This decline as a proportion of GDP reflects a relative reduction in prioritisation of education within the broader fiscal framework, and contrasts sharply with other regions and comparator countries, such as South Korea, OECD countries, other lower-middle income countries, and upper middle-income countries. In comparison, OECD countries allocated 4.9–5.3% of GDP to education, while South Korea, renowned for its rapid economic transformation, increased its education spending from 4.3% to 5.4% over the same period.

¹³¹ OECD 2023a.

Figure 11 State budget expenditure on education and training as a % of GDP in Viet Nam in comparison to other countries and country groupings¹³²



Source: World Bank, GSO¹³³

The declining trend in public expenditure shares on education in Viet Nam, especially when compared to other countries, has implications for the country's ability to achieve its Vision 2045 goals, particularly in fostering equitable, high-quality education and preparing a workforce capable of driving innovation and sustainable growth. It also limits the ability to invest in key areas such as vocational education, teacher training, and digital infrastructure. Compared to countries like South Korea and China, Viet Nam's lower expenditure limits its ability to invest in key areas such as vocational education, teacher training, and technological infrastructure. This may hinder the development of a workforce capable of meeting the demands of an innovation-driven economy. Evidence from OECD members and South Korea demonstrates that increasing education expenditure, particularly during transformative economic periods, is a prerequisite for fostering sustainable growth.¹³⁴ For Viet Nam, this means addressing its current funding gap and prioritising equitable, quality education for all levels. To achieve its Vision 2045 goals, Viet Nam must therefore realign its budgetary priorities to emphasise education, and prioritise investments which close existing disparities, reverse the declining trends in education attendance and completion rates, as well as learning losses since COVID-19, particularly for marginalized groups, and promote progress in areas such as early childhood programmes, digital literacy, critical thinking, and vocational training.¹³⁵

The state budget expenditure data for Viet Nam reveals key trends and challenges in financing education and related sectors, underscoring the need for strategic policy interventions to

¹³² The selection of country comparisons here and throughout the report provide a two-fold perspective. We include countries and country groupings within Viet Nam's income grouping (LMICs) for contextual benchmarking, as well as UMICs and HICs to illustrate exemplary policies and long-term development trajectories. Comparisons with specific countries like Singapore and South Korea highlight aspirational models in sectors such as education and social protection, aligning with Viet Nam's ambition to become a high-income country by 2045.

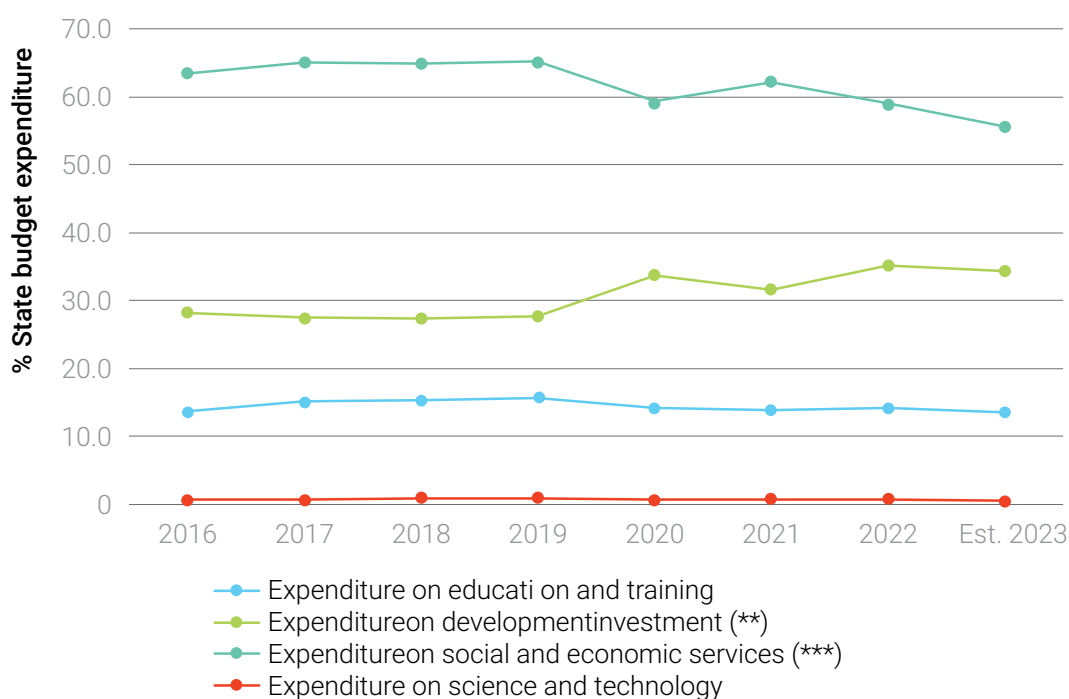
¹³³ World Bank Gender Data Portal 2024; General Statistical Office 2024.

¹³⁴ Cm, Hoang, and Yarram 2024; Tan 2017; Jimenez, Nguyen, and Patrinos 2012; UNESCAP 2021; UNESCO 2020.

¹³⁵ Tan 2017; Subiyantoro, Tarziraf, and Asmara 2023; OECD 2024; Hanushek and Woessmann 2020b.

achieve Vision 2045 goals. Between 2016 and 2023, the share of state budget expenditures on education and training fluctuated, peaking at 15.6% in 2019 before declining to an estimated 13.5% in 2023, suggesting general stagnation since 2023 (Figure 12). This decline highlights a potential de-prioritisation of education within the national budget, especially when compared to other sectors, and which may hinder the country's efforts to develop a skilled workforce and address disparities in access to quality education. When compared to other sectors, such as development investment¹³⁶, which increased from 28.2% in 2016 to 35.2% in 2022 and 34.4% in 2023, and science and technology, which stagnated at 0.6–0.8% over the same period, education spending appears insufficient to meet the demands of a rapidly evolving economy. While development investment is critical, the stagnant investment in science and technology and declining education expenditure indicate limited alignment with the priorities needed to foster innovation and technological competitiveness. These trends are particularly concerning given the global emphasis on STEM education as a driver of economic growth. The limited allocation for science and technology may hinder the ability to integrate digital tools and modernize the Vietnamese education system. These constraints also impact the recruitment, training, and retention of teachers, particularly in rural and disadvantaged areas, where investment is critical to closing equity gaps and improving learning outcomes.

Figure 12 State budget expenditure by indicator and year, as % of total expenditure and in billions VND



Source: GSO (2024)

Notes: (**) Excluding expenditure on national reserves.; (***) Including expenditure on creating source to implement salary transform and streamline employees.

136 Pursuant to Clause 1, Article 14 of Decree 163/2016/ND-CP, Development investment expenditure from the central budget includes: a) Investment in basic construction for programs and projects of ministries, ministerial-level agencies, government agencies, and other central agencies in the fields specified in Clause 3 of this Article; b) Investment and capital support for enterprises providing public products and services ordered by the State; economic organizations; central financial organizations; State capital investment in enterprises in accordance with the provisions of law; c) Other development investment expenditures in accordance with the provisions of law.

Similar figures from the Ministry of Education and Training suggest that state budget allocation for education in Viet Nam have consistently fallen short of the 20% benchmark outlined in the 2013 Resolution 29-NQ/TW¹³⁷. Over the past decade, education expenditure as a proportion of the total state budget peaked at 19.1% in 2019, while in other years it fluctuated between 15.7% and slightly above 18%.¹³⁸ This shortfall highlights significant gaps in meeting the intended commitment to prioritizing education and training as a national policy priority, and presents a significant barrier to achieving the ambitious goals of education reform and modernisation outlined in Viet Nam's long-term development plans.

According to recent analyses, inadequate funding has had tangible consequences for the education sector: facilities and teaching equipment remain insufficient, particularly against the requirements of the 2018 general education program and other reforms designed to modernise teaching and learning, and higher education continues to face limited investment.¹³⁹ Moreover, non-state resources including private sector and international investments, have been limitedly mobilised, leaving significant untapped potential for expanding investments. These funding limitations are compounded by systemic challenges in state management of education resources. The institutionalization of Resolution 29 has been slow, with gaps in policy coherence and insufficient prioritisation of education as a key driver of national development. The effectiveness and efficiency of state management remain limited, with education management agencies playing a minimal role in critical areas such as appraising and allocating funds, recruiting civil servants, and appointing management officials.¹⁴⁰ These gaps hinder the coordinated implementation of education policies and reforms. Additionally, the push for greater institutional autonomy in education and training institutions has encountered numerous difficulties, limiting their ability to innovate and respond effectively to local and national labour market needs.¹⁴¹

Further, Viet Nam's state budget allocation for education follows a formula-based approach outlined in Decision No. 46/2016/QĐ-TTg, which distributes funding based on the total population of school-age children (1-18 years old) rather than actual enrolment rates.¹⁴² While this system aims to ensure regional equity in education financing, it presents certain limitations, including migratory effects and urban-rural disparities, and limited incentives at the province level for improving enrolment rates. For example, as budget allocations are tied to household registration rather than actual school enrolment, rural provinces receive more funding than urban areas, even when students migrate to cities for better educational opportunities. This creates funding imbalances, where schools in urban areas may experience overcrowding and resource constraints, while rural provinces receive funding for students who may no longer reside there. Additionally, provinces are not entitled to receive additional funding if student enrolment increases, meaning that there is little financial motivation for local governments to actively expand school access or improve retention rates, which could disproportionately impact already disadvantaged groups.¹⁴³

While the state budget prioritises funding by region and education level, with the intention of supporting decentralisation and reducing gaps in educational development, several challenges remain. First, as 80% of total education spending is allocated to regular expenditures (including salaries and personnel costs), this leaves little room for expanding investments to address teacher shortages and improve teaching quality, purchasing modern teaching and learning

¹³⁷ thuvienphapluat.vn 2022.

¹³⁸ VTV 2023.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Viện Khoa học Giáo dục Việt Nam 2022.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

resources, and expanding digitalisation of education.¹⁴⁴ Funding for capital construction and school infrastructure remains insufficient compared to demand, impacting the capacity to modernise school facilities, purchase updated equipment, and expand educational facilities in underserved areas. The legal framework for foreign investment in education remains inadequate, limiting the potential for private sector participation and international collaboration. Recent reports also suggest that a lack of a unified and transparent education finance data system across different government levels and sectors negatively affects policy planning and resource allocation towards facilitating more efficient and equitable budget distribution decisions.¹⁴⁵

Addressing these governance and financing challenges is essential for ensuring that investments in education translate into tangible improvements in access, quality, and equity, in line with Viet Nam's Vision 2045. The state budget expenditure trends reveal a need for Viet Nam to prioritize education within its fiscal framework. A strategic approach to reallocating resources, increasing public investment in education, and fostering public-private partnerships will be crucial to achieving equitable and quality education, driving human capital development, and meeting the ambitious targets of Vision 2045.

Expanding Private Sector and International Participation in Education

The state budget expenditure trends suggest that private sector and foreign investment could play a key role in addressing these funding gaps, particularly in areas such as infrastructure development and the integration of technology into classrooms. Encouraging partnerships with private and foreign actors could supplement state funding and help align education priorities with the needs of a modern workforce. However, well-designed regulatory frameworks and clear guidelines would be essential to ensure such investments are equitable and aligned with national development goals, without worsening existing disparities and leaving disadvantaged children further behind.

Viet Nam's increasing integration into the global economy and its dynamic socio-economic changes have also created opportunities for greater private sector and foreign participation in education. With frameworks like Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), European Union-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement (EVFTA), and Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), opening new opportunities for trade and investment, the education sector is positioned to benefit from this growth.¹⁴⁶ The expanding middle class, projected to reach 50 million by 2030, is expected to drive demand for high-quality private and international schools, further incentivising foreign educational investments.¹⁴⁷ However, regulatory challenges and the lack of an updated legal framework may hinder seamless integration of private and foreign entities into the country's education landscape.

Additionally, the arrival of IR4.0 and the digital economy draws attention to the importance of equipping students with digital and technological skills. Private actors, particularly those with expertise in e-learning and digital education, could play a pivotal role in bridging these skill gaps alongside existing access gaps. Nevertheless, care must be taken to address potential inequities, ensuring that investments benefit all socio-economic groups and do not exacerbate current disparities in educational access along socioeconomic groups and regions. Policies such as tax incentives, public-private partnerships, and cross-sector collaborations could ensure that the benefits of private and foreign investments in education extend to Viet Nam's broader goals of equity and inclusive development.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ KAS and Vietnam Institute for Development Strategies 2024.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

4.3 Policy Recommendations

Viet Nam's achievements in education provide a solid foundation for further reforms to meet the aspirations of Vision 2045. Moving forward, investments in inclusive education, teacher quality, and the integration of lifelong learning opportunities will be critical to preparing a skilled, innovative, and equitable workforce capable of driving sustainable development. The below recommendations propose reforms in the short and long-term.

2025-2030

- **Ensure equitable access to high-quality early-childhood education programmes nationwide**, prioritising closing equity gaps for marginalised groups such as ethnic minorities, rural communities, children with disabilities, in alignment with the Government's Resolution No. 68/NQ-CP (May 2024). Emphasise enhancing the quality of ECE programs through interventions in early childhood education that promote STEM, problem-solving, and creativity to form a critical base that will support future competency-based learning. Establish public-private partnerships, financial incentives, and regulatory reforms to improve accessibility, affordability, and quality of preschool education, including in urban industrial parks.
- **Implement measures to support remote and ethnic minority-concentrated areas, including through cash transfer programs for disadvantaged families**, incentivising school attendance and reducing dropouts, especially among marginalised groups and at the secondary school levels.
 - Scale up nutrition and health integration, such as universal school feeding programs, to combat malnutrition and enhance cognitive development, drawing lessons from Thailand's success in improving school readiness.¹⁴⁸
 - Expanding bilingual education programmes for ethnic minority children may help to support development, learning, and school performance for ethnic minority children.
- **Expand equitable access for students with disabilities**. This should include expanding infrastructure and teaching materials for students with disabilities, ensuring equitable access to quality education. In addition, strengthen efforts to ensure all educational infrastructure and teaching and learning materials are fully accessible to students with different types of disabilities, including physical, sensory, cognitive, and learning disabilities. As part of this, continue with success of the classroom solidification programme for the period of 2021-2025, which facilitated standard-setting and broadening investments in school and classroom facilities, especially for students with disabilities.¹⁴⁹
- **Increase the state budget allocation for education and training**, ensuring the share of education and training expenditure reaches at least 20% of the total state budget by 2030, to ensure the sustainability of major reforms, including the Politburo's recent decision to waive tuition fees for all public school students, estimated to require a state budget allocation of VND 30 trillion (USD 1.17 billion) annually, which may pose pressures on the state budget. This represents about 10.6% of the 2023 state budget allocated to education and training, which stood at 13.5%¹⁵⁰, making increased and more efficient investments essential. Ensuring the sustainability of this investment, alongside measures to improve quality and equity, will be critical. This aligns with Resolution 29-NQ/TW and prioritises investments in early childhood education, universal primary and lower secondary education,

¹⁴⁸ World Bank and Ministry of Planning and Investment of Vietnam 2016.

¹⁴⁹ Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI), German Development Agency (GIZ), and United Nations (UN) Viet Nam 2023.

¹⁵⁰ General Statistical Office 2024.

and marginalised regions.

- o Strengthen oversight and establish national standards to ensure that all provinces allocate resources effectively, especially for underserved groups. Enhance the governance of education finance by revising and enforcing national guidelines, such as Decision 46, to reduce inequities in resource allocation, especially at the province level. Implement monitoring systems to ensure provinces allocate adequate funds for marginalised groups and critical areas like infrastructure, teacher training, and inclusive education.
- o Further, these resources should be redistributed to meet local and regional demands, in line with demographic shifts which have seen an overall reduction, coupled with a rural-urban shift, of learners. Therefore, efforts should be made to redistribute resources rather than solely increase resources, such as shifting towards enrolment-based funding models to ensure schools receive adequate resources based on actual student numbers, rather than outdated household registration data.
- **Allocate targeted funding for universal and compulsory education programs.** This includes expanded financial support for disadvantaged groups, particularly ethnic minorities, students with disabilities, and rural communities, to bridge equity gaps. Prioritise funding for rural and mountainous areas to reduce disparities in education access – targeted support should focus on teacher training, infrastructure development, and tailored strategies for disadvantaged students.
- **Focus state resources on modernising school facilities and teaching equipment.** Priority should be given to underserved regions to meet the requirements of the 2018 general education curriculum and ensure equitable access to quality education. This can be done by expanding capital investments in school infrastructure, prioritising the updating of school facilities, acquiring modern teaching materials, and integrating digital technologies into classrooms to improve learning environments. The 2025 announced restructuring of administrative (from 63 to 34 provinces and the abolishment of district-level units) can be used as an opportunity to modernise and integrate service delivery systems for improved efficiency, equity, and child outcomes, especially in rural and marginalised areas.
- **Develop incentives to attract private sector and international funding for education infrastructure.** Public-private partnerships should support digital learning tools, innovation in upper secondary and higher education, and equitable access to education services.
- **Maintain local-level oversight, especially for early childhood education and services targeting rural, remote, and ethnic minority communities, as part of the planned restructuring of Viet Nam’s administrative system.** On one hand, streamlining the administrative apparatus could enhance resource efficiency and reduce bureaucratic fragmentation in education governance and service delivery. However, there is also a risk that such consolidation could disrupt service coordination and worsen regional disparities. As roles and responsibilities are shifted across fewer but larger provinces, stronger inter-commune coordination and planning will be essential to ensure sustained equitable access to quality education and support systems, especially for the most marginalised children.
- **Strengthen governance of the education sector and oversight mechanisms to tackle systemic issues** such as the prevalence of extra classes and corrupt practices in the education system. Establish transparent regulations, monitoring systems, and grievance mechanisms to ensure equitable access to education and prevent exploitative practices. Increase public awareness campaigns about the rights and roles of students and parents to foster accountability at all levels of education. Develop a comprehensive, centralised system to track education expenditures more effectively and ensure efficient use of resources.

- Strengthen and expand autonomy for **schools, colleges, and universities in resource management**, while addressing implementation challenges. Building on autonomy measures introduced since 2014, continue to enhance resource management, curriculum design, and staff recruitment autonomy to foster innovation and better align with local and labour market needs. Address ongoing challenges in university autonomy by establishing clear governance frameworks, accountability mechanisms, and capacity-building programs for institutional leaders.
- **Transition to student-centred, competency-based curricula that emphasise STEM, critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, soft skills, and digital literacy, and ensure effective implementation and monitoring.** Build on the 2018 General Education Curriculum by strengthening implementation mechanisms and establishing robust monitoring and evaluation (M&E) frameworks to assess the impact and alignment of the curricula with labour market and global trends. Global examples, such as Singapore's emphasis on integrated STEM education, can provide a model for good practices. Integrate ICT into education at all levels, with targeted programmes to close the urban-rural digital divide and prepare students for emerging green and digital economies. Recent macroeconomic modelling of policy scenarios and public investments in Viet Nam suggest ICT investments (2% of GDP) as key drivers of long-term growth.¹⁵¹ Invest in market-driven career guidance for youth transitioning from secondary education to vocational or higher education.
- **Integrate career guidance programs and establish partnerships with industries** to ensure students are prepared for the changing labour market and just transitions to emerging sectors. Introduce educational programmes that are linked to sustainable development goals, environmental science, and green technologies at all levels, but especially in vocational and tertiary education, to prepare the future workforce for green sectors. Mandate career guidance programmes in all secondary schools to increase awareness of vocational pathways and STEM careers, and provide TVET scholarships for underserved students.
- **Establish career guidance centres in disadvantaged regions** to connect students with vocational training, digital skills programmes, and job opportunities tailored to their local economies, emphasising the benefits of TVET and its potential to lead to stable, high-demand careers can help shift societal attitudes and increase participation
- **Increase financial and professional incentives to attract new teaching recruits, especially in underserved areas.** Competitive salaries and financial incentives are crucial, particularly in rural areas where teacher shortages are severe. This may be achieved by measures such as providing housing allowances and cost-of-living adjustments in high-demand regions, or providing loans and stipends to new recruits in return for teaching in underserved areas. Specific attention should be given to improving teacher recruitments and representation in ethnic minority and marginalised areas.
- **Improve working conditions for teachers**, including reducing excessive workloads and providing support for teachers in disadvantaged areas, such as through rotational teaching programmes, or by hiring additional supporting staff.
- **Strengthen teacher training programs** to align with modern pedagogical methods and digital competencies (including ICT tools), addressing rural-urban disparities in teacher quality and capacities. Introduce incentives, including housing and financial support, to attract and retain teachers in remote and disadvantaged areas. Best practices from countries like Malaysia show the importance of non-financial incentives, such as public recognition, for teacher retention.¹⁵²

¹⁵¹ United Nations (UN) Viet Nam, UN ESCAP, and Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI) 2024.

¹⁵² OECD 2024.

- **Invest in digital infrastructure to ensure education continuity during crises such as pandemics or climate-related disruptions.** This includes expanding access to online learning tools and teacher training in digital platforms. Introduce capacity development and digital infrastructure for learning continuity during periods of crisis or disaster which may interrupt learning, to avoid learning losses.
- **Establish a National Framework for School-Based Mental Health Services** Develop a comprehensive national strategy to provide mental health services in schools with inter-ministerial coordination between Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), Ministry of Health (MOH), and Ministry of Labour, Invalids, and Social Affairs (MOLISA).¹⁵³ . This framework should prioritise the training and deployment of school counsellors in every educational institution by 2030, ensuring these professionals are equipped with the skills to offer psychological support, early detection of mental health issues, and appropriate referrals.

2031-2045

- **Increase education spending to meet or exceed regional averages (e.g., 4-5% of GDP).** This is critical for universal secondary education and aligning curricula with future labour market demands, including technology and STEM skills, and in alignment with recent macroeconomic modelling to evaluate long-term economic and social impacts of policy and investment scenarios, which suggests that public spending on education and social protection has a strong multiplier effect, promoting human capital and sustainable economic growth.¹⁵⁴
- **Maintain education and training expenditure at or above 20% of the state budget.** Sustained funding will align Viet Nam with regional averages for GDP allocation to education and support lifelong learning and advanced education programs. Continue targeted investments in marginalized communities to ensure equitable access to education. Efforts should focus on reducing barriers for ethnic minorities, students with disabilities, and girls, addressing disparities in educational attainment and outcomes.
- **Increase funding for higher education to develop high-quality human resources.** This should include a focus on STEM fields to align with modernisation goals, supported by financial incentives for research and innovation.
- **Expand professional development programmes for teachers,** ensuring teachers have access to upskilling in digital literacy, AI, and interdisciplinary teaching methods.
- **Improve workforce planning mechanisms** to accurately project teacher demand and ensure staffing allocations match student needs. Subsequently adapt the existing national standard teacher-classroom ratio model to fit needs of regions and localities instead of applying a one-size-fits-all approach.
- **Develop mechanisms to ensure continuous monitoring and evaluation of education investments and reforms.** Inter-ministerial coordination should align education policies with socio-economic goals and labour market requirements.
- **Strengthen the implementation of the integration of academic and vocational tracks at the secondary level,** ensuring that all students have access to pathways tailored to diverse aspirations and labour market demands. Develop and expand Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), integrated into academic-vocational pathways at the secondary level to provide students with flexible career options. Ensure inclusion for

¹⁵³ UNICEF 2022a.

¹⁵⁴ United Nations (UN) Viet Nam, UN ESCAP, and Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI) 2024.

marginalised groups.

- **Strengthen the existing national system for lifelong learning to** focus on green technologies, digital industries, and the creative economy. Through the existing sub-committee on continuing education and lifelong learning within the National Council for Education and Human Resource Development, prioritise reskilling and upskilling programs in these emerging sectors. Develop integrated academic-vocational secondary schools, providing students with transferable skills and flexible career pathways.
- **Strengthen frameworks to attract private investment in higher education and lifelong learning.** Collaboration between educational institutions and private sector actors can align education with labour market demands, particularly in green technology and digital industries. Revise regulatory frameworks to attract international funding and private sector partnerships that can expand access to high-quality education.
- **Promote partnerships with private sector actors and international organizations** to fund and implement lifelong learning initiatives. Increase investment in education research to develop innovative teaching methods and curricula that anticipate future labour market demands (upskilling). Collaborate with global partners to adopt and adapt best practices, such as Finland's approach to inquiry-based learning and Singapore's focus on technological innovation in education. Establishing councils or boards consisting of education providers, employers, government agencies, and social sectors can help to build coherence in the development of human capital, from early childhood through to tertiary education, based on continuous evidence generation and evidence-based policy development.
- **Embed sustainability and digital literacy into education curricula at all levels.** Expanded use of technology in education delivery can adapt to crises, ensure continuity in learning, and minimise learning losses.

5. Health and Nutrition

5.1 Why Invest in Child Health and Nutrition?

Investing in child health and nutrition is essential for the achievement of Viet Nam's 2045 vision. Ensuring adequate nutrition and preventing exposure to negative conditions such as malnutrition, stress, and poor sanitation are critical for developing children's cognitive and executive functions, which are the foundation for human capital development and equitable growth.¹⁵⁵ Poor health and nutrition, especially when coupled with deprivations in other critical domains such as clean water and sanitation, can lead both acute and chronic deficiencies such as stunting, limiting children's ability to learn, grow, and contribute productively to society.¹⁵⁶ Healthy children are more capable of achieving better educational outcomes, increased productivity, and higher incomes, directly contributing to national growth.¹⁵⁷

The relationship between maternal and child health and nutrition investments and the healthy, prosperous, and sustainable development of individuals and their societies has been well studied and affirmed by empirical research over the previous decades¹⁵⁸, including:

- Global estimates suggest that every additional dollar spent on reducing the burden of child malnutrition yields returns of USD 45.00.¹⁵⁹
- A package of high-impact MCHN interventions across the lifecycle of the child was separately estimated to yield an average cost-benefit ratio of return to investment of 8.7:1 by 2035 in 74 countries that account for more than 95% of global maternal and child deaths.¹⁶⁰
- In a Lancet study of 120 LMICs, childhood stunting was found to account for economic costs on the private sector amounting to at least USD 13.54 billion in annual sales, equivalent to 0.01%–1.2% of national GDP per country. The highest losses are observed in sectors such as manufacturing, garments, and food production. Investing USD 1 annually to reduce stunting yields returns ranging from USD 2 to USD 81 per year, depending on the country. These economic benefits tended to be higher for men than for women.¹⁶¹

Addressing disparities and lifting children out of disadvantaged circumstances are vital to ensuring their well-being and overcoming barriers to equity and development, making child health and nutrition a cornerstone for Viet Nam's long-term success.

¹⁵⁵ World Bank 2006; Pelletier, Frongillo, and Habicht 1993; Welsch and Zimmer 2009; Hanushek and Woessmann 2008.

¹⁵⁶ Pelletier, Frongillo, and Habicht 1993; Bhutta et al. 2017; Karpati et al. 2020.

¹⁵⁷ Galasso and Wagstaff 2018; Galasso and Wagstaff 2017; de Onis and Branca 2016.

¹⁵⁸ Heckman 2006; Alderman, Hoogeveen, and Rossi 2006; World Bank 2006; Galasso and Wagstaff 2017.

¹⁵⁹ Copenhagen Consensus Center 2017.

¹⁶⁰ Black et al. 2016.

¹⁶¹ Akseer et al. 2022.

5.2 Trends, Challenges, and Opportunities

Childhood nutrition, malnutrition and 'triple trouble'

Viet Nam has impressively achieved reductions in malnutrition rates, including stunting, underweight, and wasting, among children under five.¹⁶² Since 2018, Viet Nam has implemented national programs focused on poverty reduction, sustainable agriculture, food safety, and nutrition. Although malnutrition rates among children under five, including stunting, underweight, and wasting, have declined, significant disparities remain between urban and rural areas, socioeconomic regions, and ethnic groups. Despite progress, Viet Nam continues to face challenges in addressing food insecurity and malnutrition, especially in rural areas and among ethnic minority populations.¹⁶³

The triple burden of malnutrition – undernutrition (stunting, wasting), micronutrient deficiencies, and overnutrition or rising obesity – presents a critical challenge for Viet Nam's 2045 vision of becoming a prosperous, equitable, and high-income nation. Stunting¹⁶⁴ and wasting¹⁶⁵ are direct consequences of undernutrition and disproportionately affect disadvantaged groups. Undernutrition impairs children's physical and cognitive development, leading to lower educational attainment and reduced (future) economic productivity. The increasing rates of childhood obesity, especially in urban areas, contribute to a rise in non-communicable diseases which further strain healthcare systems and limit labour force efficiency. Tackling this triple burden requires a comprehensive, multisectoral approach to protect Viet Nam's ability to develop a healthy, capable, and productive workforce, undermining the country's human capital and its ambitions for sustainable and inclusive growth.

Optimal infant and young child feeding practices are crucial for survival, healthy growth, and development, especially from birth to age 2. In 2020-21, only 45.4% of children received a minimum acceptable diet, combining both dietary diversity and frequency. The richest households had the highest rate (56.0%), compared to just 26.7% among the poorest. Children whose mothers had higher education (54.5%), living in urban areas (50.4%), or older children (age 18-23 months, 51.8%) had better access to an acceptable diet. There were regional and ethnic disparities, with the highest percentage in the North Central and Central Coastal regions (54.0%) and the lowest in the Northern Midlands and Mountainous areas (35.8%).¹⁶⁶ On the other hand, the rate of exclusive breastfeeding in the first six months markedly improved between 2010 and 2020, increasing from 19.6% to 45.4%, though disparities remain at the regional level and between rural and urban areas.¹⁶⁷

Micronutrient deficiencies, while having shown marked progress between 2010 and 2020, remain a critical public health priority. While the rate of preclinical vitamin A deficiency among children aged 6-59 months has decreased to 9.5%, the share of children and mothers with zinc deficiencies remains high despite progress. Nationwide, the rate of children aged 6-59 months

¹⁶² General Statistics Office of Viet Nam (GSO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) 2021.

¹⁶³ Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI), German Development Agency (GIZ), and United Nations (UN) Viet Nam 2023.

¹⁶⁴ Stunting, a result of chronic undernutrition, poses significant threats to both individual and national development in Viet Nam. The cumulative effects of undernutrition – combined with underinvestment in other dimensions of child well-being, such as education, healthcare, and clean water and sanitation – limit children's physical growth and cognitive abilities with limited catch-up potential later in life. This has profound impacts on human capital development, as stunted children are more likely to have delayed mental development, poorer school performance, and reduced earning potential in adulthood.

¹⁶⁵ Wasting is indicative of acute malnutrition.

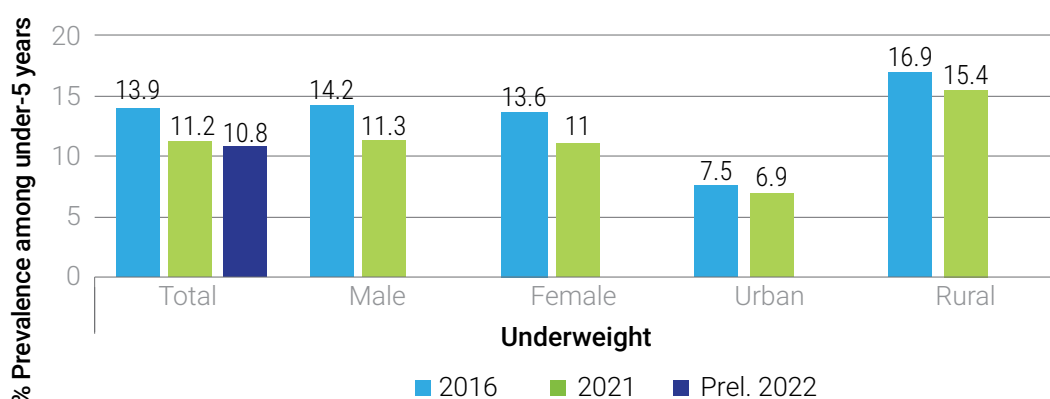
¹⁶⁶ General Statistics Office of Viet Nam (GSO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) 2021.

¹⁶⁷ Ministry of Health n.d.

and pregnant women with zinc deficiencies was 58.0% and 63.5%, respectively.¹⁶⁸ Higher rates of children are affected in the Northern Mountainous and Central Highlands regions (66-68%). Similarly, pregnant women were more likely to be zinc deficient in the Northern mountainous and Central Highlands regions (81.9% and 63.9%, respectively). In urban areas, zinc deficiencies among children aged 6-59 months have remained stagnant in the 2015-2020 period, at nearly half of the population (49.6%).

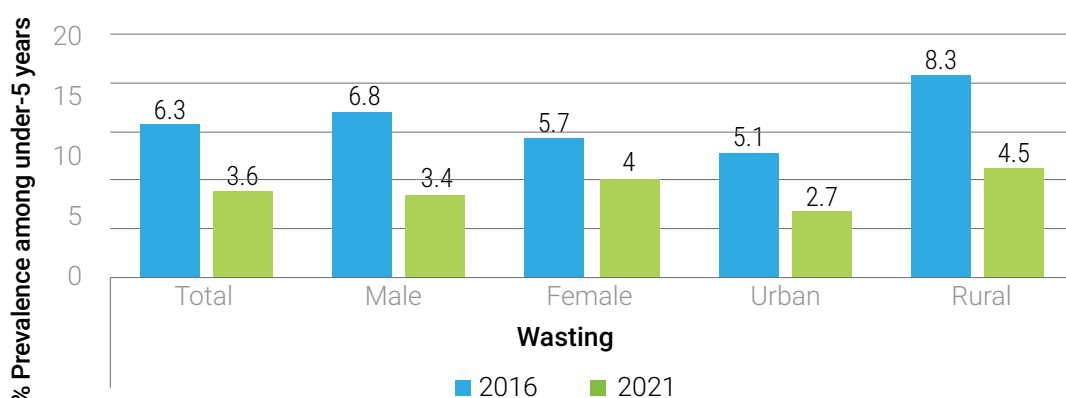
Between 2016 and 2022, Viet Nam made progress in reducing child malnutrition rates, including underweight, stunting, and wasting (Figure 13, Figure 14, Figure 15). Underweight prevalence dropped from 13.9% in 2016 to 10.8% in 2022. Stunting also decreased from 24.5% to 19% over the same period, though rural children continue to face higher stunting rates (26.3% in 2021) compared to urban children (12%). Wasting rates have significantly reduced, from 6.3% in 2016 to 3.6% in 2022. Despite overall improvements, disparities between rural and urban areas, and between boys and girls, persist. For example, stunting prevalence among boys has reduced faster than among girls. Addressing these disparities is essential for Viet Nam to meet its 2045 vision of equity and sustainable development.

Figure 13 Prevalence of under-five underweight between 2016 and 2022



Source: GSO (2024)

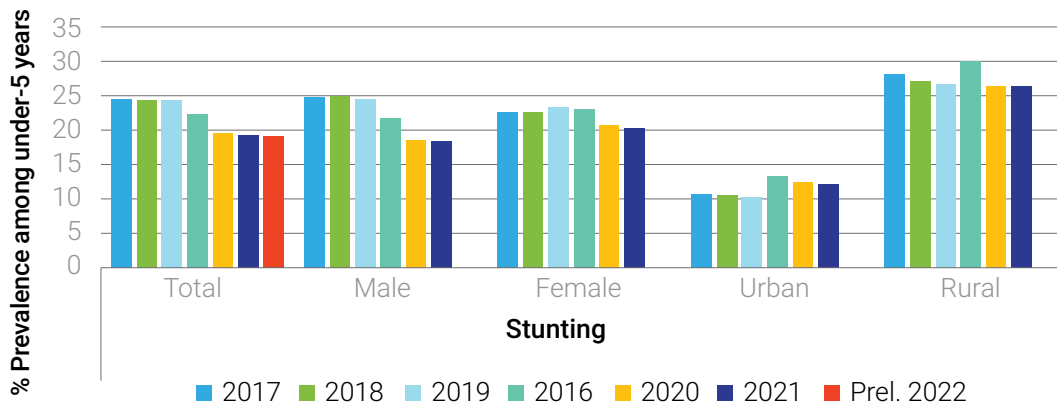
Figure 14 Prevalence of under-five wasting between 2016 and 2022



Source: GSO (2024)

168 Ibid.

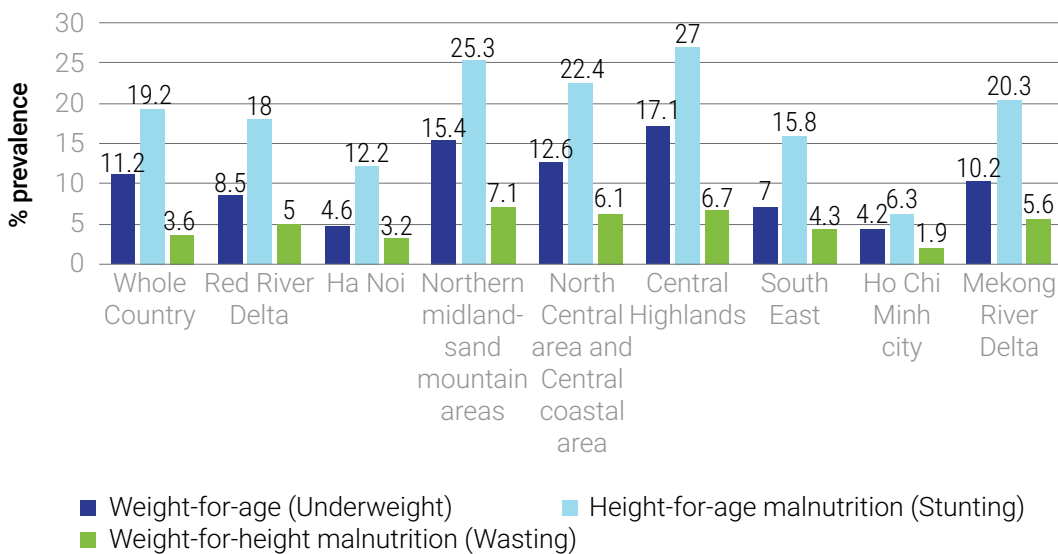
Figure 15 Prevalence of under-five stunting between 2016 and 2022



Source: GSO (2024)

In 2022, child malnutrition in Viet Nam varied significantly by region. Nationally, underweight prevalence was 11.2%, stunting was 19.2%, and wasting was 3.6% (Figure 16). Urban areas like Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh City had lower malnutrition rates, with underweight at 4.6% and 4.2%, and stunting at 12.2% and 6.3%, respectively. In contrast, rural areas such as the Northern Midlands and Central Highlands exhibited higher rates, with stunting at 25.3% and 27%, and wasting at 7.1% and 6.7%. This disparity underscores the continuing nutritional challenges faced by children in rural and mountainous regions compared to urban areas.

Figure 16 Prevalence of underweight, wasting, and stunting in Viet Nam, by region, in 2022



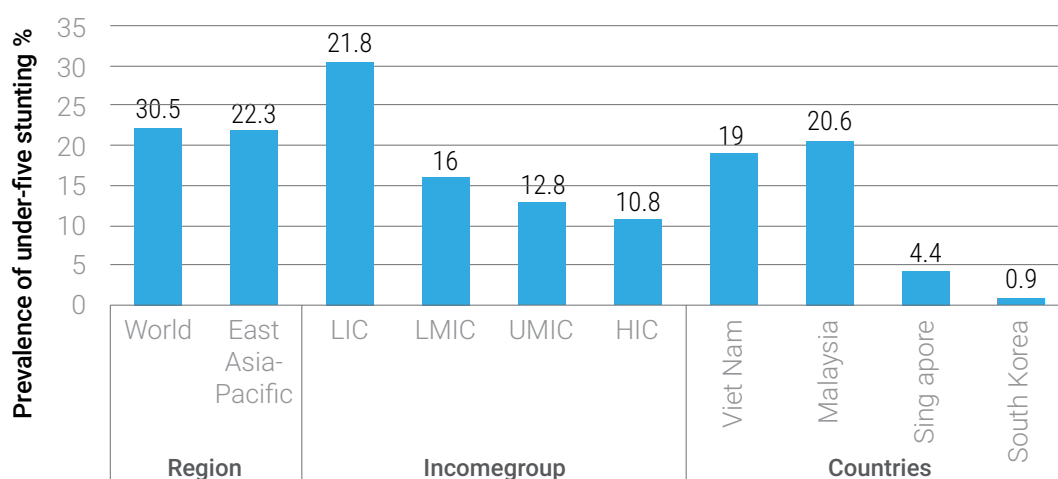
Source: GSO (2024)

While research suggests the possibility of catch-up growth given adequate investments made

in children’s development in later years, malnutrition remains a problem also among school-aged children in Viet Nam. Among school-age children aged 5-19 years, stunting malnutrition was found to have decreased from 23.4% in 2010 to 14.8% in 2019.¹⁶⁹ On the other hand, the rates of overweight and obesity have more than doubled over the same time period for this age group (Figure 18).

In the context of Viet Nam’s 2045 vision for comprehensive child development, tackling stunting and malnutrition generally remains a critical priority to ensure all children can thrive and contribute to a prosperous, equitable society. Stunting rates in Viet Nam, currently at 19%, are below the global average of 22.3% and the East Asia-Pacific regional average of 21.8%. However, Viet Nam’s stunting rate is significantly higher compared to its regional neighbours, such as Singapore (4.4%) and South Korea (0.9%), as well as compared to its LMIC income group, highlighting room for improvement, especially among its most vulnerable groups who exhibit the highest levels of stunting, such as ethnic minorities (Figure 17). Despite progress, further investment is needed to build human capital by addressing child malnutrition aligning Viet Nam’s health outcomes with those of higher-income regional counterparts.

Figure 17 Comparison of under-five stunting rates across regions, income groups, and a selection of countries in East Asia-Pacific region, based on latest available data



Source: UNICEF, GSO (2024)

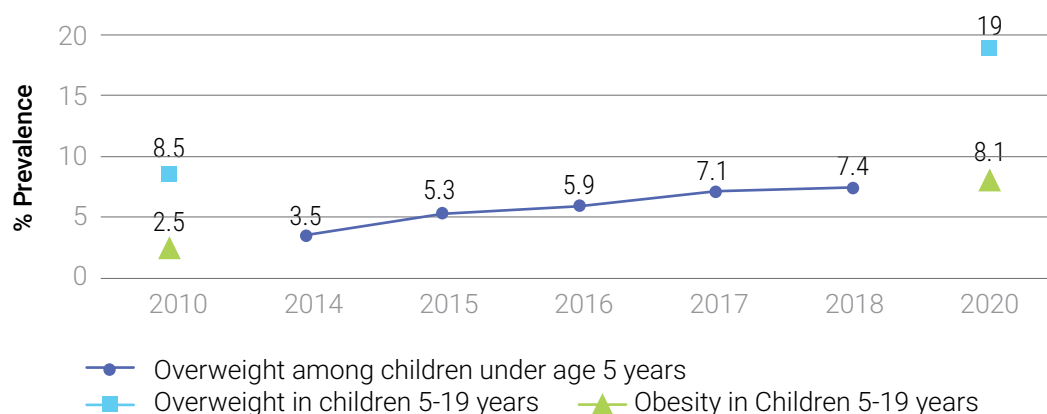
Childhood obesity¹⁷⁰ is an increasing concern in Viet Nam, with rates rising to 7% among children under five to 19% in those aged 5-19 between 2010 and 2020 (Figure 18). Boys in urban areas are particularly affected, and if current trends continue, 1.9 million children in Viet Nam are projected to be obese by 2030. The rise in obesity is linked to the consumption of processed foods high in sugar, salt, and unhealthy fats, along with insufficient fruit and vegetable intake and a lack of physical activity.¹⁷¹

169 Ibid.

170 The health risks associated with childhood obesity are significant, including a higher likelihood of developing non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, and hypertension, as well as the potential for early mortality. Obesity also impacts children’s mental health, leading to stigmatisation, low self-esteem, and anxiety, while imposing a long-term economic burden due to higher healthcare costs and lost income.

171 UNICEF Viet Nam 2021.

Figure 18 Prevalence (%) of overweight among children under age 5 years and overweight and obesity among children aged 5-19 years between 2010 and 2020



Source: Annual national nutrition monitoring, National Institute of Nutrition, via UNICEF (2021)¹⁷²

Disease burden and child health challenges

Communicable diseases

Significant differences in disease episodes were noted across urban and rural areas, regions, child age, mother’s education level, wealth quintiles, and ethnicity, particularly in the prevalence of diarrhoea reported in the two weeks preceding the survey.¹⁷³ Almost 60% of deaths due to diarrhoea worldwide are attributable to unsafe drinking water and poor hygiene and sanitation. Overall, 50% of all children with diarrhoea sought advice or treatment from a health facility or provider, predominantly in the private sector (44.6%) and public health sector (27.6%). Mothers/caretakers preferred the private health sector to the public sector in seeking advice when children had diarrhoea. This trend was specifically observed among mothers/caretakers in urban areas, in the richest quintiles, and among Kinh and Hoa ethnic people. 20.2% of children with diarrhoea in the last two weeks did not receive any treatment or drug. There was a gap between boys and girls, and a difference between urban and rural areas, although the latter was not significant.¹⁷⁴

Mental health

2022 data indicates that 21.7% of adolescents (ages 10-17) in Viet Nam experience mental health problems, with females (22.6%) reporting slightly higher rates than males (20.8%).¹⁷⁵ Despite this high prevalence, only 6.5% of adolescents access mental health support services, highlighting a significant treatment gap. The disparity between need and service utilisation suggests barriers to access, such as stigma, lack of awareness, limited availability of services, and financial constraints. Additionally, only 5.1% of parents recognise their adolescents’ need for mental health support, suggesting a gap in awareness and parental recognition of mental health issues, which could further limit help-seeking behaviour among youth. The lower service utilization among females (5.5%) compared to males (7.4%) may indicate specific gender-related barriers, such as greater stigma or societal expectations affecting help-seeking behaviours. Beyond traditional health and nutrition concerns, excessive smartphone and social media use also presents growing risks to children’s mental health, in addition to their physical, cognitive, and social development, which

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ General Statistics Office of Viet Nam (GSO) and United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) 2021.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ UNICEF Viet Nam 2024a.

merit urgent attention. These challenges are elaborated on in section 8.2.

Non-communicable diseases

Myopia is also a growing public health concern in Viet Nam, and is highly prevalent in East and Southeast Asia, impacting a large proportion of children and young adults. In countries across these regions, including Viet Nam, the prevalence of myopia among school-leaving adolescents has surged over the past five decades, rising from 20%–30% to 80%–90%—a three- to fourfold increase.¹⁷⁶ This rate has been shown to be linked to, and is projected to significantly increase due to, expanding urbanisation, frequent use of electronic and mobile devices (including for studying), lifestyle changes, and which are compounded by educational pressures. This presents an emergent health risk.

Children's environmental health including air pollution

Exposure to air pollution increases the risk of respiratory illnesses, but also risks to neurological, physical and cognitive development in children. Research suggests that prolonged exposure to air pollutants (including high PM2.5 levels), has been linked with acute respiratory infections, pneumonia, chronic lung diseases, cancer, and potentially tuberculosis, asthma, and cataracts, as well as reduced lung function, impaired brain development, and increased risk of neurodevelopmental conditions such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.¹⁷⁷ It can also lead to reduced immune system development and low birth weight in children during prenatal and early life stages.¹⁷⁸

In Viet Nam, in 2020-21, 11.9% of households used polluting fuels and technologies for cooking, with significant disparities based on urban-rural location, region, education, ethnicity, and living standards.¹⁷⁹ This rate was particularly high among ethnic minorities, the poorest households (53.5%), less educated household heads (45.9%), and in regions like the Northern Midlands and Mountainous areas (36.5%) and the Central Highlands (30.5%). The Mong ethnic group had the highest usage rate at 88.7%, as these groups mainly relied on wood for cooking fuel.

Air pollution also presents a significant public health hazard, especially to children. On average, in 2023, Viet Nam's level of hazardous small particles (PM2.5) were nearly six times the level recommended by the WHO.¹⁸⁰ In 2024, Viet Nam ranked the second-most polluted country in ASEAN, and the 22nd worst in terms of air quality globally.¹⁸¹ In early 2025, Ha Noi was ranked as the top most polluted city in the world, with PM2.5 levels measured at 266 microgrammes per cubic meter.¹⁸² Exposure to poor air quality presents both short and long-term risks to health, such as respiratory infections, breathing difficulties, and chronic diseases, and is associated with shortened life spans and at least 70,000 annual deaths in Viet Nam. Pregnant mothers and young children under age 5 years, are particularly vulnerable to these health impacts, with children under age 5 years making up around 7% of these deaths. The health and humanitarian impact of air pollution has been associated with social and economic costs upwards of USD 13 billion yearly, without accounting for future clean-up costs, equivalent to 4% of the country's GDP.¹⁸³ This makes addressing both air pollution and its health impacts not only a strategic priority to improve labour productivity and human capital towards the national vision for 2045, but also as part of broader efforts to promote environmental sustainability and green

¹⁷⁶ Tran et al. 2025.

¹⁷⁷ Sram et al. 2013; Perera et al. 2019.

¹⁷⁸ Johnson et al. 2021.

¹⁷⁹ General Statistics Office and UNICEF 2021.

¹⁸⁰ Pratt, Khalidi, and Flowers 2024.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Reuters 2025.

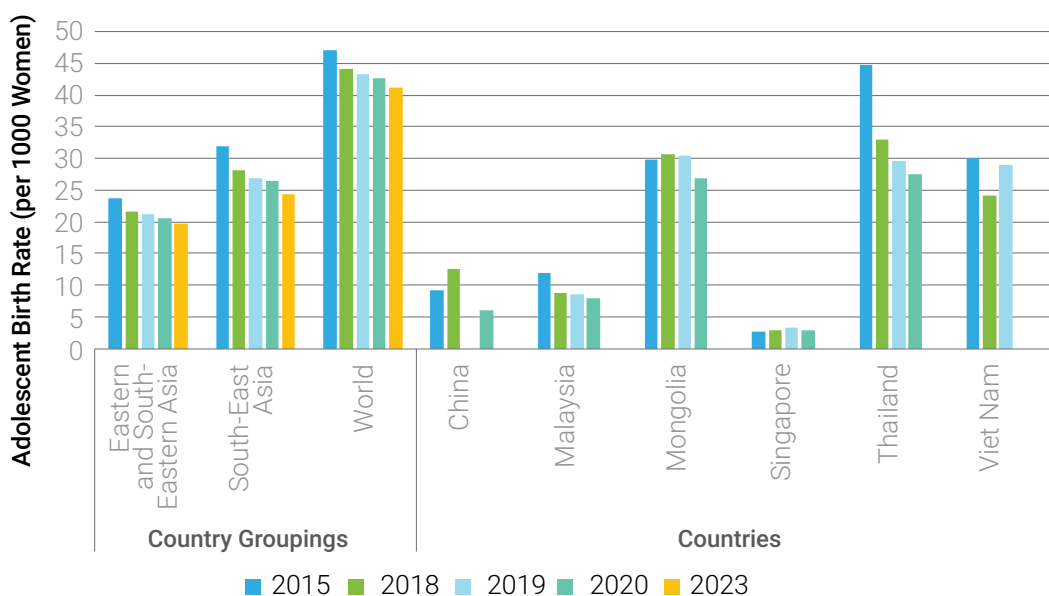
¹⁸³ Pratt, Khalidi, and Flowers 2024.

technologies to curb the effects of climate change.

Early childbearing

Early childbearing is also of serious concern in Viet Nam, with the country having some of the highest rates of adolescent pregnancy and abortion in the region. This issue is further elaborated on in section 8.2. The adolescent pregnancy rate (share of women aged 15-19 years with a pregnancy outcome in the last two years), was 4.1 in 2020-21, compared to 15.3 nationally.¹⁸⁴ Among this group, induced abortions made up 2.1% of pregnancy outcomes. While trends since 2015 indicate that Viet Nam has made some progress in reducing adolescent birth rates (live births per 1,000 women aged 15-19 years), its fluctuations and stagnant decline relative to South-East Asia, Eastern Asia, and Malaysia suggest inconsistent policy impact (Figure 19). However, the region generally exhibits stagnant progress in reducing adolescent fertility over the previous decade. More recent analyses estimate and project a decline of the adolescent birth rate from 47 in 1994 to 34 in 2024, and 30 per 1,000 women in 2045, remaining the third-highest in the East and South-Eastern Asia region after Lao PDR and Cambodia.¹⁸⁵ According to SDGCW data of 2020-21, the adolescent birth rate among women living in poorer wealth quintiles, among women with no or pre-primary education is around 60 times higher than that of their peers with at least tertiary education, and is also particularly high among Mong ethnic women.¹⁸⁶ Strengthening reproductive health services, investing in comprehensive reproductive health education, ensuring universal contraceptive access, and addressing socio-cultural barriers will be critical in achieving sustained reductions and aligning with regional trends, including matching the lower rates of higher income ASEAN countries.

Figure 19 Adolescent birth rate (per 1,000 women) by country and year



Source: World Health Organization (2025)¹⁸⁷, based on most recent available data.

184 General Statistics Office of Viet Nam (GSO) and United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) 2021.

185 United Nations 2025.

186 General Statistics Office of Viet Nam (GSO) and United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) 2021.

187 World Health Organization 2025.

Maternal and newborn health

Viet Nam has made significant progress in improving sexual and reproductive health over the previous 20 years. Nearly all women aged 15-49 years surveyed in the Viet Nam SDG indicators on Children and Women (SDGCW) Survey 2020-2021¹⁸⁸ received antenatal care from skilled health personnel (97.0%) at least once, predominantly doctors, though coverage was lower among ethnic minorities, less educated women, and those in poorer households. Tetanus protection was also uneven, with significant disparities among marginalized groups. Birth in health facilities was widespread (96.3%) but lower in rural areas (94.8% compared to 99.6% in urban areas) and among disadvantaged groups (for example, only 37% of Mong, compared to 83.6-100% among other ethnic groups), with home deliveries still prevalent in certain regions. Low birth weight presents serious risks to a child's survival and long-term development, with rural (4.5% compared to 2.8% in urban areas and 4.0% nationally) and poor (7.0%) populations being more affected, as well as among women who gave birth under the age of 20 years (14.6%). Postnatal care is critical for both mothers and newborns, as a significant portion of newborn deaths occur shortly after birth. The first days following birth offer vital opportunities for lifesaving interventions, such as health checks, breastfeeding support, and infection prevention, with rural and disadvantaged groups again facing lower coverage.¹⁸⁹

Progress in improving maternal, newborn, and child health over the previous decades has seen Viet Nam as one of only six countries in the world that had achieved the Millenium Development Goal on the reduction of maternal mortality (MDG5) in 2015.¹⁹⁰ In 2021, the neonatal mortality rate was estimated at 6 deaths per 1,000 live births. The infant mortality rate was estimated at 10 per 1,000 live births, while the under-five mortality rate was estimated at 14 per 1,000 live births. These estimates show that approximately 60% of infant deaths occurred during the neonatal period, and about 71% of under-five deaths were infant deaths. However, disparities remain high between urban and rural areas, between regions, and among ethnic minorities. While the maternal mortality ratio declined to 46 deaths per 100,000 live births at the national level in 2021, this compares to around 100-150 per 100,000 livebirths in Northern Midland and Mountains and ethnic minority regions.¹⁹¹ Rural children face greater health challenges than urban children, with higher mortality rates across neonatal, post-neonatal, infant, and under-five categories. Male children are at greater risk of mortality compared to females in both neonatal and post-neonatal stages.¹⁹²

Although access to maternal and postnatal care is widespread, significant inequalities remain, with marginalized groups facing barriers to receiving adequate care.¹⁹³ Children in rural, poor, and ethnic minority communities continue to face higher health risks due to limited access to quality healthcare and preventive services.

Health service utilisation and access gaps

Healthcare coverage and utilisation

Viet Nam has made great progress in improving child health and nutrition over the previous decade. Viet Nam has achieved significant progress in universal health coverage, with 92.04% of the population covered by health insurance as of 2022, including among children aged

188 General Statistics Office of Viet Nam (GSO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) 2021.

189 Ibid.

190 UNFPA 2021.

191 Ibid.

192 General Statistics Office of Viet Nam (GSO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) 2021.

193 Ibid.

5-17 years.¹⁹⁴ Children under age 6 years also receive a free health insurance card. However, non-participants are primarily unemployed individuals or informal sector workers, with a high proportion of women among them.¹⁹⁵ The 2021 WHO and World Bank report indicated that Viet Nam's essential service coverage index in 2020 reached 70 out of 100, surpassing both Southeast Asia's (61) and the global average (67).

Although policies have aimed to improve health and nutrition service quality and access, many marginalised groups, like children, the poor, and those with disabilities, remain underserved. Persistent inequalities in access to essential services across regions and population groups highlight ongoing challenges.¹⁹⁶ Children in rural, poor, and ethnic minority communities continue to face higher health risks due to limited access to quality healthcare and preventive services. For example, in mountainous areas, ethnic minorities have a lower vaccination coverage rate compared to the national rate, at under 80%, based on 2019 study data.¹⁹⁷

Moreover, health utilisation rates have shown a notable decline, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic, which likely contributed to hesitation or fear surrounding medical treatment. While the gaps in health utilisation between urban and rural communities, income quintiles, and ethnic groups appear to have narrowed by 2022, disparities persist (See Figure 20).¹⁹⁸ While the share of households facing high medical expenses rose slightly between 2016 and 2018, it decreased by 2020, attributed in part to the 2014 Amended Law on Health Insurance, which increased participation rates. In 2022, 27.7% of people underwent health checks, with 26.4% receiving outpatient care and 3.6% inpatient care. The average health expenditure per person decreased from over 3 million VND in 2020 to 2.5 million VND in 2022. Urban residents spent more on health checks than rural residents, averaging 2.8 million VND compared to 2.3 million VND, a difference of approximately 500,000 VND per person. While trends in declining service utilisation may have been influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic, more current data to assess potential recovery is not yet available.

194 Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI), German Development Agency (GIZ), and United Nations (UN) Viet Nam 2023.

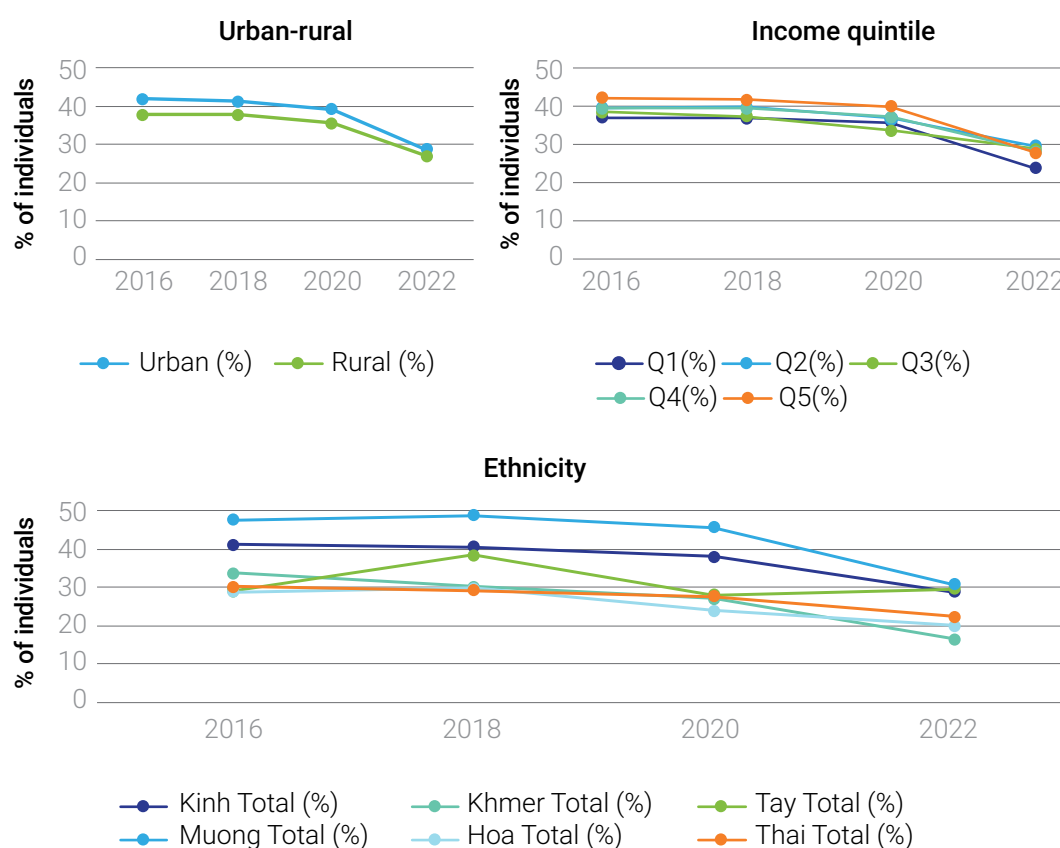
195 In contrast, based on VHLSS 2022 data 89.2% of people have health insurance, and there is no difference observed among area, regions, living standard quintiles and sex. Two regions observed highest proportion of people having health insurance are Central Highland and South East (General Statistics Office (GSO) 2023).

196 Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI), German Development Agency (GIZ), and United Nations (UN) Viet Nam 2023.

197 Ibid.

198 General Statistics Office (GSO) 2023.

Figure 20: Percentage of people having received health treatment in the past 12 months by urban-rural, income and ethnicity



Source: ¹⁹⁹

Immunisation and preventive care

Immunisation is a highly effective tool for preventing life-threatening infectious diseases, and it is one of the most cost-effective health interventions that can be made accessible to even the most vulnerable populations. Viet Nam has impressively achieved high immunisation coverage for diseases such as tuberculosis.²⁰⁰ The SDGCW 2020-21 survey data show that the percentage of children who received basic vaccinations²⁰¹ before their first birthday was low, as 40% of children age 12-23 months and 21.2% of children age 24-35 months received full basic antigens before their first birthday. While vaccination coverage for diseases like tuberculosis was high, with 96% for children aged 12-23 months, and 98% for children aged 24-35 months, coverage for other vaccines, such as the polio vaccine, was lower (52.5% for children aged 12-23 months, and 37.8% for children aged 24-35 months). Full immunisation coverage varied significantly by socioeconomic factors, with lower rates observed among children from the poorest households, Mong ethnic households, and those with less educated mothers.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ General Statistics Office of Viet Nam (GSO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) 2021.

²⁰¹ The Viet Nam Expanded Programme on Immunisation provides children with all the WHO recommended vaccinations against diseases such as tuberculosis, hepatitis B, polio, measles, and others, with the majority of these vaccinations administered during the first year of life.

Additionally, regional disparities are evident, with lower vaccination coverage in areas such as the North Central Coast, Central Coastal, and Northern Midlands and Mountainous regions.²⁰² In 2021, in the context of the COVID-19 epidemic, the percentage of children under 1 year of age who were fully vaccinated decreased to 87.1%.²⁰³ More recent data suggests a worsening situation – due to procurement delays, the full immunisation rate for infants under one year old dropped to 77.1% nationwide by November 2023, from 98% in 2016, falling short of the targeted 90% (Figure 21).²⁰⁴ Regional disparities are significant – while the Red River Delta consistently had higher immunisation rates, declining from 98.9% in 2016 to 85% in 2023, other regions fared worse. For example, rates in the Northern Midlands and Mountainous areas dropped from 97.4% in 2016 to just 71.9% in 2023, while the Central Highlands experienced the most dramatic decline, plummeting from 96.5% in 2016 to a critically low 57.2% in 2023. Similarly, the Mekong River Delta fell from 98.4% in 2016 to 71% in 2023.

Vaccine procurement delays in Viet Nam's Expanded Immunisation Programme (EIP) have been linked to policy shifts, bureaucratic hurdles, and budget delays. In 2023, responsibility shifted from the Ministry of Health (MoH) to local authorities, many of whom lacked experience in budget allocation and procurement.²⁰⁵ The lengthy approval process (2-3 months) and delays in budget approvals for 2024 further disrupted supply. Post-COVID-19 disruptions also affected vaccine availability and distribution. In response, the Government reinstated central funding through Resolutions No. 98 and 99, allowing MoH to distribute 22.79 million doses by late 2023, though systemic challenges remain.

These trends illustrate the compounding challenges faced by regions with greater socioeconomic vulnerabilities, including delays in vaccine procurement, disparities in healthcare access, and resource constraints in the public health system. These data highlight the need for targeted efforts to ensure equitable access to vaccines, especially in marginalized communities, as well as improved procurement systems and timely vaccine supply chains to safeguard immunisation coverage and protect the health of Viet Nam's children.

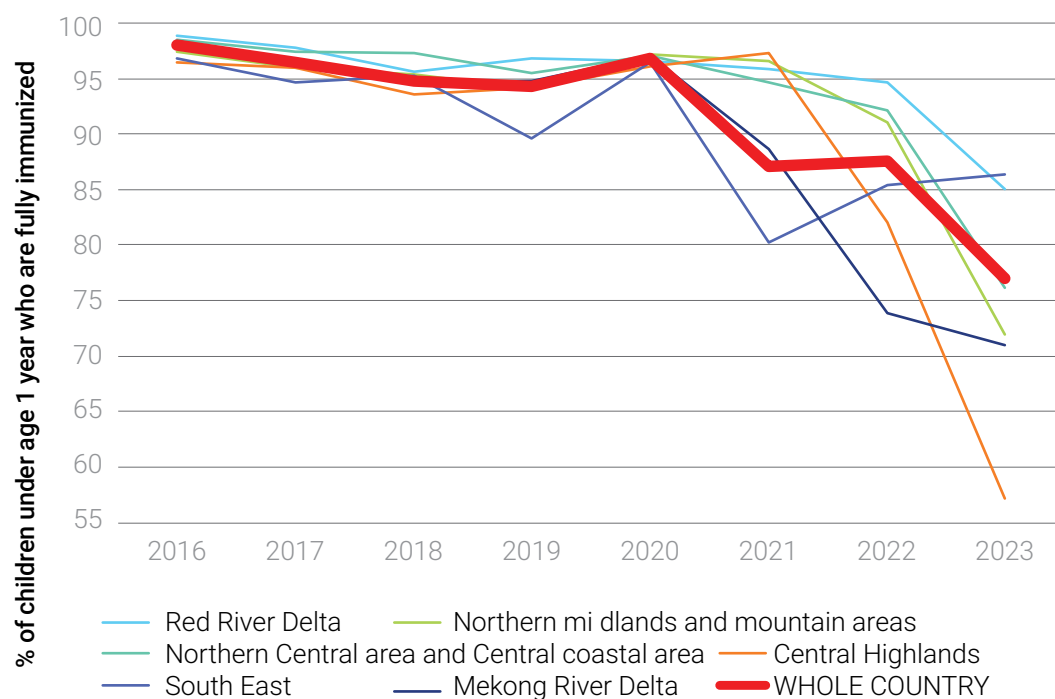
202 General Statistics Office of Viet Nam (GSO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) 2021.

203 Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI), German Development Agency (GIZ), and United Nations (UN) Viet Nam 2023.

204 National Institute of Epidemiology 2023.

205 Viet Nam News 2024.

Figure 21 Percentage of children under age 1 year who are fully immunised, by province and nationally, between 2016 and 2023



Source: GSO (2024)

Expanding equitable healthcare access and enhancing immunisation efforts can address health disparities, particularly for ethnic minorities and rural communities. Promoting balanced diets and encouraging physical activity offer ways to counter rising obesity rates, while nutrition programs targeting both under- and over-nutrition can bridge gaps in dietary diversity. Viet Nam has already developed contextually adapted food-based dietary guidelines based on the situation of nutrition and availability of food, in alignment with ASEAN minimum standards for school food standards that contribute to children having healthy diets.²⁰⁶ Increased investment in clean energy and sanitation infrastructure could mitigate disease prevalence and improve child health outcomes. Finally, Viet Nam’s ongoing health insurance expansion offers a platform to further support marginalized groups, moving closer to universal health coverage and meeting Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Health and nutrition financing

Viet Nam’s healthcare system has made substantial progress towards universal health coverage (UHC), with the percentage of the population covered by health insurance increasing from 74.2% in 2015 to 93.3% in 2023, amounting to an increase of 69 million to 94 million insured persons.²⁰⁷ SDGCW 2020-21 data, providing disaggregation of health insurance coverage for children, suggest near universal health insurance coverage for children aged 5-9 years (98.5%), and 10-14 years (96.8%), with a slightly lower rate for children aged 15-17 years (90.9%).²⁰⁸ This

²⁰⁶ ASEAN Secretariat 2024.

²⁰⁷ General Statistical Office 2024.

²⁰⁸ General Statistics Office of Viet Nam (GSO) and United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) 2021.

near-universal coverage of children also extends across urban and rural areas, and includes children with disabilities, as well as children living in households across all wealth quintiles. Gaps in health insurance coverage of children aged 5-17 years remain at the regional level, with the lowest rate being 91.2% in the Mekong River Delta region, and among children not attending school, including ECE, (58.6% compared to 98.7% of those attending). Similarly, children living in ethnic minority and poor households are slightly less likely to be covered (89-91% among children in ethnic minority households, compared to 98% of Kinh and Hoa households).²⁰⁹

However, gaps remain in health financing, particularly for vulnerable populations such as informal workers, ethnic minorities, and low-income households.²¹⁰ High out-of-pocket (OOP) health expenditures continue to burden households, exacerbating inequality and financial insecurity. In 2021, OOP health expenditures in Viet Nam amounted to 40% of total current health expenditures, which is above the 34% ASEAN average, and suggests a persistent financial burden, especially on disadvantaged families.²¹¹

The average healthcare expenditure per person having treatment over the 12 months preceding the survey has steadily increased between 2010 and 2022, from VND 1,358.4 to 2,480.2 thousand by 2022.²¹² This near doubling of average healthcare expenditures is visible across income quintile groups, and also among children. Especially among children aged 0-4 years, expenditures increased from VND 586.1 thousand in 2010, to VND 1,181.2 thousand in 2022, with inpatient treatment expenditures rising nearly 7-fold, from VND 1,358.2 to 9,515.8 thousand.²¹³ These rising costs exacerbate inequalities in access, particularly for households without financial protection mechanisms.

Similarly, monthly healthcare expenditures per capita also doubled between 2010 and 2022, from VND 61.8 thousand to VND 122.3 thousand. Of these expenditures, 35.3% made up expenditures on medicines (up from 11.2% in 2010), while 24.3% constituted payment of voluntary health insurance in 2022 (up from 3.5% in 2010). In 2022, consumption expenditure for health care made up around 5% of average total consumption expenditure.²¹⁴

Encouragingly, progress has also been achieved in lowering the share of households with more than 10% of medical expenditures as a share of total expenditure, nearly halving from 14.3% in 2010 to 8.6% in 2022. Among these households in 2022, a higher share lived in rural (15.2%) compared to urban (12.2%) areas, in Red River Delta region (11.7%, compared to 5-9% in other regions), and in the poorest wealth quintile (10.7%), compared to the richest (7%).

At the national level, total revenue from health insurance more than doubled from 59.67 trillion VND in 2015 to 126.50 trillion VND in 2023.²¹⁵ However, expenditures have also increased over this period, rising from 49.04 trillion VND in 2015 to 125.43 trillion VND in 2023.²¹⁶ This rapid increase in spending signals growing financial pressure on the system, requiring strengthened budget allocations and better risk pooling mechanisms. While health care spending made up 5.6-5.8% of total expenditures in 2016 and 2017, no more recent official figures exist to assess the structure of healthcare spending as a share of GDP, and whether this has kept pace with

209 Ibid.

210 UNICEF 2021a.

211 World Bank Group 2024b.

212 General Statistics Office (GSO) 2023.

213 Ibid.

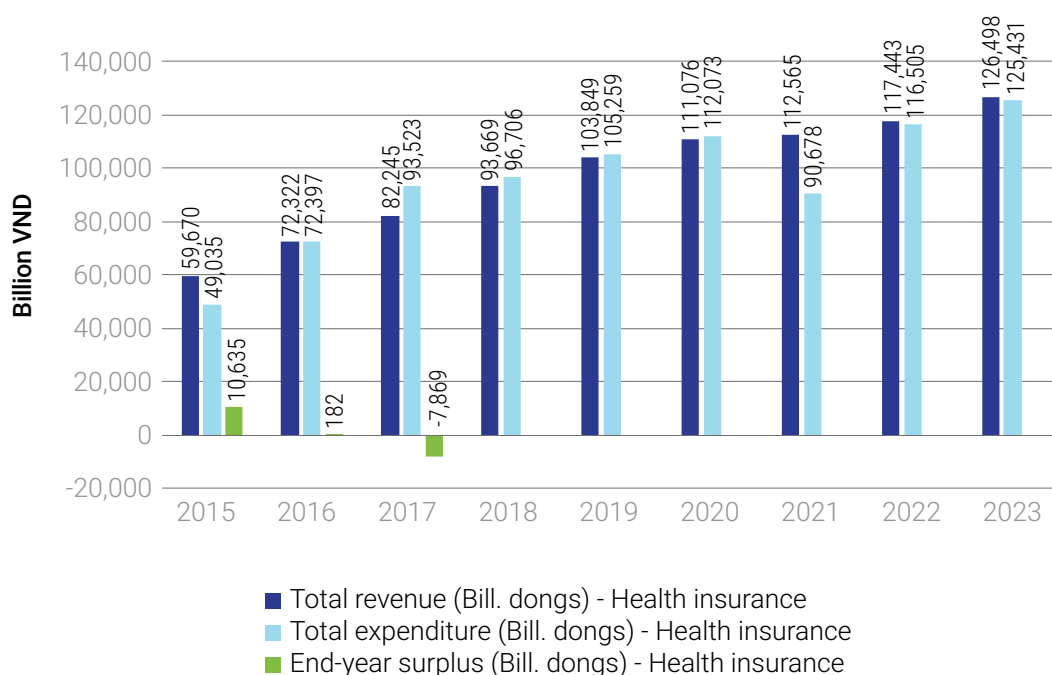
214 Ibid.

215 General Statistical Office 2024.

216 Ibid.

rising healthcare costs.²¹⁷ More recent figures from UNICEF suggest government spending on health has continued to account for 5-6% of total government expenditures between 2018 and 2020.²¹⁸ The same report suggests capital investment in public health spending increased over this period, from 19.9% to 32%, while recurrent expenditures decreased from 80.1% to 67.1%. Over the same period, spending on medical check-ups and treatments increased significantly from 38.2% in 2018 to 45.4% in 2020, while investments in preventive medicine saw a decline, dropping from 15.4% in 2018 to 12.2% in 2020, raising concerns about long-term health outcomes and cost-effectiveness. These trends suggests there is a need to increase health and nutrition financing, prioritising preventive medicine, maternal and child healthcare, and ensuring equitable access and quality for local and district level health facilities.

Figure 22 Health insurance revenue, expenditure, and end-of-year surplus between 2015-2023



Source: GSO (2024)

Note: No data available for end-year surplus between 2018-2023.

Ongoing administrative reforms, including the consolidation of provinces and the removal of district-level governance, is expected to significantly reshape the institutional landscape for health service administration and delivery.²¹⁹ These changes could help to evolve health governance structures and streamline budgeting and oversight, but they may also create transitional gaps, especially in the management and financing of primary healthcare services.

217 Ibid.

218 UNICEF 2021a.

219 Lao Dong 2025; THƯ VIỆN PHÁP LUẬT 2025a; THƯ VIỆN PHÁP LUẬT 2025b.

5.3 Policy Recommendations

There is strong evidence that conditions during early childhood – especially child nutrition have a substantial impact on a wide range of economic and social indicators later in life, including schooling, learning, employment, and productivity. Ultimately this reality also has implications for economic growth.²²⁰ Global evidence indicates that managing a disease landscape dominated by non-communicable diseases demands more sophisticated case management and effective care coordination, making an integrated primary care system essential.²²¹

2025-2030

- **Expand and sustain public financing for maternal and child health service coverage, especially among disadvantaged groups (rural, ethnic minorities, and poor regions),** to ensure access to prenatal, postnatal, and delivery care is equitable and inclusive. The WHO recommends at least 5-6% of health spending as a share of GDP to achieve universal coverage and strong health systems. With Viet Nam's ambition to transition to a high-income country, especially with the rise of non-communicable diseases, and ageing population, the 2016-level of health expenditures (5.6% as a share of GDP)²²² may need to be increased. In 2021, health spending as a share of GDP was 13.1% in HICs, more than double than the 5.3-5.4% in low and middle-income countries, or upper-middle income countries (5.8%).²²³ This should be accompanied by a policy shift to reduce reliance on out-of-pocket (OOP) payments, which currently account for half of total health expenditures. A shift in spending composition is necessary to alleviate financial burdens on households and improve equity in access to healthcare.²²⁴ It is especially critical to expand budget allocations for preventive medicine, maternal and child healthcare, and early nutrition programs, to reduce future healthcare costs and address rising non-communicable diseases.
- **Strengthen universal health coverage and primary care.** Strengthen Viet Nam's health insurance system to ensure that all families can access essential health services without financial strain, especially among the unemployed, informal sector workers, and groups facing additional barriers to healthcare access (rural, poor, ethnic minority communities). Develop and strengthen a high-quality, primary-care-focused system that prioritizes preventive and paediatric care, particularly in underserved rural and marginalised communities. Focusing on preventive and paediatric care through a primary healthcare system could help to improve early intervention capabilities, maternal and child health outcomes, and reduce maternal and childhood illness and mortality.²²⁵ Preventive care through a primary system can provide significant returns on investment and reduce long-term healthcare costs, by reducing the social and economic costs of poor health and nutrition outcomes among children.
- **Invest in training paediatric healthcare providers and community health workers to identify and address child-specific health issues,** including nutrition, mental health, and developmental concerns.
- **Ensure all healthcare facilities are equipped to provide accessible and specialised services for children with physical, cognitive, and developmental disabilities. First 1,000 Days Campaign.** Develop a national campaign to educate mothers, families, and healthcare

220 World Bank and Ministry of Planning and Investment of Vietnam 2016.

221 Ibid.

222 General Statistical Office 2024.

223 World Bank 2022a.

224 {Citation}

225 World Bank and Ministry of Planning and Investment of Vietnam 2016.

providers on the importance of holistic parenting practices, including optimal infant and young child health and feeding practices, alongside other aspects of early childhood care and parenting during the first 1,000 days of life, to promote children's physical, cognitive and emotional development. The campaign should include:²²⁶

- Accessible, context-specific materials on exclusive breastfeeding and timely introduction of complementary foods, and other parenting topics such as caregiving, immunisation, preventive care, adult-child interaction, and hygiene practices.
- Affordable recipe cards and meal plans for pregnant women and infants, detailing appropriate meal composition, timing, and using locally sourced, culturally relevant ingredients.
- Provide guidelines on safe cooking and hygiene practices, environmental health, including the use of clean cooking fuels and improved water sources and sanitation facilities.
- Utilise public health centres and private clinics for information dissemination to mothers, grandmothers, and fathers, enhancing community support for breastfeeding and proper nutrition. Train community health workers to provide tailored outreach and guidance services to families, adapted to the cultural context of the population, with sensitivity to poor households, households in ethnic minority regions, and rural households.
- Partnerships with local vendors, community groups, and caregivers to promote easy-to-prepare, nutritious, and affordable complementary feeding options.
- **Strengthen cross-sectoral collaboration to improve child malnutrition rates.** This should include enhanced communication and coordinated action between ministries responsible for health, nutrition, agriculture, education, and social protection to effectively enact both nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive policies and programmes that improve child development outcomes. These might be expanded by:
 - Scale up community-based nutrition programmes targeting vulnerable groups, focusing on promoting exclusive breastfeeding, dietary diversity, and micronutrient supplementation to combat persistent micronutrient deficiencies in mothers and infants.
 - Targeted programmes that address both nutrition-specific (e.g., improving maternal and child health services, dietary supplementation) and nutrition-sensitive interventions (e.g., agricultural practices, clean water, social safety nets).
 - Expand school meal programs to include a more diverse range of nutrients, aiming to address both undernutrition and emerging issues of obesity. Integrate obesity prevention into school curricula to promote healthy eating habits, and organise awareness campaigns to promote healthy diets and physical activity to address rising obesity and overweight rates among school-aged children.
- **Integrate nutrition and agricultural programs to diversify local food production** and support smallholder farmers in reducing reliance on staple crops. This approach will increase dietary diversity and improve food security, especially in regions with high levels of malnutrition.²²⁷

²²⁶ UNICEF Viet Nam 2023.

²²⁷ Ibid.

- **Strengthen vaccine procurement systems to prevent delays and ensure full immunisation for children, prioritising marginalised regions. Scale up targeted immunisation programs to reach children in ethnic minority groups** and rural areas, where vaccination coverage remains low. By expanding equitable access to vaccinations, Viet Nam can significantly reduce preventable diseases and improve health outcomes for vulnerable populations. Following COVID-19-related disruptions, introducing awareness campaigns to rebuild trust in vaccination may be necessary.
- **Develop and enforce regulations, and expand investments, to reduce air pollution levels through reduced carbon emissions and promotion of clean energy technologies.** This should be prioritised in highly urbanised and industrialised regions, such as Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh City.

Ensure that commune-level health facilities are adequately financed, staffed, and resourced throughout the consolidation of provinces and removal of district-level governance, considering its implications for changes to health governance structures and budgeting. This will be important to prevent disruptions in access to care during this transition. For children and women in underserved regions, maintaining continuity in essential services such as immunisations, antenatal care, and nutrition support should remain a top priority during and after the administrative transition.

2031 – 2045

- **Strengthening primary care remains a critical priority** for Viet Nam's health system over the next 20 years. A robust primary care system, centred on a continuous doctor-patient relationship, is essential for effectively managing the growing burden of non-communicable diseases. This requires a sustained programme of reforms, including developing human resources, improving provider payment mechanisms, implementing gatekeeping practices, coordinating care across health system levels, and ensuring quality assurance. Such reforms will demand long-term commitment and investment to establish an integrated, efficient, and modern healthcare system.²²⁸
- **Expand universal access to healthcare services to all children**, ensuring no financial barriers for any level of healthcare service, including preventive and therapeutic services, regardless of location, socio-economic status, or ethnic background. This may be accompanied by expanded telehealth or mobile health units to provide outreach and care services in currently underserved areas, to ensure inclusive coverage. Mental health services should be integrated into universal health coverage, providing access to counselling, treatment, and crisis intervention services for children and adolescents, as well as their caregivers.
- **Strengthening public health and nutrition financing to reduce out-of-pocket (OOP) expenditures**, ensuring universal access to essential healthcare and nutrition services. As part of this, develop a sustainable health and nutrition financing framework that responds to the needs of a changing demographic landscape, including an aging population and shifting disease burdens, including that of persistent malnutrition.
- **Establish resilient healthcare systems and infrastructure in response to growing incidence of climate-related emergencies**, including floods and heatwaves, which disproportionately impact children and adolescents. Strengthen surveillance and prevention of diseases that are exacerbated by climate change, such as dengue fever and malaria.
- **Establish paediatric clinics providing non-communicable diseases services**, integrated within primary healthcare systems, to manage rising non-communicable diseases such as obesity, diabetes, and asthma. Implement risk-factor screening for non-communicable

²²⁸ World Bank and Ministry of Planning and Investment of Vietnam 2016.

diseases in health centres and schools, to enable early detection and intervention.

- **Develop and implement national, school-based programmes which promote healthy lifestyles**, including physical activity, healthy diets, and mental health. Regulate the availability and marketing of unhealthy foods to children, enforcing strict standards for advertising and nutrition labelling, to reduce the consumption of unhealthy, processed foods among children.
- **Expand mental health services for children, especially in health centres and schools.** All schools should have access to mental health counsellors to help children address mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and trauma, and which provide appropriate referral services to mental health clinics. Develop telehealth infrastructure to ensure service continuity during emergencies which may exacerbate mental health issues among children, adolescents and their caregivers.
- **Strengthen and enforce laws and regulations to prevent child accidents and injuries**, such as improved road safety measures, and drowning prevention interventions in schools, communities, and health centres.

6. Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH)

6.1 Why Invest in WASH for Children?

Investing in Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) is crucial for boosting comprehensive child development and achieving Viet Nam's 2045 vision for prosperity and equity. Access to safe drinking water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) is a basic human right enshrined in the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) that is fundamental to good health and overall well-being. Adequate services and facilities and handwashing practices can reduce the transmission of diseases such as cholera, diarrhoea, typhoid and polio. In Viet Nam, water pollution remains a significant challenge, with approximately 9,000 deaths annually attributed to contaminated water. Furthermore, around 20,000 people are diagnosed with cancer each year due to exposure to polluted water sources.²²⁹ These figures highlight the urgent need to improve water quality and accessibility in the country.

Children are disproportionately affected by the health impacts of unsafe and inadequate WASH facilities and practices. Stunting can result from increased exposure to illness and disease due to poor WASH conditions, in addition to other factors such as poor nutrition. Malnutrition not only affects physical growth but also impairs cognitive development, perpetuating cycles of poverty and limiting future human capital. By reducing child mortality and illness, improved WASH conditions allow children to attend school regularly, contribute to better learning outcomes, and ultimately promotes human capital development. Global evidence consistently demonstrates that nutrition-sensitive investments in WASH drive reduce infant and child disease and mortality, stunting, and drive economic growth through improved educational outcomes and labour productivity.²³⁰ World Bank estimates suggest that water quality degradation could reduce Viet Nam's GDP by as much as 4.3% annually.²³¹ The interlinkages between WASH, nutrition, and education highlight its critical importance in improving child health and developmental outcomes, breaking the cycle of poverty, enhancing human capital, and building a healthier and more productive future workforce for Viet Nam.

6.2 Trends, Challenges, and Opportunities

Significant progress in access and service delivery with extant gaps

From 2018 to 2022, Viet Nam made notable progress in access to adequate water and sanitation facilities. Access to drinking water through a centralized water supply system increased from 86.7% to 94.2% in the period mentioned. Furthermore, 95.7% of households used improved water sources in 2018 compared to 98.3% in 2022. Moreover, the gap between urban and rural areas is narrowing. The proportion of households with hygienic toilets rose from 90.3% in 2018 to 96.2% in 2022. Active industrial parks and export processing zones with centralized wastewater treatment systems invested in the sustainability of their operations, with the share of companies meeting the environmental standards rising from 80.1% to 91.0%.²³²

²²⁹ Kinh Te Moi Truong 2023.

²³⁰ Sinha et al. 2018; World Health Organization and United Nations Children's Fund 2019; Humphrey 2009.

²³¹ (WHO, 2016)

²³² Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI), German Development Agency (GIZ), and United Nations (UN) Viet Nam 2023.

According to the Sustainable Development Goals indicators on Children and Women Survey 2020-2021 (SDGCW), household members have near-universal access to improved drinking water sources²³³ within reachable distance, use basic drinking water services²³⁴, and have access to a handwashing facility with water and soap. Approximately eight in ten of the population use an appropriate water treatment method. 95.4% of girls aged 15-19 years use appropriate menstrual hygiene materials with a private place to wash and change while at home. Still, 3% of households in Viet Nam lacked access to drinking water due to issues like seasonal water shortages (71.6%)^{235,236}, while 92.1% of the population had improved sanitation, though open defecation (2.7% equivalent to 2.7 million people) and shared toilet facilities (3%) remain challenges.

Further, despite access to improved facilities, quality of water and safe management of drinking water services remains an issue. In 2020-2021, four out of ten household members had at least a moderate *Escherichia coli* (*E. coli*)²³⁷ contamination in their drinking water, with 11.9% exposed to a very high risk of >100 per 100 mL. The number of *E. coli* bacteria reflects the risk of faecal contamination. Contamination levels were much higher when household members used unimproved drinking water sources. Furthermore, 0.6% of household members used drinking water sources with arsenic contamination.²³⁸ Improper water storage, handling of bottles and refilling equipment can lead to high potential for contamination at the point of distribution.²³⁹

Significant challenges remain for the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 6 on Clean Water and Sanitation.²⁴⁰ In line with SDG 6.1.1, 57.9% of Vietnamese population use safely managed water and 43.9% use safely managed sanitation facilities (SDG 6.2.1) based on the 2020-2021 SDGCW. The 2030 national target for safely managed water facilities is 95%, requiring an annual growth rate of 5.1%. Assuming the same target rate for safely managed sanitation facilities, an annual growth rate of 8.0% is required.

Sanitation challenges among rural, remote, and marginalised communities

Access to improved drinking water sources is near-universal among households in both urban and rural areas in Viet Nam, with upwards of upwards of 97% of households have a main drinking water source that is considered improved. Slight variations occur at the regional level, where the Northern Midlands and Mountainous Area have the lowest access to improved drinking water (93%). Similar disparities are visible among ethnic minority households and the poorest households.

Larger discrepancies exist for access to improved sanitation facilities, which is near-universal among urban households (97.8%), compared to 89.1% in rural households. These gaps widen at the regional level, with the lowest access being in the Mekong River Delta region at 78.7%, followed by the Central Highlands region at 82.7%.²⁴¹ Moreover, when disaggregated by piped drinking water sources and other sources, coverage of piped water sources is relatively low in

233 Improved drinking water sources include piped water (into dwelling, compound, yard or plot, to neighbour, public tap/standpipe), tube, well/borehole, protected dug well, protected spring, rainwater collection, and packaged or delivered water.

234 Basic drinking water sources are defined as drinking water from an improved source, provided collection time is not more than 30 minutes for fetching water and returning.

235 UNICEF Viet Nam 2023.

236 General Statistics Office of Viet Nam (GSO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) 2021.

237 Moderate *E. coli* contamination: 1-10 *E. coli* per 100 mL.

238 General Statistics Office of Viet Nam (GSO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) 2021.

239 UNICEF Viet Nam 2023.

240 UNICEF Viet Nam 2022c.

241 UNICEF Viet Nam 2023.

rural areas (19.5% piped into dwelling) compared to urban areas (57.1% piped into dwelling). These differences are also stark at the regional level, and across wealth quintiles. Compared to high coverage in the Red River Delta (upwards of 50%), coverage of piped drinking water sources is significantly lower in Northern Midlands and Mountainous Area (16.5%), Central Highlands (12.2%), and Mekong River Delta (22.0%). Coverage of piped water is under 10% among households in the poorest quintile, compared to 72.3% among households in the richest wealth quintile.²⁴²

Adequate handwashing facilities with access to soap and water are critical for proper hygiene and prevention of communicable diseases. Access to handwashing facilities with access to soap and water is near universal among urban households (96.4%), compared to 87.8% among rural households. Adequate hand washing facilities are most available in the South East (95%) but limited in the Central Highlands (78.1%).

Table 1 presents the percentage of household members with access to improved water, sanitation and hygiene facilities according to area of residence, region, ethnicity of the household head and wealth index quintile.

Table 1: Access to improved drinking water sources (2020-2021)

		WATER	SANITATION	HYGIENE
		Access to improved drinking water sources	Access to improved sanitation facilities	Access to handwashing facility with water and soap
National	<i>National</i>	98.1	92.1	90.7
Area of residence	<i>Urban</i>	99.6	97.8	96.4
	<i>Rural</i>	97.2	89.1	87.8
Region	<i>Red River Delta</i>	99.6	98.9	92.2
	<i>Ha Noi</i>	99.4	98.7	97.4
	<i>Northern Midlands and Mountainous Area</i>	93.9	87.7	84.9
	<i>North Central and Central Coastal Area</i>	97.5	95.1	92.1
	<i>Central Highlands</i>	96.8	82.7	78.1
	<i>South East</i>	99.4	98.3	95.0
	<i>Ho Chi Minh City</i>	99.6	98.4	93.8
Ethnicity of Household head	<i>Kinh and Hoa</i>	99.0	94.6	93.4
	<i>Tay, Thai, Muong, Nung</i>	90.9	89.4	82.1
	<i>Khmer</i>	100.0	73.1	85.7
	<i>Mong</i>	84.1	46.4	50.3
	<i>Other/missing</i>	94.0	69.6	67.9

242 Ibid.

		WATER	SANITATION	HYGIENE
		Access to improved drinking water sources	Access to improved sanitation facilities	Access to handwashing facility with water and soap
Wealth index quintile	<i>Poorest</i>	93.0	69.6	72.4
	<i>Second</i>	98.5	93.2	89.7
	<i>Middle</i>	99.1	98.6	94.7
	<i>Fourth</i>	99.8	99.2	97.8
	<i>Richest</i>	99.9	100.0	99.0

Source: SDGCW Survey 2020-2021

Access to WASH facilities in Viet Nam varies significantly by ethnicity, wealth, and gender. Across all indicators, members living with a household head of Mong ethnicity faced the greatest challenges in access to water, sanitation, and handwashing (84.1%, 46.4% and 50.3% respectively). Individuals belonging to the poorest wealth quintile had the least access to WASH facilities compared to household members belonging to the highest wealth quintiles, with only 67.9% of the population belonging to the poorest households having access to a handwashing facility with water and soap, compared to near-universal access among the richest. Women and girls are more likely to bear the responsibility for carrying water, often for long distances (34.2% of female household members aged 15 years and older compared to 23.6% of males).²⁴³

Although rural areas lead in safely managing faeces disposal (92.0% vs. 82.2%) adequate wastewater management remains limited. In urban areas only 15% of wastewater is collected and treated.²⁴⁴ In addition, there is a lack of attention to the management and disposal of child faeces. In 2020, 10.7 million people (10.15 million in rural areas and 550,000 in urban areas) still practiced open defecation, accounting for up to around 2.7% of the national population as per 2020-21 survey data.²⁴⁵ Open defecation rates are particularly high in the Northern Midlands and Mountainous areas (9.3%) and the Central Highlands (8.0%), where access to sanitation infrastructure is limited, and is also commonly practiced among field workers who often travel long distances from home to work.²⁴⁶ Addressing these challenges requires targeted interventions to expand sanitation infrastructure in underserved regions and provide portable or field-accessible solutions for mobile workers, ensuring equitable progress toward improved hygiene and health conditions which impact child health and nutrition outcomes and worker productivity.

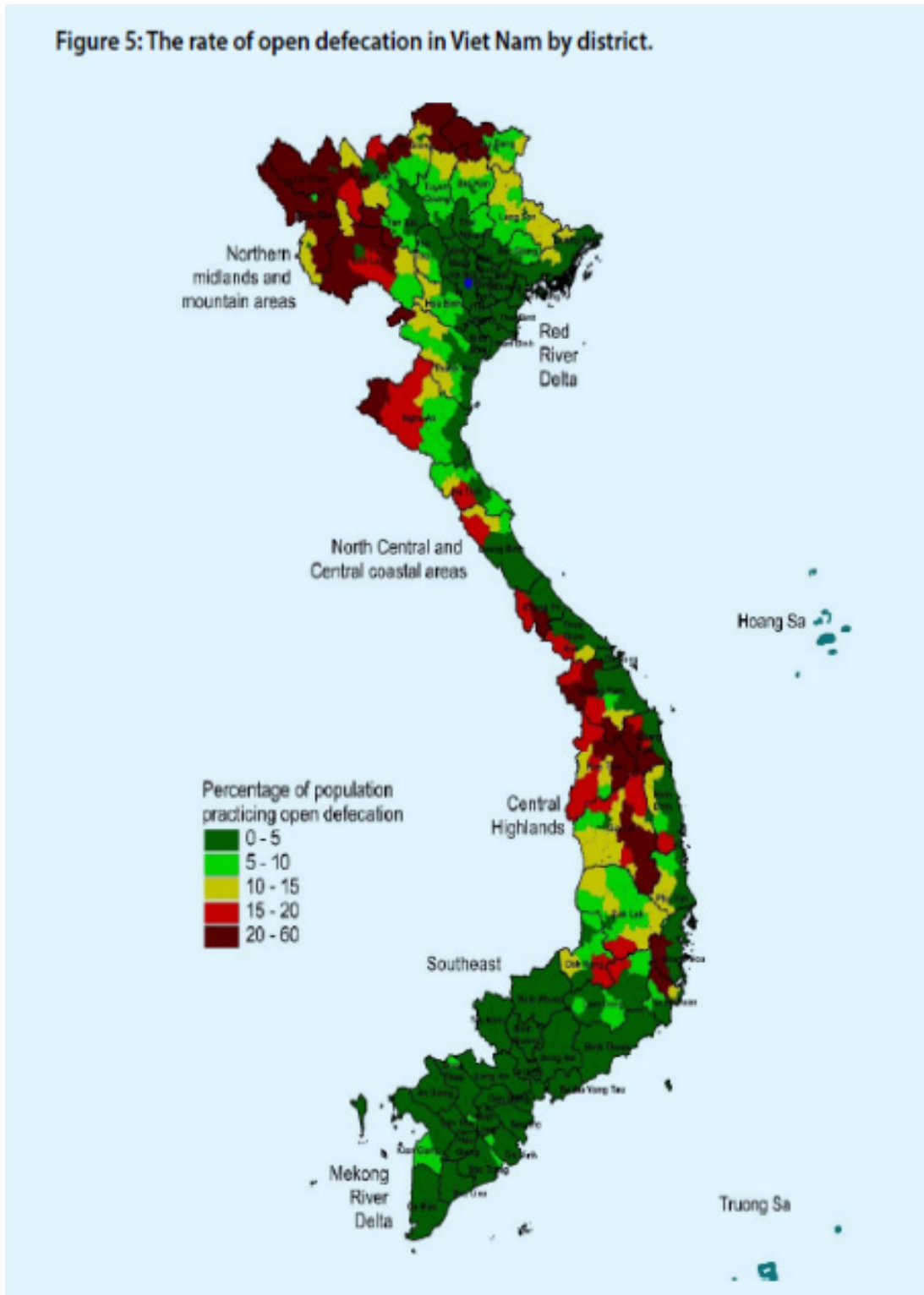
243 General Statistics Office of Viet Nam (GSO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) 2021.

244 Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI), German Development Agency (GIZ), and United Nations (UN) Viet Nam 2023.

245 UNICEF Viet Nam 2020; General Statistics Office of Viet Nam (GSO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) 2021.

246 UNICEF Viet Nam 2024b; General Statistics Office of Viet Nam (GSO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) 2021.

Figure 23. Open defecation rate in Viet Nam by district



Source: ²⁴⁷

247 UNICEF Viet Nam 2024b.

Affordability of water for ethnic minorities in rural communities may be a significant factor in these disparities. Research on rural water supply, sanitation and hygiene for hard to-reach populations in Soc Trang, Gia Lai, and Dien Bien shows that the Bahnar, Jrai and Hmong ethnic minorities spent the least amount of money on water (0-3% of the median income), while they mainly depended on community-managed piped water, wells or streams for their domestic and drinking water.²⁴⁸ This suggests the need for more targeted, culturally-sensitive policy interventions that prioritize these marginalized groups, to provide affordable and reliable access to safe water while addressing their unique socio-economic context and challenges.

The low levels of knowledge and skills around menstrual hygiene management (MHM) among ethnic minorities in Viet Nam reflect broader disparities in health education and access to WASH services. These challenges are compounded by cultural taboos that restrict open discussion and social support for menstruating individuals, further marginalizing women and girls in these communities. Additionally, menstrual hygiene management materials are limited in variety and of low quality.²⁴⁹ Integrating MHM education into community health programs and ensuring access to affordable, high-quality menstrual products can significantly enhance the dignity, health, and participation of women and girls in these underserved regions, contributing to broader goals of gender equity and socio-economic development.

Shifting public investments in WASH

Expenditure on WASH-related activities in Viet Nam has shown a notable shift in priorities over recent years, highlighting both progress and challenges. Expenditure on basic WASH-related activities in Viet Nam in GDP decreased from 1% in 2016 to 0.6% in 2018 (Figure 24), while total estimated capital investment required to meet the government's WASH targets by 2030 alone was around VND 204.3 billion (or USD 8.8 billion), representing around 3% of Viet Nam's 2020 GDP.²⁵⁰ These investments focus primarily on basic service expansion, expanding urban wastewater treatment, urban and rural water supply, and improving sanitation facilities in schools and households. However, achieving the SDG 6 target of safely managed water and sanitation – which ensures 100% of the population has access to continuous water services on premises, with quality monitored to WHO standards, and safe wastewater and faecal sludge treatment – requires significantly greater investment. According to recent conservative estimates, Viet Nam would need an estimated USD 34.9 billion in total (13% of 2020 GDP), including USD 18.6 billion for water services and USD 13.5 billion for sanitation services, with a substantial portion allocated to extending services to underserved populations and maintaining capital infrastructure for those already serviced.²⁵¹ Aligning these financial requirements with Viet Nam's Medium-Term Investment Plan (MTIP) and national policy roadmap will be essential to balancing sectoral funding priorities and ensuring a phased approach to meeting both national and global targets.

Despite the growing investment needs, progress has been observed in some targeted areas. Spending on WASH in mountainous provinces and poor areas increased significantly, from 7.0% and 12.0% in 2016 to 24.0% and 47.0% in 2018, respectively. The majority of the budget (59.1%) was spent on urban wastewater treatment and sewage systems. Spending remained limited with regards to supportive services (training and guidelines (4.1%), basic household-level sanitation (6.1%), basic water supply (7.7%), clean water supply (7.8%) and public hygiene services (mainly at government offices) (15.1%). Expenditure on hygiene promotion and handwashing was only 0.01 and 0.02% respectively. The state budget was the main source of expenditure, coming from government revenues, government repayable funds (loans and bonds), and government non-repayable funds (grants and Official Development Assistance (ODA). Private sector

248 UNICEF Viet Nam 2023.

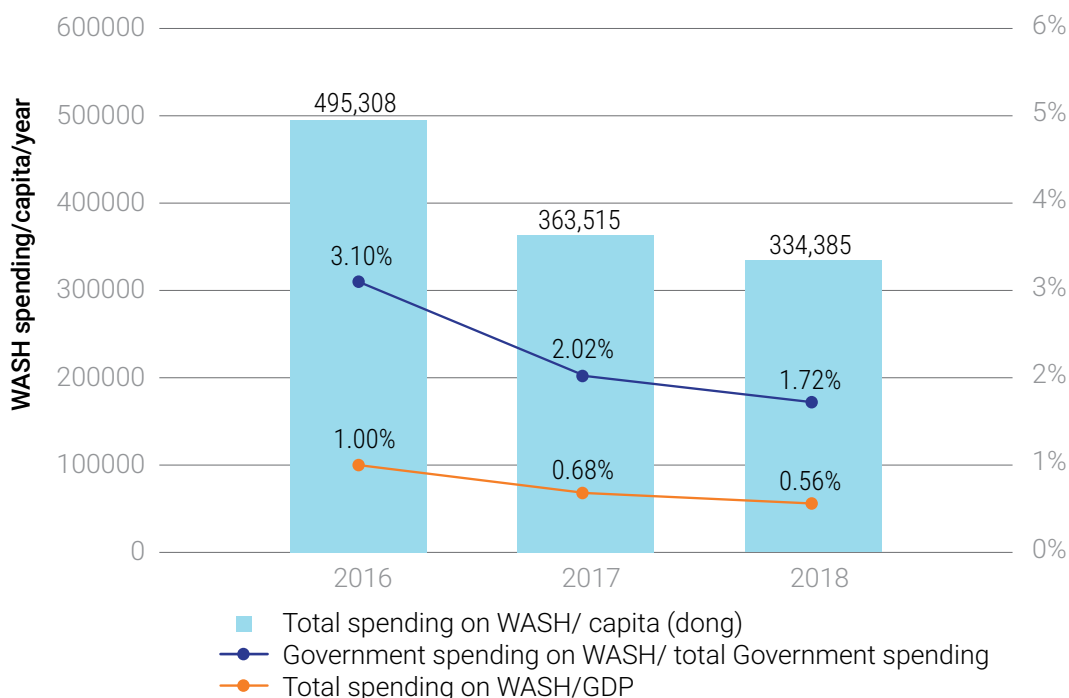
249 Ibid.

250 UNICEF 2022b.

251 Ibid.

investments were encouraged, especially in areas of high population density.²⁵² These figures reaffirm the need for more balanced WASH investments, with greater emphasis on community-level sanitation, clean water access, and hygiene promotion to achieve improvements in health and well-being across the country.

Figure 24. WASH government spending and expenditure/capita (VND)



Source: UNICEF (2019) *Rapid Review of Financing for WASH sectors in Viet Nam*

Impact of climate change

As a result of climate shocks and resulting stresses on the WASH sector, the population may experience lower levels of service in terms of quality, quantity and reliability. In particular, ethnic and minority communities living in remote rural areas, who are already more vulnerable, are at greater risk of damage to WASH infrastructure in the event of storms, cyclones, and landslides, as they face challenges related to functioning service delivery and a lack of information. In addition, the likelihood of experiencing serious health risks increases, with limited possibilities to practice personal hygiene. For example, during droughts or floodings, river flows are more exposed to a higher concentration of contaminants and pollutants. In coastal areas, on the other hand, the storage capacity of the soil and groundwater quality deteriorate due to saltwater intrusion.²⁵³

The recent Typhoon Yagi also demonstrates the devastating impacts of these challenges – an estimated 321,946 household sanitation systems were damaged and 98,144 households with self-water supply were affected. Provinces such as Quang Ninh and Hai Phong faced the most severe damage, largely due to landslides, flooding, and infrastructure weaknesses. Damage to

²⁵² UNICEF Viet Nam 2020.

²⁵³ UNICEF Viet Nam 2024b.

piped water systems and sanitation facilities not only disrupted access to clean water but also increased exposure to waterborne diseases, particularly among the 91,000 people left without access to safe water. Consistent with cross-sectoral vulnerabilities, marginalised groups, including women, children, persons with disabilities, ethnic minorities, and older persons faced heightened risks and humanitarian impacts during this disaster. The overall WASH sector recovery needs, as result of loss and damages, were estimated to amount to 1,526.00 billion VND, equivalent to around USD 62.54 million, with recommendations towards resilient repair and restoration of water systems, providing loans to operators for repairs, and providing cash assistance to affected households.²⁵⁴

Policy Recommendations:

2025-2030

- **Prioritise basic service expansion to meet government WASH targets**, focusing on increasing water and sanitation coverage in rural and underserved areas.
 - **Increase investment in water, sanitation, and hygiene infrastructures, including operation and maintenance (O&M)** in remote and mountainous areas. This should include mobilisation and allocation of medium-term public investment resources for the 2026-2030 period (clearly distinguishing the State-invested and private-invested sectors) to ensure reduction of the differences and close gaps in key WASH indicators among the regions. Provide inclusive options for people with disabilities or temporary mobility issues, learning from the experience of the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) Campaign in India.²⁵⁵
 - **Increase investments in both urban and rural water infrastructure to increase access to safely managed water services.** This includes upgrading water treatment facilities, extending piped water networks to underserved areas, and ensuring equitable access for low-income and marginalised communities.
 - **Expand capital investment in urban and rural piped water networks and wastewater treatment facilities**, aligning with the Medium-Term Investment Plan (MTIP).
 - **Improve or establish monitoring systems** to build a foundation for continuous monitoring of progress in the WASH sector toward achieving SDG6.
 - **Prioritise the improvement of WASH facilities in public institutions**, especially schools and health centres. This includes ensuring access to safely managed water, functional sanitation systems, and adequate handwashing stations with soap. Enforce national guidelines for WASH infrastructure in schools and health centres to meet global standards, including specifications for accessibility, gender-sensitive facilities, and provisions for people with disabilities.

²⁵⁴ UNDP 2024.

²⁵⁵ The Government of India launched the pro-sanitation programme “Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM)” in 2014, which led an increase in rural sanitation from 38.7% in 2014 to 99.1% in 2019. Moreover, behavioural change was achieved through various strategic partnerships with ministries, development partners, media and other prominent influencers. As more than 95 million toilets were built across rural and urban India Since the launch of this mission, the programme sparked a national movement of the people, by the people and for the people, making SBM the world’s largest toilet-building initiative. During the course of the programme, sanitation was identified as a primary state subject given that SBM was managed and led by Prime Minister Modi. As cumulative budget of \$20 billion was spent between 2014 and 2019. UNICEF Viet Nam 2020.s

- **Improve inter-sectoral, inter-ministerial, regional, and river basin planning and coordination for decision-making in investment, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.** A formalised coordination mechanism, aligned with ongoing institutional reforms, should be used to enhance investments alignment, policy coherence, and accountability in the sector.
 - Pilot bundling of WASH investments and urban-rural/rural-rural aggregation models to achieve economies of scale, unlock private sector participation (PSP), and support financial sustainability in infrastructure development.
- **Integrate WASH planning with broader infrastructure and climate resilience strategies,** using regional coordination frameworks to improve water resource management and service delivery. Integrate climate adaptation strategies into water and sanitation policies. Invest in sustainable climate-smart WASH technologies, renewable energy, and energy efficiency applications and strengthen disaster preparedness in rural areas.
- **Promote awareness and community engagement campaigns** on the importance of using improved water and sanitation and adequate handwashing practices in communities, schools, and health centres to ensure equitable access. Advocate for accurate, contextualized access to information related to menstruation, including pain management, menstrual materials, and sexual and reproductive health, in particular in remote areas.
- **Strengthen wastewater management and circular economy** in urban and rural areas, particularly following the safely managed sanitation chain, which encompasses a comprehensive system to ensure the safe containment, transport, treatment, and disposal or reuse of human waste. In addition, special attention should be paid to ending open defecation and safe disposal of child faeces.
- **Encourage the adoption of innovative circular economy approaches, such as wastewater recycling and reuse systems,** to address water scarcity and enhance sustainability in WASH infrastructure. The “Net Zero” toilet model, implemented in primary schools in Soc Trang, is a prime example of using clean energy, such as solar power, to convert wastewater into germ-free water for reuse, significantly reducing environmental impact.²⁵⁶ This wastewater treatment system provides a sustainable and hygienic sanitation solution, which is especially suited for use in schools and in areas facing water scarcity and climate-related challenges. This case demonstrates how schools and public facilities such as health centres and serve as opportune entry points for such technologies to protect both children’s health and their education.
- **Increase human capacity** of national and local governments through systematic knowledge sharing and skills transfer. Implement capacity building on climate resilient WASH based on standards and guidelines and promote and strengthen international cooperation.
- **Extend alternative financing, including for O&M,** especially in rural areas, by exploring public-private partnerships (PPPs) and incorporating private investments provided by commercial banks or private investors. Safe and resilient WASH services can be delivered through innovative public-private partnerships to improve the availability and affordability of household water filtration, hand-washing equipment, and latrine construction, reduce maintenance costs, and support community engagement. While PPPs can serve as a potential financing mechanism, their viability depends on key factors such as cost recovery tariffs, appropriate subsidy pathways, utility creditworthiness, and fair risk allocation. These aspects must be carefully assessed and addressed to improve access to commercial finance and ODA, ensuring sustainable and scalable private sector participation in WASH investments.

²⁵⁶ Pham n.d.

2031-2045

- **Expand focus beyond expanding access to gradually improve quality of services**, including water safety monitoring and faecal sludge management. Strengthen enforcement of water quality standards and introduce compliance incentives for wastewater treatment plants.
- **Achieve 100% safely managed water and sanitation services as defined by SDG 6**, ensuring, continuous water supply to all households with WHO-standard quality monitoring, as well as universal wastewater and faecal sludge treatment, including for rural and informal settlements. Use international financing mechanisms (e.g. ODA, climate finance), to promote full SDG 6 compliance.
- **Fully develop and integrate climate-resilient WASH systems** and sustainable water management into national policies. Improve cooperation and coordination between the Water Resources Management (WRM) and WASH sectors and explore options for using technical innovations for safely managed water and sanitation service delivery. The experience of strengthening the sustainability of water sector investments in France may serve as a valuable model for Viet Nam.²⁵⁷
- **Scale up renewable energy (RE) and energy efficiency (EE)** applications through RE&EE policy development, scheme installations, water and RE credit standards development, monitoring, and evaluation. To ensure sustainability, it is essential to push towards a low-carbon WASH sector by optimizing water and energy usage, utilizing renewable energy sources, and reducing greenhouse gas emissions through efficient operations.
- **Building community resilience through WASH programmes, by prioritising the reduction of** inequalities in service provision that disproportionately expose vulnerable groups to climate threats or restrict their capacity to respond effectively. WASH contributions to community resilience can further be achieved through capacity development, fostering ecosystem resilience, promoting income generation, and securing food and energy sources.

²⁵⁷ In 2018-2019, the French Government, in collaboration with the national development bank Caisse des Dépôts, organized consultations with local authorities, service providers and financial institutions on the emerging issue of water quality and availability in the context of climate change. Discussions focused on improving water services' quality and enhancing customers' trust in public utilities, water resource management, water leakage reduction, and aquatic ecosystems' protection. As a result, the French Government committed to provide 2 billion euros for water sector investments, allocated through the Caisse des Dépôts. UNICEF 2022b.

7. Social Protection and Children's Rights

7.1 Why Invest in Social Protection for Children?

Viet Nam's evolving demographic, economic, and environmental landscape places increased importance on social protection systems to address inequality and poverty, especially among children. The traditional family model, which has long been the cornerstone of care for children and the elderly, is being replaced by greater need for and reliance on state-provided social security systems and safety nets. This transition has implications for multigenerational households, with effective social protection contributing to higher productivity, improved health outcomes, and an expanded tax base. As urbanisation accelerates, access to comprehensive social protection systems will play a crucial role in mitigating urban poverty and reducing vulnerabilities in growing urban centres.

Investment in social protection is a crucial strategy for breaking cycles of poverty and social exclusion, enhancing economic outcomes, and promoting social cohesion. By reducing barriers to accessing essential services, social protection programs play a critical role in reducing child poverty and developing human capital, particularly among marginalized groups.²⁵⁸ Examples from Thailand and Mongolia, particularly in scaling up social transfers to children and families and subsequent horizontal and vertical expansion of child-sensitive programmes, highlight the success of universal child benefits in improving welfare and reducing child poverty, especially in shock-contexts.²⁵⁹ Regional UN ESCAP estimates of the impact of a basic child benefit in countries in East-Asia and Pacific suggest significant reductions in household poverty rates of between 5.1% - 91.2%, using the international \$3.65/day poverty line. Recent analyses in Viet Nam suggest the gradual achievement of universal social protection for children, such as through a universal cash transfer for children under three or six years, for example, would reduce child poverty significantly, and would initially cost, respectively, around 1-2% of GDP.²⁶⁰

Expanding cash transfers for children not only reduces (child) poverty²⁶¹ but also has far-reaching impacts on child well-being and human capital development.²⁶² Evidence from both global and regional studies demonstrates that well-designed cash transfer programs contribute to improved nutrition and health outcomes and service uptake²⁶³, higher school attendance²⁶⁴, and reductions in child labour²⁶⁵, reduced child maltreatment and abuse²⁶⁶, all of which have long-term economic and social benefits. For example, cash transfers improve dietary diversity and food security, particularly among young children, by enabling families to purchase nutritious foods and essential healthcare services, as evidenced by studies on Mongolia's Child Money Programme, Thailand's Child Support Grant, and child grant programmes in the Philippines and

258 Fiszbein et al. 2009; Handa et al. 2018; Giang and Nguyen 2017.

259 United Nations Children's Fund 2020a; Parliament of Mongolia 2022; UN ESCAP 2021.

260 UN ESCAP 2023.

261 Resina, Kamarni, and Putra 2023; UN ESCAP 2021; UNICEF 2019b.

262 Handa et al. 2018; Awojobi 2022; Bastagli et al. 2016; Bastagli et al. 2019.

263 World Bank 2011; Frufonga 2015; Cahyadi et al. 2020; UNICEF and Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation 2015; Satriawan 2016.

264 ADB 2020; ILO 2024.

265 Frufonga 2015; Cahyadi et al. 2020.

266 Jocson et al. 2023.

Indonesia.²⁶⁷

Beyond its role in reducing poverty and inequality, social protection also serves as a crucial instrument in macroeconomic management. In times of economic shocks and downturns, social protection measures can be strategically deployed to stabilize the economy by stimulating aggregate demand, sustaining household consumption, and preventing economic contraction. During shocks such as the 2020-2022 COVID-19 pandemic period, social protection and cash transfer programs played an important role in protecting livelihoods, maintaining domestic consumption levels, and preventing a downward economic spiral, including in Viet Nam.²⁶⁸ These measures not only cushioned the livelihoods of vulnerable populations but also contributed to economic resilience and recovery by ensuring continued domestic consumption and economic activity. For example, in Mongolia, emergency COVID-19-related top-ups to the existing universal child benefit scheme successfully reduced poverty to below pre-pandemic levels, and was deemed the most effective programme for emergency delivery during pandemic due to high existing coverage and established delivery mechanisms, with the higher benefit amount ultimately being adopted permanently in 2022.²⁶⁹ Strengthening shock-responsive social protection mechanisms will be essential for future economic stability, particularly as Viet Nam faces climate-related risks, economic volatility, and demographic shifts.

The integration of social protection systems with child rights frameworks ensures that all children are protected and supported in line with Viet Nam's commitments to international conventions, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Viet Nam has committed since 1990. This linkage strengthens accountability and prioritizes the specific needs of vulnerable groups, including children with disabilities, orphans, and those in marginalized communities.

7.2 Trends, Challenges and Opportunities

Reducing Child Poverty and Expanding coverage and equity in Social Protection

Viet Nam has also made significant progress in reducing both monetary and multidimensional poverty²⁷⁰ among households (Figure 25) as well as children (Figure 26). In 2016, the multidimensional poverty rate among households in Viet Nam stood at 9.2%, with significant regional disparities. By 2022, the national multidimensional poverty rate had decreased to 4.2%, reflecting notable progress. However, disparities persisted, with the Northern Midlands and Mountain Areas still having the highest rate at 12.8%, compared to the Southeast's minimal rate of 0.4%. A similar trend is observed among children. Multidimensional child poverty rates among children under age 16 years, while consistently exceeding household level poverty rates at nearly double the headcount, also decreased during this period from 25.9% in 2016 to 13.0% in 2024, according to a threshold of 2/7 dimensions, and from 11.9% in 2016 to 3.7% in 2025 according to a threshold of 3/7 dimensions (Figure 26). The updated definition of multidimensional child poverty in 2024 considers a threshold of 3 out of 8 dimensions, accounting for an additional dimension of children's access to recreational (learning) materials, yielding a rate of poverty of

267 ILO 2024; UNICEF 2019b; United Nations Children's Fund 2020a; Huijbregts et al. 2023; Cahyadi et al. 2020; Frufonga 2015; UNICEF 2019a.

268 UNICEF Viet Nam 2022a; United Nations Children's Fund 2020c; International Labour Organization, 2024; UNESCAP 2021.

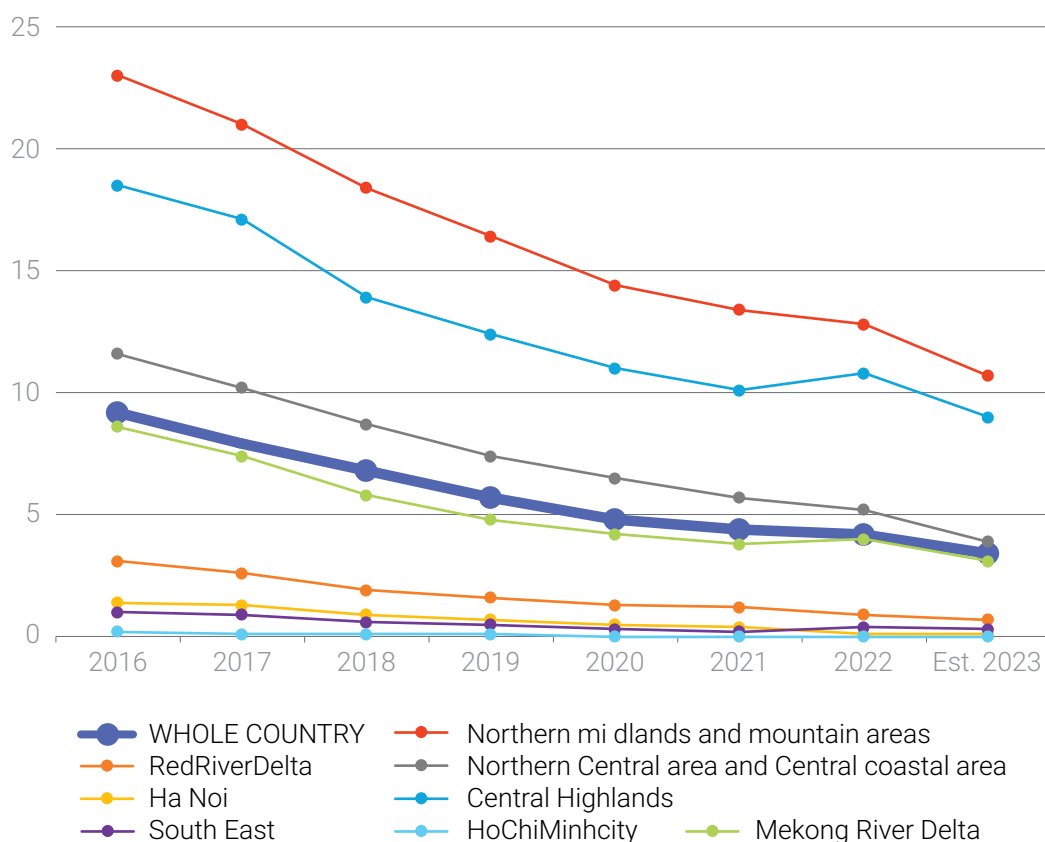
269 United Nations Children's Fund 2020a; Parliament of Mongolia 2022; UN ESCAP 2021.

270 Decree No. 07/2021/ND-CP issued by the Government of Viet Nam establishes multidimensional poverty standards for 2021-2025, detailing income thresholds and criteria for access to basic social services, including education, healthcare, housing, water and sanitation, employment, and information. It defines poor and near-poor households based on income and service deprivation levels, setting rural and urban thresholds of VND 1.5 million and VND 2 million per month, respectively. These standards form the basis for poverty reduction initiatives, social protection policies, and monitoring progress in addressing multidimensional poverty.(thuvienphapluat.vn 2023.)

8.4%.²⁷¹ Overall, these trends reflect substantial gains in addressing child poverty nationwide. Improvements were observed across all socio-economic regions, urban/rural areas, and ethnic groups (Table 2). These reductions highlight the effectiveness of Viet Nam’s efforts in improving access to education, healthcare, and basic services for children.

Despite overall progress, significant disparities remain in multidimensional child poverty rates across regions, urban/rural settings, and ethnic groups (Table 2).²⁷² Ethnic minority children continue to face the highest levels of poverty, with rates declining from 68.6% in 2016 to 33.1-39.4% in 2024 (according to a threshold of respectively, 3 out of 8 and 2 out of 7 dimensions), which is still far above the 3.7-7.9% rate among the Kinh/Hoa group. Rural children also experience greater deprivation, with a 2024 rate of 11.2% compared to 3% in urban areas. Geographically, regions like the Northern Midlands and Mountainous Areas and the Central Highlands report the highest rates, reflecting persistent regional inequalities. Further, 23.1% of children in the poorest quintile are multidimensionally poor, compared to 1.2% in the richest quintile.²⁷³ These disparities underline the importance of targeted multisectoral interventions, supported by a comprehensive and child-sensitive social protection system, to ensure equitable progress in reducing child poverty in Viet Nam.

Figure 25 Multidimensional poverty rate among households by province, 2016-preliminary 2023²⁷⁴



Source: GSO (2024)

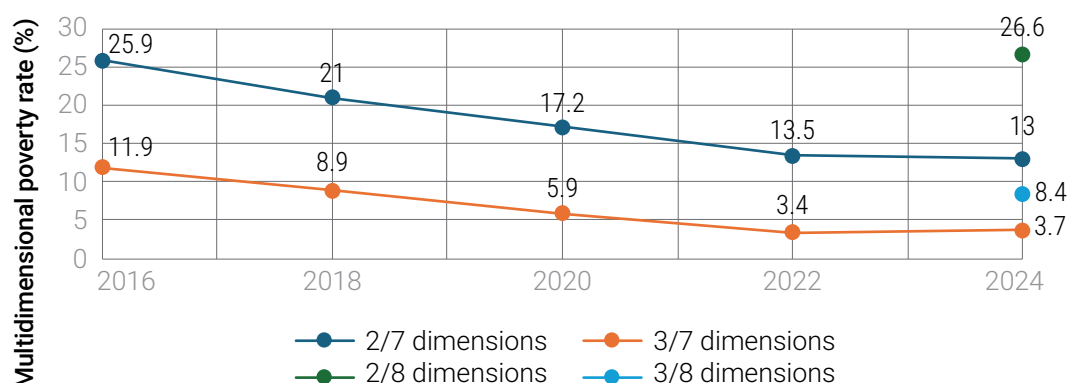
271 Tổng cục Thống kê (General Statistics Office) 2025.

272 General Statistics Office 2025.

273 Tổng cục Thống kê (General Statistics Office) 2025.

274 Note about different poverty lines/standards 2016-2020 vs 2021-2025

Figure 26 Multidimensional child poverty rate trends between 2016-2024



Source: General Statistics Office 2025²⁷⁵

Table 2 Multidimensional child poverty trends between 2016-2024 according to different deprivation thresholds

		Multidimensional deprivation threshold											
		2/7 dimensions					3/7 dimensions					2/8 dimensions	3/8 dimensions
	Population	2016	2018	2020	2022	2024	2016	2018	2020	2022	2024	2024	2024
	Total	25.9	21	17.2	13.5	13	11.9	8.9	5.9	3.4	3.7	26.6	8.4
Sex	Boys	25.9	20.9	17.1	14	13.3	11.7	8.5	5.8	3.4	3.7	26.5	8.5
	Girls	25.8	21	17.3	13	12.7	12.1	9.2	6.1	3.2	3.7	26.7	8.2
Socio-economic Region	Red River Delta	7	4.8	4.9	5.2	5.2	0.7	0.4	0.2	0.4	0.4	13.9	1.8
	Northern Midlands and Mountainous Areas	48.9	39	35	29.5	25.9	29.3	21.1	17.5	9.7	11.5	44.5	19.8
	Northern Central and Central Coast	25.8	22.2	16.3	11	12.2	12	9.5	5	2.5	2.2	26.7	7.3
	Central Highlands	48	36.5	27.5	18.9	24.2	26.7	18.3	11	7.9	6.4	40.5	19.5
	Southeast	7	6.3	9.6	11.2	6.5	1.6	1.3	2.1	0.9	2.9	14.5	2.8
	Mekong Delta	32.8	28.5	24.1	14.1	14.3	10.5	9	7.1	3.1	3.2	33.3	8.9
Urban/Rural	Urban	8.5	7.2	8	8.3	6.7	2.1	1.5	1.5	0.8	1.5	15.1	3
	Rural	32.8	27	21.8	16.4	16.3	15.8	12.1	8.2	4.7	5	32.7	11.2
Ethnic Group	Kinh	14.7	11.6	10.4	8.1	7.9	3.5	2.4	2	0.9	1.1	19.7	3.7
	Other ethnic group	68.6	58.6	51.6	42.3	39.4	43.8	34.5	25.8	16	17.8	62.4	33.1

Source: Tổng cục Thống kê (General Statistics Office) 2025.

275 Tổng cục Thống kê (General Statistics Office) 2025.

Large Gaps in Social Protection Coverage for Children

In recent years, the Government of Viet Nam has made positive movements towards strengthening social protection systems, exemplified by Resolution number 42-NQ/TW²⁷⁶ (replacing resolution number 15), on innovation and improving the quality of social policies to meet the requirements of nation-building and protection in the new period, and Decree 76/2024/ND-CP²⁷⁷, on providing social assistance policies for social protection beneficiaries, replacing Decree 20/2021/ND-CP. These efforts were aimed at creating a more comprehensive and inclusive social protection system to align with Viet Nam's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Viet Nam's social protection system is relatively advanced within the East Asia-Pacific region, encompassing both social insurance (SI) and social assistance (SA) frameworks. However, the independent design and fragmented implementation of these policies over the years have posed significant challenges in terms of expanding coverage and ensuring effective financing. Children from marginalised and low-income households are particularly vulnerable to gaps in the existing system. The limited reach and funding of social assistance programs also constrain their ability to provide a meaningful safety net for those most in need.²⁷⁸ The recent situation of child-sensitive social protection in Viet Nam is characterized by targeted support programs designed to address the needs of vulnerable children, including orphans, children in poor households, and those affected by HIV/AIDS. However, social protection schemes, including cash transfers, child allowances, and social insurance programs, provide some relief but are often insufficient in coverage and value.²⁷⁹

The social protection system for children in Viet Nam remains significantly underdeveloped compared to both regional and global standards, despite gradual progress. Data from 2015 to 2023 show a modest increase in the proportion of children receiving child or family cash benefits in Viet Nam, from 1% to 1.4% (Figure 27). This figure is considerably lower than the regional average for Asia and the Pacific, which rose from 14.31% in 2015 to 22.43% in 2023 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the costs of living crisis from 2020-2022, and even further below high-income countries, where the coverage rate for children reached 80.5%. Comparisons to the average across its income group further highlight this critical gap, with LMICs increasing coverage by nearly 10 percentage points between 2015 and 2023, from 14.9% to 23.5%.

In comparison to other countries in the region, Viet Nam's performance lags significantly behind. Countries like Mongolia and Japan maintain high coverage rates, with Mongolia (uniquely among LMICs) sustaining universal coverage at 100% and Japan at 85.4%. Social assistance programs in Viet Nam reach approximately 3.5 million beneficiaries, offering an average monthly benefit of USD 12, which was recently adjusted to almost USD 20 (around 500,000 VND) based on the decree 20 revised in 2024²⁸⁰, remaining far below regional and global standards.²⁸¹ Even countries with similar economic status such as Thailand and Indonesia have made substantial improvements, with child benefit coverage increasing to 31.8% and 43.6%, respectively. In contrast, the average for upper-middle-income countries is 27.8%. While Viet Nam has made progress in expanding cash benefits and other social protection programs, these comparisons suggest room for growth in child-targeted social protection mechanisms. This low coverage highlights significant gaps in Viet Nam's social protection system, particularly in ensuring adequate support for children and vulnerable households. Enhancing child benefit coverage is critical to addressing disparities and ensuring equitable access to services and opportunities for all children, which is vital for building human capital and achieving sustained economic growth.

276 LawNet 2023.

277 Luật Vietnam 2024, 76.

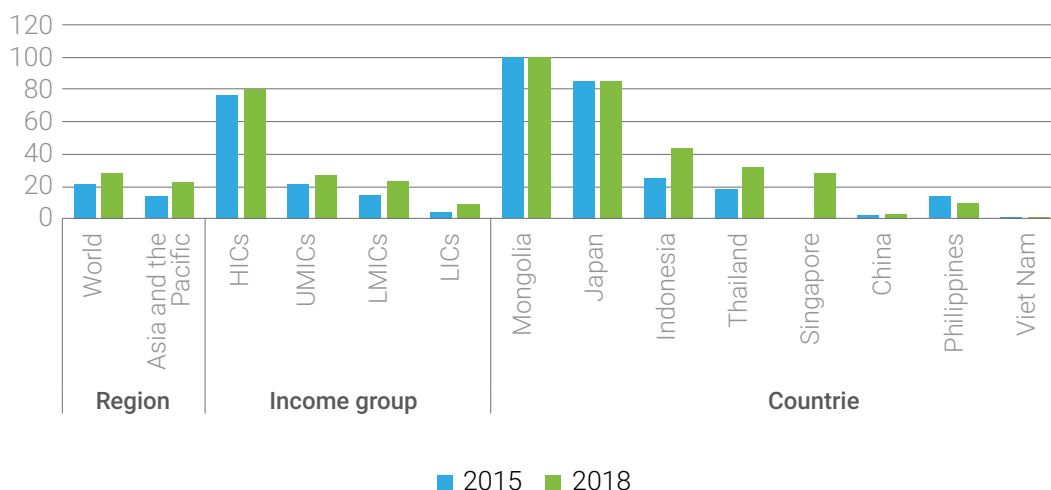
278 United Nations Children's Fund 2020c; UNICEF Viet Nam 2022a.

279 United Nations Children's Fund 2020c; UNICEF Viet Nam 2022a.

280 thuvienphapluat.vn 2024.

281 Timár et al. 2023.

Figure 27 Effective coverage of children 0-15 years receiving child or family cash benefits between 2015 and 2018 (using latest available data)



Source: International Labour Organisation²⁸²

Strengthening the social protection system, with a focus on child-sensitive social assistance schemes, would be a crucial step toward addressing childhood vulnerabilities, breaking the cycle of poverty, and improving long-term outcomes for children, especially those in remote areas and belonging to marginalised groups. A significant proportion of Viet Nam’s workforce remains uninsured, particularly in the informal sector and migrant populations, affecting their access to social protection. Moreover, migrant workers, who constitute 80% of the workforce in the apparel and footwear sector, often leave children behind in rural areas due to lack of family-friendly housing, affordable childcare, and accessible schooling.²⁸³ Families with children in this demographic therefore face heightened economic vulnerability, as was evidenced in recent assessments on the impacts of social protection in response to the COVID-19 pandemic containment measures.²⁸⁴ The high costs of social insurance contributions may further pose barriers to coverage, particularly for lower-income groups.²⁸⁵

Recent analyses suggest the gradual achievement of universal social protection for children, such as through a universal cash transfer for children under three or six years, for example, would reduce child poverty significantly, and would initially cost, respectively, around 1- 2% of GDP initially, with costs falling to 0.6-1.2% of GDP within 5 years.²⁸⁶ While targeted schemes are less expensive, they risk excluding vulnerable groups due to implementation challenges and social exclusion, and therefore less effective at reducing child poverty.²⁸⁷ A global simulation of universal child benefits (UCB) on child income poverty²⁸⁸ in select countries suggest that

282 International Labour Organization, 2024; International Labour Organization (ILO) 2024.

283 UNICEF 2017b.

284 UNICEF Viet Nam 2022a; UNDP 2021.

285 McClanahan, Gelders, and López 2019.

286 Timár et al. 2023.

287 Ibid.

288 In this simulation, the ILO measures relative child income poverty rates as the share of children living in households with incomes below 60 per cent of the national median household income. To allow for comparison, household income is adjusted using the square root of the household size. These cross-country calculations were based on the assumption that all eligible households receive the relevant benefits. International Labour Organization, 2024.

the child income poverty rate for Viet Nam could be reduced from 17.0% to 12.7% via the introduction of a UCB, with a benefit amount equivalent to the average payment per child per month in the 29 countries that are currently providing a UCB (equivalent to 6% of the average wage in respective countries).²⁸⁹

These options demonstrate the potentially transformative effect of a UCB for reducing child poverty and promoting equity in Viet Nam, exceeding the effects of alternative, fragmented and more targeted policies. Further, by promoting equitable access to social protection, Viet Nam can support middle-class expansion while ensuring the financial sustainability of these systems through a widened tax base and increased economic resilience. The growth of a robust middle class is pivotal to creating a sustainable, equitable society. Access to complementary services in quality education, healthcare, and social services for children is foundational for expanding and stabilising this group.

Viet Nam's rapid urbanisation, demographic shifts and socio-economic transitions also highlight the need for social protection in early childhood development. The increasing reliance on private childcare groups to meet the demand for care, particularly for children under 36 months, highlights a significant gap in the current social protection framework. Such centres often operate with limited resources, compromising the quality of care and thus the early development of young children. These concerns are especially prevalent in industrial zones, and in remote areas among ethnic minority groups, and are compounded by a lack of targeted government support and subsidies.²⁹⁰

Learning from recent Socio-Economic Crises and Environmental Disasters to improve shock-responsiveness of social protection

The COVID-19 pandemic and recent environmental disasters revealed the inadequacy of existing social protection systems. These crises disproportionately affected children, exposing gaps in the ability of cash transfer programs and other social safety nets to respond rapidly and effectively. As a consequence of COVID-19, school closures widened learning gaps, households adopted negative coping strategies like reducing meal quality or selling assets, and emergency assistance often failed to reach the "new poor" created by the pandemic.²⁹¹ Children with disabilities, of migrant workers and informal workers were faced disproportionate disadvantage during the pandemic as well as its social protection response.²⁹² Emergency social assistance was inadequately linked with regular assistance, limiting its shock-responsiveness. Emergency assistance has relied on in-kind support like rice, blankets, and drinking water, rather than more flexible cash benefits.

Viet Nam's social protection system lacks strong integration between regular and emergency assistance. Emergency responses, as during the pandemic, tend to rely on in-kind transfers, which were less flexible than cash benefits.²⁹³ Addressing these limitations requires modernising administrative systems, such as digitised beneficiary registries, to ensure swift and accurate delivery of benefits during crises. As a country situated in a region which faces high environmental hazards and climate vulnerabilities, and in light of the recent devastating impact of Super Typhoon Yagi in 2024, it highlights the urgent need for climate-resilient social protection systems.

Adaptive social protection systems that can scale up during crises, targeting the most vulnerable, are urgently needed to mitigate the impacts of future shocks. Children who are the least covered

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

²⁹⁰ UNICEF 2016.

²⁹¹ Timár et al. 2023; UNICEF Viet Nam 2022a.

²⁹² UNICEF Viet Nam 2022a.

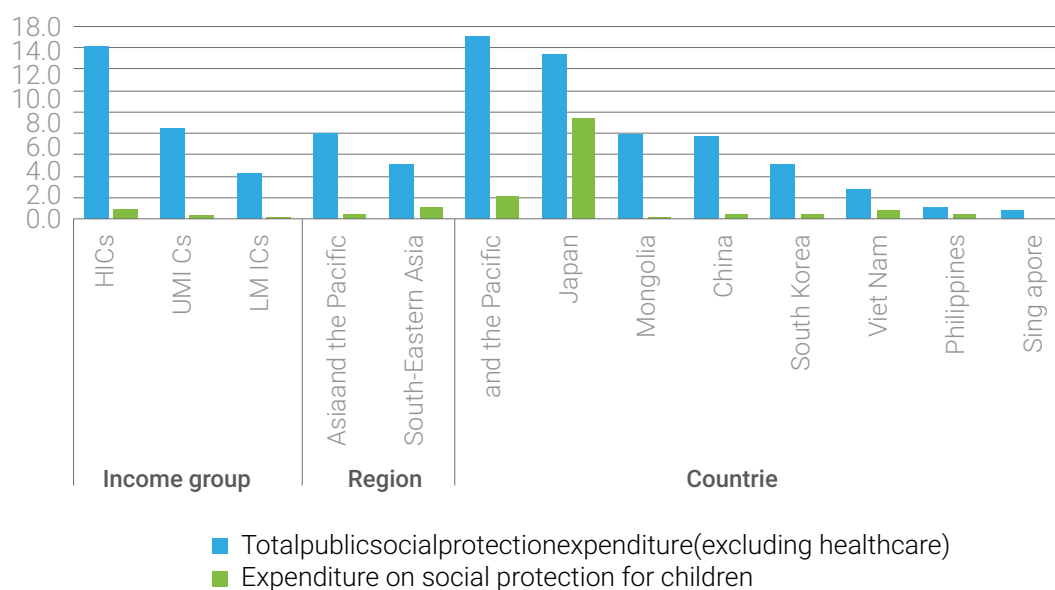
²⁹³ UNICEF Viet Nam et al. 2021.

by social protection schemes will be the most affected by and susceptible to risks associated with climate change, environmental disaster, and other socioeconomic risks. A fragmented, reactionary, and instrument-based approach to social protection will not be sufficient for children, to ensure that Viet Nam is climate resilient going into 2045. An integrated, systematic approach, alongside developing shock-responsive social protection systems and measures which are child-sensitive, adaptive, and focus on early action triggers, needs-based assessments, and pre-defined benefit levels to streamline emergency responses will be highly critical.

Scope for expanding fiscal space for social protection

Globally, countries allocate an average of 12.9% of GDP to social protection (excluding healthcare), with upper-middle income and high-income countries spending 8.5%-16.2%, which is significantly above Viet Nam's level of approximately 5.1% as of 2020, at 0.4% spent on children, as a percentage of GDP (Figure 28).²⁹⁴ Viet Nam's expenditure on social protection systems for children, lags behind other countries in the Asia-Pacific and region and countries of higher income levels, reflecting the need for greater investment in child-sensitive social protection to support its ambitions of becoming a high-income country by 2045. Compared to high-income countries such as Japan (2.1% of GDP on social protection for children) or even regional lower-middle-income countries like Mongolia, which spends 9.4% of GDP on children and implements a universal child benefit, Viet Nam's investment is modest. While its total social protection expenditure is comparable to other lower-middle-income countries, the allocation for children remains disproportionately low. This highlights a critical gap in using social protection systems to address child-specific vulnerabilities, which are key to reducing child poverty and developing a skilled, healthy, and productive workforce for the future. As Viet Nam transitions towards higher-income status, increasing targeted investments in child-sensitive programmes will be essential to fostering inclusive growth and reducing inequality.

Figure 28 General government actual expenditure on social protection as a percentage of GDP (excluding healthcare) and on social protection for children



Source: International Labour Organisation²⁹⁵

294 International Labour Organization (ILO) 2024; International Labour Organization, 2024.

295 International Labour Organization, 2024; International Labour Organization (ILO) 2024.

As Viet Nam navigates demographic shifts, such as urbanisation and an aging population, social protection systems must evolve to address these challenges while supporting children's rights and development. The intersection of rapid economic growth and climate vulnerabilities necessitates scalable, adaptive programs that safeguard the most vulnerable, taking into account a gender-sensitive approach.²⁹⁶ Investments in social protection alone can have trade-offs, such as higher carbon emissions due to increased economic activity, but long-term benefits include higher productivity and better health outcomes. Carbon tax revenue, if reinvested in social sectors, can create fiscal space and address socioeconomic challenges without substantially impacting GDP growth.²⁹⁷ To ensure that social protection effectively supports children's rights and well-being, a forward-looking, integrated, and systematic approach to social protection²⁹⁸ is necessary, underpinned by a strategic framework that incorporates resilience-building, adaptive mechanisms, and disaster risk reduction. An investment into social protection for children and families is an affordable and strategic investment into the human capital of future generations.

7.3 Policy Recommendations

2025-2030

- **Expand social protection and social assistance for children, introducing** gradually universal(ist) cash transfers for children under six years and pregnant women (i.e., a universal child benefit), progressively until reaching the whole child population. The objective should be to gradually move toward a universal child benefit for all children under age 18, with additional targeted transfers providing top-ups for vulnerable groups (continuing existing programmes), ensuring that no child is excluded from essential financial and social protection. This will ensure adequate coverage, reduce child poverty, and enhance long-term human capital development. Simulations of the affordability²⁹⁹, poverty reduction effects³⁰⁰, high returns and multiplier effects of such policies for economic growth³⁰¹ in Viet Nam justify this investment. Evidence from Mongolia's Child Money Programme and Thailand's Child Support Grant in the region highlight the transformative potential of universal child benefits in addressing intergenerational poverty.³⁰² Viet Nam has the opportunity to replicate such models to foster equity and resilience in its social protection framework. A well-designed universal child benefit (UCB) not only ensures every child is covered, supporting poverty reduction, but also serves as a strategic foundation on which to build a broader (child-focused) social protection system, offering a platform for realising children's rights, improving the design and delivery of complementary social services, and enabling more effective policy planning.
 - **Improve the inclusivity, targeting and coverage of social protection programmes** to ensure inclusion of all vulnerable children, including those in marginalized communities and families reliant on informal labour, ethnic minorities, children with disabilities, and urban migrants, especially in shock contexts. Incorporate additional top-up benefits for children facing greater vulnerabilities, including children with disabilities, children in

296 UNICEF Office of Research - Innocenti 2024.

297 United Nations (UN) Viet Nam, UN ESCAP, and Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI) 2024.

298 De Neubourg, Cebotari, and Karpati 2021.

299 Timár et al. 2023.

300 International Labour Organization, 2024.

301 United Nations (UN) Viet Nam, UN ESCAP, and Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI) 2024.

302 Mongolia's universal Child Money Program ensures inclusive support for all children, complemented by mobile preschools like "ger kindergartens" for rural access and shock-responsive systems addressing climate risks. Thailand's Child Support Grant and Universal Health Coverage exemplify integrated policies that enhance child welfare through financial assistance, healthcare access, and education subsidies. Both countries demonstrate the importance of universal benefits, cross-sectoral integration, and adaptability to external shocks.

extreme poverty, and children in informal labour-dependent households.

- Enhance the value of cash transfers to meet basic needs and introduce adaptive mechanisms to automatically scale up benefits during crises (e.g., pandemics, natural disasters, economic downturns). For example, index transfer values to inflation or GDP growth to maintain purchasing power over time, and prevent erosion of benefits.
- **Strengthen shock responsiveness** by integrating regular and emergency assistance systems to enable cohesive responses during crises. Developing and expanding digitised beneficiary registries can help improve the responsiveness, speed and accuracy of emergency cash transfers.
 - Introduce child-sensitive reforms, such as lump sum cash benefits for children during emergencies, building on the initial steps seen during COVID-19. Adopt Child-Centred Disaster Risk Reduction strategies, which incorporate targeted interventions like school safety programmes and nutritional support for displaced children.
 - Establish pre-defined, early-action economic and climate-based triggers to initiate cash transfers before a shock hits or a crisis deepens, such as specific inflation-induced cost of living hikes triggering automatic cash or food transfers. Similarly, introduce digital innovation linking disaster-risk-management (DRM), climate-change-adaptation (CCA) and social protection mechanisms to enable early action on climate shocks via meteorological data, such as rapid deployment of cash or in-kind assistance. This should be coupled with the establishment of real-time tracking systems using digital technologies such as mobile or satellite data to monitor shocks and stressors and subsequently enable real-time monitoring of the need to deploy social transfers.
- **Strengthen programs that prioritise children's needs**, linking cash transfers to educational and healthcare outcomes. Adaptive measures should integrate climate resilience, ensuring that disaster-prone communities receive timely and sufficient support. Developing robust data systems to monitor programme effectiveness and ensure accountability will also help to tailor benefits to meet the needs of the population.
- **Pair poverty alleviation strategies with programs that support families transitioning into the middle-income category.** These efforts should include subsidised childcare, universal preschool and upper secondary school, and financial incentives for formalising labour.
- **To ensure protection of children of migrant workers and children left behind, introduce mechanisms to ensure** these children can retain their access to social protection and other critical health and education services, regardless of their parents' location or migration status. This may be done through strengthening social and education services in rural areas, including through investments in boarding schools, financial support, and deployment of social workers and teachers in underserved communities. Investing in developing community-based childcare models³⁰³ in rural areas may also help to provide safe and affordable care for children of migrant workers, while offering incentives for employers to support on-site childcare in industrial zones, in line with previous recommendations on the development of high-quality ECE services in these areas (see 4.3).

2031-2045

- **Aim for universal social protection and gradually expand and consolidate the social protection systems** to cover all families with children, aiming for universal social protection for children and pregnant women, ensuring that benefits are adequate to meet diverse needs. Develop a comprehensive social protection framework integrating health, education,

303 The State Council of the People's Republic of China 2024.

and welfare services. The ILO proposes a tiered child and family benefits system, to address income disparities while promoting universal coverage.³⁰⁴ In the long term, work toward consolidating various social assistance policies into a flagship program to ensure coherence, efficiency, and sustainability. This effort should align with the current institutional context following the merger of the Social Protection Department of MOLISA into MOH.

- **Ensure that migrant workers and informal sector employees are fully integrated** into social security schemes, with contributory and non-contributory options to expand social protection coverage. Concurrently, develop long-term rural development strategies to reduce economic migration, to support parents and reduce the pressure to leave their children behind.
- **Increase public investment in social protection to at least 6% of GDP**, aligning with global best practices. Explore innovative financing mechanisms, such as social-impact bonds and tax reforms, to ensure the long-term viability of these programs.
- **Integrate child-specific needs into broader social protection policies, alongside embedding climate adaptation and disaster responsiveness into social protection systems**, prioritising vulnerable regions and populations. Develop early warning systems and pre-emptive financial safety nets to mitigate future shocks. Ensure that critical infrastructure, such as schools and healthcare centres, are built to withstand severe weather events.
- **Institutionalise child rights frameworks within social protection policies**, ensuring that all children – regardless of socio-economic status or ability – have equal opportunities to thrive. Expand bilingual education and inclusive programs for ethnic minorities and children with disabilities. Integrate family-focused social protection within the broader child rights framework to ensure alignment with international conventions like the Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- **Expand maternity benefits and leave provisions, as well as the availability of childcare centres**, and enhance inclusive childcare services in alignment with global evidence demonstrating the importance of affordable, high-quality childcare in supporting working families and reducing child poverty. Learning from China's recent efforts to foster a childbirth-friendly society³⁰⁵, Viet Nam can similarly aim to promote family well-being and address demographic challenges by incentivising public-private partnerships to support families with newborns, focusing especially on rural, low-income, and underserved groups.
- **Institutionalise adaptive social protection and shock-response mechanisms in the social protection system**, integrating regular and emergency social assistance within a unified system that can be easily scaled-up horizontally and vertically during crises, and ensure broad coverage and identification of needs. The development of an integrated, comprehensive, and adaptive social protection system in Viet Nam should be supported through a robust financing model, e.g. including earmarked funds (e.g. for disaster response and resilience building), and regional frameworks and mechanisms for shared resource mobilisation in response to disaster.

304 McClanahan, Gelders, and López 2019.

305 The State Council of the People's Republic of China 2024. The policy directive included targeted measures for 1) enhancing childbirth support services such as maternity insurance, maternity leave, subsidies and MCH services; 2) expanding inclusive child-care systems; 3) strengthening support in education, housing and employment; 4) and fostering a birth-friendly social atmosphere.

8. Child Protection

8.1 Why Invest in Child Protection?

Protecting children from abuse, neglect, exploitation, and violence fosters their physical, emotional, and social well-being, which directly impacts their ability to thrive as healthy, productive adults. Such investments not only uphold Viet Nam's commitments to international conventions like the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child but also yield long-term economic and social returns by reducing societal costs associated with crime, healthcare, and lost productivity. Moreover, in a rapidly urbanising, evolving economy and climate change, ensuring robust child protection systems supports resilience against emerging risks such as trafficking, digital threats, and environmental disasters.

Children who experience violence and abuse or are exposed to negative parenting practices face serious and direct consequences for their mental, physical, and behavioural health in both the short and long-term, as it impairs their ability to learn, socialise, and transition successfully into adulthood.³⁰⁶ They are also at greater risk of having poorer health and lower educational achievement, with repeated occurrences leading to long-term effects on the child's development and well-being well into adulthood.³⁰⁷ Affected children often have increased feelings of fear, stress, tension and anxiety, as well as low self-esteem compared to children who are not affected.³⁰⁸ Moreover, children who face violent discipline or are exposed to intimate partner violence (IPV) tend to be more likely to experience violence in adulthood, both as victims and perpetrators.³⁰⁹

Regional estimates have found the economic burden of child maltreatment in East Asia-Pacific to be up USD 209 billion per year, equivalent to 1.88% of the region's GDP.³¹⁰ In South Africa the prevention of violence, neglect, and abuse against children was found to significantly reduce population-level issues, such as drug abuse (by 14%), self-harm (23%), anxiety (10%), and interpersonal violence (16%), while the cost of inaction was estimated at nearly 5% of the country's GDP in 2015, highlighting the multiplicative potential of prioritising child protection as an investment in protecting human capital development.³¹¹

8.2 Trends, Challenges and Progress

Progress in Protecting Children from Risks of Harms, and Harm

In 1990, Viet Nam ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, as the second country in the world. Since then, the country has introduced numerous laws and regulations to protect children from harm and exploitation, including the Child Protection, Care and Education Law, passed in 1991 and revised in 2004, the Law on Domestic Violence Prevention and Control

306 Hillis, Mercy, and Saul 2017; Leeb, Lewis, and Zolotor 2011; Norman et al. 2012; Wood and Sommers 2011; Wegman and Stetler 2009; Springer et al. 2003.

307 UNICEF Viet Nam Country Office, UNICEF Office of Research - Innocenti, and University of Edinburgh 2016.

308 UNICEF Office of Research - Innocenti 2016, vol. 2016/26.

309 UNICEF East Asia and the Pacific Regional Office, UNFPA Asia and the Pacific Regional Office, and UN Women Asia and the Pacific Regional Office 2021.

310 Fang et al. 2015; United Nations Children's Fund 2015.

311 Hsiao et al. 2018.

(2023) and the Child Law (2016).³¹² The establishment of these laws demonstrates the country's commitment to addressing violence and abuse of children and women. The national definition of children is limited to persons under the age of 16 years old.³¹³ The Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs is the main responsible stakeholder in the field of child protection in Viet Nam, overseeing the cooperation between state agencies at all levels.³¹⁴ Birth registration, a fundamental mechanism for access to basic social services such as health and education, has near-universal coverage. At the national level, 98.1% of children under five have a birth certificate.³¹⁵ According to the Legal Aid Act, adopted in 2017, legal aid is guaranteed to all children under the age of 16 and to child perpetrators aged 16 to 18 in the criminal justice system, and child victims aged 16 to 18 who are in financial difficulties.

In June 2021, the first-ever National Programme on Online Protection and Support for Children's Healthy and Creative Interactions 2021-2025 was endorsed, with the objective to protect children's (personal) information and privacy when accessing the internet and participating in online activities and to support safe and healthy online interactions. Moreover, in 2021, a Multi-agency and Interdisciplinary Network to Protect and Rescue Children in the Online Environment was established by the Minister of Information and Communications to prevent and combat online child abuse by increasing coordination between relevant stakeholders and improving social awareness of child protection activities and among others.³¹⁶ Additionally, in 2022, all schools in Viet Nam have incorporated basic education programmes about violence and abuse prevention in their curriculum.³¹⁷

Viet Nam has also ratified international conventions to combat child labour and has shown progress in reducing child labour, which fell from 9.6% in 2012 to 5.4% in 2018 and down to 1.31% in 2023 according to national child labour surveys. However, these figures only account for children involved in "economic activities." When the definition is expanded to include domestic work—such as cooking, cleaning, or caring for siblings, which places a significant burden on children, especially girls—the rate is higher. Data from the 2021 SDGWC survey by the General Statistics Office (GSO) and UNICEF shows that 6.9% of children aged 5–17 were still engaged in child labour, particularly in rural areas, ethnic minority households, and regions. Economic hardship remains a key driver, with many children contributing to household income or helping in family businesses.³¹⁸ Most child labourers are engaged in agriculture, construction, or service sectors, often beginning work around the age of 12.³¹⁹ The main reasons for participating in economic activities include (1) desire to engage in the business and production process of their households or to help their households and (2) to generate income for the household or to contribute to the household income of their families.³²⁰

Vietnam's National Action Plan (NAP) for improving laws and policies to promote responsible business practices was enacted and published on July 14, 2023. The key tasks outlined in Vietnam's National Action Plan emphasize the importance of child protection in the business setting by enhancing policy and legal frameworks that safeguard the rights of vulnerable

312 UNICEF Office of Research - Innocenti 2016, vol. 2016/26.

313 Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs and UNICEF n.d.

314 ECPAT, INTERPOL, and UNICEF 2022.

315 General Statistics Office of Viet Nam (GSO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) 2021.

316 ECPAT, INTERPOL, and UNICEF 2022.

317 Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI), German Development Agency (GIZ), and United Nations (UN) Viet Nam 2023.

318 As defined in the SDGWC 2020-21 survey as "children involved in economic activities above the age-specific thresholds, children involved in household chores above the age-specific thresholds, and children involved in hazardous work". General Statistics Office of Viet Nam (GSO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) 2021.

319 ILO and Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs of Viet Nam 2020.

320 Ibid.

groups, including children. This initiative focuses on reviewing and amending laws related to gender equality, anti-discrimination, and the rights of individuals with disabilities to align with international standards.

A national Child Protection Helpline is available free of charge and available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, with the aim of directly receiving and processing information, reports, risk declarations and child abuse. In recent years, there has been a sharp increase in the number of helpline consultations related to child abuse, violence, and legal advice. Between 2019 and 2024, over half of all calls received by the helpline pertained to cases of child abuse.³²¹ Among intervened cases, 45.3% were case of violence against children and 24.3% were cases of sexual abuse. In recent years, children and caregivers have increasingly called the helpline, signalling an increasing awareness of both the helpline service and of protection violations. Since 2020, helpline consultation calls related to child abuse and violence accounted for 51.6% of all calls, and children have made up the largest group of callers (47.1%), followed by persons interested in children's issues (27.2%), parents and caregivers (16.9%), social workers (7.3%), and other groups (1.6%). In addition, three consulting centres are available Hanoi, Da Nang, and the province of An Giang.³²²

Physical and psychological aggression remains widespread, as 72.4% of children aged 1-14 years were exposed to any form of psychological aggression or physical punishment in the month prior to the survey.³²³ Based on most recent data available (2020-21), four in ten children experienced some physical punishment³²⁴, while 1.6% faced severe physical punishment. Nearly half of the ever-married/partnered women (47.0%) have experienced emotional violence from a husband/partner during their lifetime.³²⁵ Concurrently, 9.0% of mothers/caretakers believed that physical punishment is necessary to discipline children.³²⁶

Gender-based stereotypes, kinship systems, and societal expectations place women and girls at a disadvantage, making them more susceptible to violence, early marriage, and exploitation.³²⁷ The 2019 Violence Against Women Survey shows one in four ever married/partnered women aged 15-64 years (26.1 percent) in Viet Nam have faced physical violence from a husband/partner during their lifetime, while 4.6% faced such violence in the last 12 months prior to the survey. 4.4% women reported being sexually abused by the age of 15. Around one in four girls aged 15 to 19 have experienced physical violence from a non-partner.³²⁸ More than eight out of ten girls age 15-17 years felt safe walking alone in their neighbourhood after dark (83.7%) compared to 96.8% of boys this age.³²⁹ Approximately 10.9% of women (15-49 years) and 9.9% of men reported that a husband was justified for hitting or beating his wife for at least one of the following five reasons: if she goes out without telling him, if she neglects the children, if she argues with him, if she refuses sex with him, and if she burns the food.³³⁰

321 Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs 2024.

322 ECPAT, INTERPOL, and UNICEF 2022.

323 General Statistics Office of Viet Nam (GSO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) 2021.

324 Physical punishment is defined as being shook; spanked; hit or slapped on the bottom with bare hand; hit on the bottom or elsewhere on the body with something like a belt, hairbrush, stick or other hard object; hit or slapped on the face, head or ears or; hit or slapped on the hand, arm, or leg; or beaten up over and over as hard as one could.

325 Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs, General Statistics Office of Viet Nam (GSO), and United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) 2020.

326 General Statistics Office of Viet Nam (GSO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) 2021.

327 UNICEF East Asia and the Pacific Regional Office, UNFPA Asia and the Pacific Regional Office, and UN Women Asia and the Pacific Regional Office 2021.

328 Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs, General Statistics Office of Viet Nam (GSO), and United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) 2020.

329 General Statistics Office of Viet Nam (GSO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) 2021.

330 Ibid.

Child labour and involvement in household chores

Viet Nam has ratified multiple international and national conventions and laws related to child labour, including the Minimum Age Convention (1973), the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention (1999), the law on Children (2016) and the Labour Code (2019), to protect minor labourers), labour exploitation and involvement in hazardous work. Involvement in child labour can have negative consequences for children's health, education and development. In particular, the economic condition and poverty level of households can put pressure on children's participation in child labour.³³¹ According to recent data, among children aged 5-17 years, 6.9 percent of children are involved in child labour – accounting for both economic activity and domestic chores - with higher prevalence among children living in Northern Midlands and Mountainous Areas (10.1%) and Central Highlands (13.8%), among children not attending school (26.2%), among children in rural areas (8.1% vs 4.6% in urban areas), and among children living with an ethnic minority household head (11.0-25.5%) compared to Kinh and Hoa (5.4%). Regularly gathered (administrative) data on child protection, especially on child labour and child sexual exploitation and abuse, remains limited.

In terms of children's involvement in household chores, 1.4% of children aged 5-11 years and 3.9% of children aged 12-14 years spent 21 hours or more on domestic chores.³³² The proportion of children involved in domestic chores is higher among girls, children living in rural areas, ethnic minorities, and older children.³³³

Child marriage and pregnancy

The minimal legal age for marriage in Viet Nam is 18 years for girls and 20 years for boys.³³⁴ Child and early marriage is prohibited and penalized by the Law on Marriage and Family, Law on Children and Penal Code. Child marriage in Viet Nam is driven by a combination of social, cultural, economic, and systemic factors, many of which are deeply rooted in gender inequality and traditional norms.³³⁵ Patriarchal beliefs often expect early marriage for girls to fulfil societal expectations as wives and mothers, particularly within ethnic minority communities. These groups also face compounded challenges such as poverty, limited educational access or lower levels of attainment, and restricted access to resources. Practices like arranged marriages, early pregnancy, as well as dangers such as trafficking, and bride abduction further entrench the issue of child marriage. Economic hardship plays a critical role, as families may view marriage as a way to alleviate financial difficulty. The lack of comprehensive sexual and reproductive health education leaves many boys and girls vulnerable to risk-prone behaviour and unintended pregnancies, which are frequently addressed through marriage to avoid social stigma. While education is a significant protective factor, with higher education levels found to be strongly associated with delayed marriage, the weak enforcement of legal frameworks and inconsistent application of child protection laws have undermined efforts to reduce these practices, especially among the most vulnerable groups. Additionally, the rise of digital and social media has created new vulnerabilities, including online exploitation and trafficking for forced marriages.³³⁶ ³³⁷

Child marriage in Viet Nam is often more common among girls than boys. It hinders children's development, with an increased risk of school drop-out, labour market involvement, early pregnancy and social isolation, amongst other. Girls who marry before the age of 18 also tend

331 ILO and Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs of Viet Nam 2020.

332 General Statistics Office of Viet Nam (GSO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) 2021.

333 ILO and Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs of Viet Nam 2020.

334 UNICEF and UNFPA 2018.

335 Ibid.

336 Ibid.

337 Ibid.

to have more children and at a younger age, compared to those who marry later in life and are less likely to receive (adequate) maternal health care services.³³⁸ Moreover, child marriage can result in a greater likelihood of exposure to sexual violence and abuse. In Viet Nam, 14.6% of women aged 20-24 years were married before their 18th birthday. According to latest data, 7.4% of girls aged 15-19 years were married or in a union as opposed to less than two% of boys this age (1.4%). Boys also presented lower early marriage rates, with 0.3% and 1.9% boys aged 20-24 years married before the ages of 15 and 18 respectively.³³⁹

There has been a slight increase in the prevalence of child marriage since 2014, with 0.8% of girls aged 20-24 years married before the age of 15 years and 10.6% before the age of 18 compared to 1.1% and 14.5% in 2021 respectively, which may be linked to the socio-economic impact of the COVID-10 pandemic.³⁴⁰ 10.3% of girls 15-19 were married in 2014, compared to 7.4% in 2021.

Internet and social media risks

Viet Nam has one of the highest rates of mobile phone use in the world.³⁴¹ While 90% of children aged 12-17 use the internet regularly, inadequate training on online safety exposes them to risks such as early pregnancy and marriage³⁴², grooming, human trafficking, and sexual exploitation.³⁴³

Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) is an emerging concern, posing serious risks to the mental health and well-being of adolescents, particularly girls. Adolescents, especially girls, are at greater risk of grooming, human trafficking, and exploitation by sharing personal information, including photos. Among internet-using children age 12-17 years, only 36% indicated that they have received training on how to be safe online, although the majority claimed to have basic knowledge of online safety skills.³⁴⁴ 1% experienced online sexual exploitation and abuse, including blackmailing, sharing their sexual images without permission, or coercing them to engage in sexual activities through promises of money or gifts, representing an estimated 94,000 children.

Between 2017–2019, 4,320 cases of child sexual abuse and exploitation were registered by the INTERPOL National Central³⁴⁵.³⁴⁶ It is expected that the actual number of cases is much higher due to the underreporting of experiences of sexual exploitation as a result of stigmatisation and feelings of shame.

Excessive social media and smartphone use in children and adolescents has also been found to be associated with notable disturbances in sleep (including shorter sleep duration and poorer quality sleep), physical and mental health.³⁴⁷ For example, social media exposure of 3 to less than 5 hours has been found to be associated with a 26% increase in depressive symptoms,

338 General Statistics Office of Viet Nam (GSO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) 2021.

339 Ibid.

340 General Statistics Office of Viet Nam (GSO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) 2015.

341 UNICEF Viet Nam Country Office, UNICEF Office of Research - Innocenti, and University of Edinburgh 2016.

342 UNICEF and UNFPA 2018.

343 ECPAT, INTERPOL, and UNICEF 2022.

344 Ibid.

345 Investigation of child sexual exploitation and abuse in Viet Nam are conducted by to specialised units: the Anti-Human Trafficking Crime Section of the Criminal Investigation Police Department (CID), and the Cyber Security and Cyber Crime Department (CSCCD).

346 ECPAT, INTERPOL, and UNICEF 2022.

347 Carter et al. 2016; Girela-Serrano et al. 2024.

with effects rising to 50% for 5 or more hours.³⁴⁸ Evidence further indicates that problematic smartphone use corresponds with substantially higher odds of depression, anxiety, and perceived stress.³⁴⁹ These negative effects were found to be more pronounced when use occurs at night, for longer durations, and among older adolescents and girls, with links extending to body image issues and diminished self-esteem.

Human Trafficking

In 2011, the National Assembly of Viet Nam endorsed the Law No. 66/2011/QH12 on Human Trafficking Prevention and Combat (HT Law). Furthermore, articles of the Penal Code in 2015 on 'human trafficking' and 'trafficking of a person under 16'³⁵⁰ were amended. According to the young people's household survey conducted by CORAM International in 2019, which is nationally representative for households of 12 24-year-olds in Viet Nam, an estimated 5.6% of children have experiences indicative of, or consistent with, child trafficking. Among them, 0.4% was involved in cross-border trafficking. Children living in poor households and in rural areas are more likely to encounter indications of trafficking, with child recruitment often influenced by their parents. At the regional level, a higher prevalence is observed in the central and southern provinces (ranging from 9.1% to 9.9%).³⁵¹ Between October 2013 and 2024, the Anti-Human Trafficking Hotline has provided consultation services on 26,841 calls, of which 638 were referred to rescue and support services, and provided support to 701 persons who had been trafficked or were at risk of being trafficked.³⁵² Traffickers often use deception and/or false promises to recruit victims. Awareness of the dangers on social media and informed parental supervision remains limited.³⁵³

Child Justice

In Viet Nam, some 2,727 child victims of crime were reported in 2022. More than 70 per cent of them were sexually abuse survivors.³⁵⁴ Yet, this is just the tip of the iceberg as numerous cases go unreported. Research reveals that victims of sexual abuse, including children, encountered various societal, legal and institutional barriers in accessing justice.³⁵⁵ In the same year, 4,076 child offenders were convicted by first-instance courts. Most of these were adolescent boys aged between 16 and 18 years old. The majority were first-time offenders. The most common crimes committed by them included disturbing public order and theft. Despite this, imprisonment was often applied (more than 63 per cent). Alternatives to detention, rehabilitation programs, and support services remain limited, and are often of low quality. Furthermore, insufficient attention is given to preventing children from offending in the first place.³⁵⁶

In recent years, important progress has been made in creating critical elements of the child justice system. Most notably is the creation of specialised children's courts in three Superior People's Courts and 43 Provincial People's Courts. In addition, in 2024, the Law on Justice for Minors was approved, providing a solid legal foundation for enhancing children's access to justice. Effective from January 1, 2026, the law prioritizes diversion and community-based rehabilitation, integrating social workers into the criminal justice system to help reintegrate children into their communities while maintaining family and school connections. Additionally,

³⁴⁸ Kelly et al. 2018.

³⁴⁹ Sohn et al. 2019.

³⁵⁰ According to Vietnamese law, child trafficking refers to a reciprocal exchange, involving the 'transfer' or 'receipt' of persons, and only applies to children under 16, excluding those trafficked at the age of 16 or 17.

³⁵¹ Apland and Yarrow 2019.

³⁵² Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs 2024.

³⁵³ UNICEF and UNFPA 2018.

³⁵⁴ Supreme People's Procuracy of Viet Nam and UNICEF 2024a.

³⁵⁵ Skinnider, Montgomery, and Garrett 2017.

³⁵⁶ Supreme People's Procuracy of Viet Nam and UNICEF 2024b.

it outlines guidelines for handling cases involving child victims and witnesses in a child- and gender-sensitive manner, promoting community-based rehabilitation of minors in conflict with the law, limits to pre-trial detention of children, expanding the coverage of legal aid to more children; and the introduction of overarching child justice principles in the Law on Children (2016) to ensure minimum standards for treatment of all children in contact with the justice system.

However, the proclamation of a law is merely a starting point. Viet Nam is currently at a critical juncture where strong commitment and investments are needed for effective and coherent implementation and enforcement of the recent child justice reforms to ensure real change in the lives of boys and girls.

Persistent challenges in Child Protection Exacerbated by Institutional Weakness and Coordination Issues

Despite institutional, legal, and programmatic progress in efforts made to protect children's rights, significant challenges persist in child protection. Gaps in the legal system, in implementation and in resource allocation hinder the full realisation of child protection goals. Addressing these gaps is critical for building a future workforce that is not only skilled but also resilient and inclusive. For example, gaps remain in the legal system, lacking regulations which dictate the protection of a number of areas for children and vulnerable groups, such as in social welfare, social security, and social work.³⁵⁷ Further, no specific policies govern the prioritisation of budget investments, human resources, and other funds for the implementation for children's rights regarding their protection, the prevention of child abuse, accidents, or injuries.³⁵⁸ Regulations on child care, education, protection, and rights fulfilment, further lack consistency.

The coordination and management of child protection interventions lacks clarity on responsibilities,³⁵⁹ with one budget line allocated for services at national and sub-national³⁶⁰ Limited resources are often spent on a programme basis. Moreover, cooperation between law enforcement agencies and child support institutions remains³⁶¹

Mental health care services for victims of violence and abuse are severely lacking, particularly at the commune level, where such services are almost non-existent due to insufficient financial and human resources. At the district and provincial levels, while services may be available, they are often significantly underfunded, further limiting access to essential care for affected children and families.

At the grassroots level, gaps remain in awareness and implementation on children's rights and the laws governing them, child protection, and life-skills education, or have had limited effectiveness.³⁶² Preventing and combating violence and sexual abuse in certain localities and schools has also not received due attention.

The limited social sector workforce and lack of a social worker network remains a persistent challenge.³⁶³ Social welfare personnel consists largely of volunteers who do not have sufficient knowledge to carry out complex tasks. In addition, counselling services and shelters are limited and mainly located in urban areas.

357 Lê 2024.

358 Ibid.

359 UNICEF and UNFPA 2018.

360 UNICEF Viet Nam Country Office, UNICEF Office of Research - Innocenti, and University of Edinburgh 2016.

361 Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs and UNICEF n.d.

362 Lê 2024.

363 UNICEF East Asia and the Pacific Regional Office, UNFPA Asia and the Pacific Regional Office, and UN Women Asia and the Pacific Regional Office 2020.

8.3 Policy Recommendations

The pathway to becoming a high-income country depends on Viet Nam being able to strengthen protection of its children from harm and risks of harms, as a cornerstone of human capital development. Moving forward, it is imperative to prioritise investments in child-friendly services, multi-sectoral coordination, and gender equality initiatives. Enhancing data systems and evaluating the effectiveness of interventions will enable evidence-based policymaking to improve multi-sectoral coordination and progress for children. Promoting community awareness and behavioural change will build a society that values and protects its children, ensuring their comprehensive development contributes to the country's long-term growth.

2025-2030

- **Address harmful social norms and practices that condone violence and abuse of children.** Prioritize interventions which address deeply rooted societal attitudes and behaviours that perpetuate psychological and physical violence against children, as well as harms and risks of harms to children. This could be done through comprehensive and wide-reaching communication campaigns using mass and social media, as well as evidence-based behavioural change strategies to shift public perceptions and promote non-violent practices. Parenting programs designed for parents of children across all age groups, focusing on promoting non-violent discipline, nurturing care, and positive parenting practices, have been shown to be critical tools in these efforts and effective in improving the wellbeing of both children and their parents.³⁶⁴ These programs not only aim to positively influence current parental behaviours but also provide a foundation for nurturing and supportive environments for children which help to break cycles of violence and influence long-term societal change.
- **Strengthen the legal framework on child protection and justice for children.** Inclusive access to specialised, integrated and government-funded services (e.g. related to health care, social services and justice) must be ensured to guarantee the full protection and realisation of rights for all children under the age of 18. This should involve increasing the age limit for the definition of a child in Viet Nam from 16 years to 18 years in the Child law. Clarify and specify the definition of abuse and exploitation of children in national law and criminalise various offenses, in particular criminalising grooming, livestreaming of child sexual abuse to children of all ages, online sextortion and online sexual harassment. Prevention, early intervention (e.g. psycho-social support), rehabilitation and reintegration services should be provided for child victims of violence and abuse, including sexual exploitation. As part of this legal framework strengthening, it is critical to establish clear legal responsibilities for government agencies involved in child protection by revising relevant policies
- **Increase national and subnational institutional capacity in child protection, in terms of infrastructure, services, human resources and state budget allocations.**
 - **Ensure the provision of child-friendly services and increase their capacity,** by adapting response mechanisms to provide accessible and inclusive services.
 - **Improve the qualifications of social workers and frontline workers,** for example through capacity-building programs for social workers and frontline workers, including mandatory certification, ongoing professional development, supervision, and specialisation in areas like crisis intervention.
 - **Allocate and mobilise financial resources for the coordination and implementation of child protection programmes and interventions.** Establish mechanisms to mobilise

³⁶⁴ Wang and Zhang 2024; Durrant et al. 2014; Santini and Williams 2016; Sanders 2008; Coore Desai, Reece, and Shakespeare-Pellington 2017.

additional funding through public-private partnerships and donor support

- **Promote a multi-sectoral approach to addressing child protection, strengthening coordination mechanisms related to planning, budgeting, monitoring and reporting.** By adopting a holistic and life-cycle approach that focuses on addressing the many factors that may underlie different forms of violence and abuse against children, strengthen the coordination between relevant ministries, programmes of education and training, the police and judiciary, socio-political organisations, and enterprises at the national, provincial, district and community levels.
 - While UNFPA and UNESCO have been promoting Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE), its application remains limited. Coordinated action among development partners, including UN agencies, in collaboration with efforts from government and the MOET would be needed to promote CSE and institutionalise CSE in schools.
- **Enact targeted interventions to address the drivers of child marriage,** with a focus on promoting gender equality, expanding educational access, and fostering economic empowerment within at-risk communities. Policies should prioritise enforcing legal marriage age through education campaigns and consistent law application, while offering financial incentives to delay marriage. Expanding access to quality education, especially for girls, and providing access to social protection for families can address underlying financial pressures. Culturally tailored interventions, encouraging the engagement of community leaders, local authorities, and digital platforms, can help to promote social and attitude shifts, while comprehensive social support and outreach services could ensure at-risk girls have safe spaces and opportunities for (re-)integration into education.
- **Address the underlying drivers of gender inequality.** Empowerment and investment in girls are crucial and should be at the heart of all child protection programmes and interventions.
 - Structural reform efforts to promote gender equality must go beyond awareness campaigns and address deep-rooted structural, social and economic barriers that perpetuate (gender) inequality. This includes addressing discriminatory cultural norms, economic limitations, and biases that limit opportunities for women and girls. Policies should be designed to create structural and behavioural shifts that promote gender equity at all levels of society.
 - Direct investments in education, vocational training, and skills development for girls and women should be a distinct priority, as these interventions have proven long-term benefits for economic empowerment, family decision-making, and improved child rearing and child well-being. Evidence shows that education and financial independence enable women to participate more actively in economic and social domains, and break intergenerational cycles of poverty. Policymakers should focus on expanding access to quality education, including STEM fields, financial literacy, and digital skills, ensuring that girls and women are equipped for future labour market demands.
 - While community-level campaigns to promote gender equality could be a key component to these efforts, these should be complemented by evidence-based approaches to address the root causes of gender inequality, such as discriminatory cultural norms and economic barriers.
- **Strengthening data management and research.** Improve the availability of accurate, reliable and disaggregated data collected regularly to implement evidence-based initiatives. Develop and implement monitoring and evaluation systems to track progress, measure the impact of interventions, and adapt strategies based on evidence and feedback. Conduct systematic evaluations of the effectiveness of existing child protection programmes and

interventions.

- **Implement mandatory digital literacy training** for students and educators, including integration of online safety education into school curricula, targeting all students nationwide.
- **Implement awareness and broader social and behavioural change to encourage positive alternative discipline strategies by parents, teachers and community.** Develop training programmes for parents and caregivers on non-violent parenting techniques to prevent violence and abuse (See China's recent fertility-friendly society and care policies and programmes³⁶⁵). Adopt a community-based approach to promote positive relations between both male and female caregivers and children and include extended family members when they are directly involved in bringing up children (e.g., grandparents). Launch nationwide campaigns to increase awareness of the national child helpline.
- **Encourage disclosure, reporting and seeking help of child exploitation and abuse,** through public awareness campaigns and partnerships with the education system, to help minimise shame and embarrassment or negative perceptions about the consequences of reporting. Raise awareness about the dangers of social media and improve digital literacy among children and young people.
- **Effective implementation of the Law on Justice for Minors and other child justice reforms** through the acceleration the roll-out Family and Juvenile Court in all provinces and designation of Family and Juvenile Judges in all districts; building capacity for law enforcement, prosecutors, judges, legal aid/lawyers; development of diversion and community-based rehabilitation programmes, and victim support services in selected provinces and district.

2031-2045

- **Ensure formal high-level political commitment to child protection system strengthening** by securing adequate financial and human resources. Commit a dedicated budget line for child protection within national and sub-national budgets exclusively for child protection. This will ensure sustained and transparent financing for child protection services, enabling dedicated investment in prevention, response, and systemic improvements in the sector, including in human resources, system strengthening, and programming.
- **Lead all child protection interventions through an established and formalised national and sub-national child protection system,** integrated within broader multisectoral responses. Establish and maintain implementation structures for the normative framework/legislation outlining the national child protection system to ensure effective delivery and compliance.
- **Conduct regular reviews, evaluations, and audits of the national child protection system,** making revisions as necessary, to strengthen the national child protection system. Revise policies and interventions based on review findings to address any emerging challenges and improve effectiveness and efficiency of the system. Formalise intra and inter-sectoral coordination mechanisms for planning, implementation, monitoring, and reviews.
- **Establish a formalized and fully functional national multi-sector child protection coordination mechanism with oversight from the lead ministry/agency,** ensuring that child protection delivery is consistent and aligned across governance levels. Integrate specialised child protection units into all hospitals to provide immediate and coordinated responses to cases of abuse, neglect, or other protection violations. These units should work closely with the broader child protection system to ensure continuity of care and response.

365 The State Council of the People's Republic of China 2024.

- **Foster effective coordination between lead ministries/agencies at central and sub-national levels** for child protection service delivery. Institutionalise professional social worker positions at the commune level, designated as Child Protection Officers. Provide these officers with appropriate training, licensing, and legal authority to intervene in cases of abuse, neglect, or exploitation, including the power to remove children from harmful environments.
- **Implement government-managed national scale-up of prevention and response-related child protection services through national programs** that ensure compliance with national minimum standards. Set up independent accountability and oversight mechanisms alongside government systems. Ensure regular monitoring and reporting of child protection services to enforce national minimum standards.
- **Develop a well-planned and supported social service workforce** with functional licencing, accreditation, and supportive supervision systems.
- **Secure sustainable financing for child protection services** by funding tertiary and some secondary child protection services through national/sub-national budgets. Regularly track budgets and expenditures to ensure transparency and equity in resource allocation.
- **Design and implement a formalised national foster care programme** to provide alternative care options for children in need, particularly those without parental care. Establish legal frameworks, training programmes, and financial support for foster parents to ensure high-quality care and protection.
- **Introduce legal provisions for child protection orders**, including guardianship and custody arrangements.
- **Establish an independent complaints mechanism and procedure** for children to address grievances about child protection services to be addressed promptly and transparently within a specified timeframe.
- **Integrate administrative data into the national statistical system** for inclusive monitoring and planning, addressing disparities, and improving access to essential social services.
- **Scaling up child justice reforms** through building child justice specialist capacity in law enforcement and other sectors, replication of successful diversion and community-based rehabilitation programmes, and victim support services; reforming the system of administrative handing of minors in conflict with the law.

9. Cross-Cutting Issues

9.1 Equity and Inclusion

Equality of opportunity exists when social outcomes are not influenced by circumstances beyond an individual's control, such as those determined at birth. It can be likened to a "level playing field," where every child is afforded an equal chance to succeed. Despite Viet Nam's considerable social progress in recent decades, disparities in opportunity remain a significant challenge. These inequities are especially pronounced along lines of gender, sexual orientation, disability, ethnicity, urban migration status, and socio-economic background, reflecting systemic barriers to access and opportunity in education, health, WASH, and economic participation.³⁶⁶ The discussion here focuses on inequality of opportunity based on gender, sexual orientation, disability, ethnicity, urban migration, and socio-economic background. By embedding equity and inclusion into all facets of social development, Viet Nam can move closer to achieving its broader goals of sustainable, inclusive growth and social cohesion.

Gender disparities

Viet Nam has made notable progress in promoting gender equity, achieving minimal differences in school enrolment and attainment by gender and a modest gender wage gap compared to global standards. However, challenges persist, particularly in the areas of sex ratio at birth (SRB), driven by cultural preferences for sons,³⁶⁷ early marriage,³⁶⁸ and gender-based violence (GBV), with 21.8% of women and girls reporting violence by a partner in 2019 despite efforts to enhance legal frameworks and victim support services.³⁶⁹

Gender disparities in healthcare and WASH further illustrate inequities. Boys face higher under-five mortality rates,³⁷⁰ but girls are less likely to receive medical treatment for illnesses like diarrhoea and encounter systemic barriers to accessing sexual and reproductive health services as they grow older.³⁷¹ Additionally, the responsibility for water collection falls disproportionately on women and girls, with 34.2% of females aged 15 and older collecting water compared to 23.6% of males.³⁷² This burden further entrenches discriminatory gender norms, while potentially limiting their opportunities for education and economic participation. Inadequate sanitation also uniquely impacts girls, who require safe and private facilities for menstrual hygiene. To address these challenges, the design of WASH facilities (especially in schools, health facilities, and other public spaces), must ensure gender-responsive approaches, including the provision of safe, private, and accessible spaces for menstrual hygiene management.

Sexual orientation

Sexual and gender minority children in Viet Nam face unique challenges related to stigma and discrimination, both at home and in schools. While Viet Nam has made significant strides in advancing gender equality through its current Gender Equality Law (GEL) and international

³⁶⁶ World Bank and Ministry of Planning and Investment of Vietnam 2016.

³⁶⁷ Ibid.

³⁶⁸ Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI), German Development Agency (GIZ), and United Nations (UN) Viet Nam 2023.

³⁶⁹ Ibid.

³⁷⁰ Gender Equity Unit 2023.

³⁷¹ Ibid.; General Statistics Office of Viet Nam (GSO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) 2021.

³⁷² General Statistics Office of Viet Nam (GSO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) 2021.

commitments to LGBT rights, there remains room to enhance inclusivity for sexual and gender minorities. The GEL presents a critical opportunity to address existing inequalities by explicitly recognising and protecting sexual and gender minorities, guaranteeing equal opportunities for all individuals, and promoting gender equality across all aspects of life.³⁷³

In schools, the absence of discussions about sexual orientation and gender identity in the curriculum often leaves students without access to accurate information, contributing to misunderstanding and exclusion. Some LGBT children report experiencing bullying and harassment, which can impact their mental health, academic performance, and attendance. A lack of formal support mechanisms in schools sometimes deters students from reporting incidents or seeking help.³⁷⁴

Disability and inclusion

Viet Nam has many people with disabilities, in part a legacy of war. Children with disabilities in Viet Nam face significant barriers to inclusion, despite a strong legal framework supporting their rights. Viet Nam has demonstrated its commitment to the inclusion of people with disabilities through the Law on Disabilities (2010) and its ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2015. These frameworks, alongside constitutional protections, guarantee fundamental rights for people and children with disabilities, including access to healthcare, education, vocational training, public facilities, and cultural activities. The law emphasises their right to live independently, integrate into the community, and participate equally in social activities.³⁷⁵

However, their implementation falls short, particularly for children with severe disabilities. More than half of these children do not have access to inclusive education, leaving them without the foundational opportunities necessary to integrate into society. This exclusion not only deprives children with disabilities of their rights but also hinders broader societal attitudes toward inclusion.³⁷⁶ The 2016 National Survey on People with Disabilities highlights that while most people with disabilities are covered by health insurance, significant gaps remain in living standards and social participation. For children, the most common form of impairment is psychosocial. This is connected to the different development stages of childhood and adolescence, and such impairments can act as a significant barrier to children's social inclusion, development, and educational outcomes.³⁷⁷ Accessibility remains limited across critical services for children with disabilities, including in schools and WASH facilities (in schools and within communities). Formative research in 2023 found that there existed no inclusive sanitation options for people with disabilities or with temporary issues.³⁷⁸

Ethnic minorities

The most significant equity challenge in Viet Nam is the enduring and pronounced disparity in socioeconomic outcomes between the country's 52 ethnic minority groups and the majority population. This gap is largely fuelled by the severe disadvantages faced by ethnic minority children. Three interconnected factors create a "triangle of inequality" for these children: limited access to quality education, high levels of malnutrition, and inadequate sanitation facilities. These barriers collectively perpetuate inequality of opportunity for ethnic minority children.³⁷⁹

373 World Bank Group 2023.

374 Knight 2020.

375 World Bank and Ministry of Planning and Investment of Vietnam 2016.

376 Ibid.

377 General Statistics Office (GSO) 2016; UNICEF 2022a; UNICEF 2022c.

378 Missing UNICEF source; to be added.

379 World Bank and Ministry of Planning and Investment of Vietnam 2016.

Urban migrants

13.6% of Viet Nam's population are internal migrants, with children heavily impacted by both internal and international migration.³⁸⁰ Key drivers of migration include economic hardship, natural disasters, and the need for better employment opportunities. However, migration exposes children to trafficking, violence, economic exploitation, and limited access to essential services. Children of urban migrants in Viet Nam face significant barriers to equality of opportunity. Over 5 million Vietnamese, including 2.7 million in Ho Chi Minh City, lack permanent registration where they reside. This system restricts access to essential services such as healthcare, education, social protection, utilities, and employment opportunities for those without permanent status and their children. The hurdles to obtaining permanent registration include lengthy waiting periods, extensive documentation, and unofficial payments to local officials, leaving many as temporary residents for years.³⁸¹

Early Childhood Development (ECD)

Evidence, elaborated on in Chapter 3 and Annex I, shows that ECD provides the highest cumulative return on investment. To attain full development potential, people require nurturing care in their early years, including access to quality health care and nutrition services (e.g., pre- and postnatal care); early cognitive stimulation and learning opportunities (e.g., caregiver programs and preschool classes that structure learning around age-appropriate and play-based activities that stimulate child development and early socioemotional skills); and a nurturing, secure, safe environment. ECD is a fundamental entryway to learning, and health care, with early interventions in the critical first 1,000 days of life, vital in mitigating risks and promoting protective factors that enable healthy brain development and yield cumulative gains for future well-being and productivity. ECD also brings greater benefits to children from disadvantaged groups.

Stunting

While Chapter 5 does delve into persistent stunting rates in Viet Nam and the implications across a wide range of children's developmental outcomes, it is important to emphasise that stunting is a cross-sectoral issue that extends beyond health and nutrition. Stunting is the result of a cumulative process that starts in pregnancy and continues in infancy and early childhood and has been shown to be strongly associated with repeated experiences of illness (e.g., diarrhoea, malaria, acute respiratory infection), insufficient dietary intake, poor WASH, environmental factors, caregiver neglect, among other disadvantageous childhood conditions.³⁸² Stunted children are more likely to do poorly in school, limiting their lifelong earning potential and labour force productivity.

Socio-economic disparities

Socio-economic disparities significantly shape the opportunities and outcomes for children in Viet Nam, creating stark contrasts between children from affluent urban families and those from poorer rural households. Children from wealthier families, particularly in cities like Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh City, typically benefit from high-quality education through upper-secondary school, often supplemented by private tutoring. They are more likely to complete a university degree, paving the way for greater career opportunities. In contrast, children from poor rural families often face limited educational opportunities, with many unable to advance beyond lower-secondary school. While Viet Nam's education system is inclusive and equitable at the

³⁸⁰ UNICEF EAPRO 2021.

³⁸¹ World Bank and Ministry of Planning and Investment of Vietnam 2016.

³⁸² de Onis and Branca 2016; Sinha et al. 2018; Galasso and Wagstaff 2017; Galasso and Wagstaff 2018; United Nations Children's Fund 2017.

lower-secondary level, it becomes increasingly exclusive and inequitable in higher levels of education.³⁸³

Access to healthcare also highlights socio-economic disparities. Children from poorer families are more likely to experience higher mortality rates, lower immunisation coverage, and limited access to clean energy, which affects their overall well-being. Malnutrition remains a significant issue for children in disadvantaged households, further hindering their physical and cognitive development.³⁸⁴

9.1.1 Policy Recommendations

Viet Nam has achieved remarkable progress across most aspects of the socio-economic life of children and the Vietnamese people, especially on poverty reduction, access to key social services and addressing vulnerability. However, COVID-19 and the climate disasters in recent years have revealed some systemic weaknesses and some emerging challenges.

First, quality of services could be further strengthened in all social sectors, especially on education, health and WASH, and social services by strengthening national standards, monitoring mechanisms, and capacity-building efforts for service providers, as well as designating and regulating dedicated budget lines for critical child-relevant services to finance these efforts. Service quality enhancements should prioritise the fulfilment of children's rights, ensuring that all children have equitable access to high-quality services that meet their needs and promote their wellbeing and uphold their dignity.

Second, the COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated existing inequalities, especially with regards to already disadvantaged groups including ethnic minorities, migrants and people with disabilities. These groups tend to be left behind, despite various targeted programmes and policies by the government and by non-state players. Addressing these inequities is critical, and should involve embedding equity and inclusion in all policy frameworks and programmes, and tailoring interventions to specific vulnerable populations, such as ethnic minorities, urban migrants, and children with disabilities.

Third, resilience and sustainability interventions are much needed in the context of worsening climate situation and emerging challenges. Integrating climate adaptation and disaster risk reduction strategies into all social development programmes would be crucial to mitigate the impacts of climate change and future shocks on vulnerable children and families.

To promote equitable opportunities for all children in Viet Nam, targeted policies addressing disparities in education, healthcare access, and social services are essential. Building on Viet Nam's progress and aligning with its commitment to gender equality, disability inclusion, and ethnic minority development, these recommendations provide actionable pathways for advancing equity and inclusion:

Education

- **Transition to universal upper-secondary attendance** by replacing exam-based selection with policies ensuring that all children, regardless of background, can complete secondary education. Improve curricula to focus on job-relevant, non-cognitive, and problem-solving skills for a competitive labour market.³⁸⁵
- **Support for ethnic minority children** by expanding initiatives like high-quality early-childhood

383 World Bank and Ministry of Planning and Investment of Vietnam 2016.

384 General Statistics Office of Viet Nam (GSO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) 2021.

385 World Bank and Ministry of Planning and Investment of Vietnam 2016.

education, teaching assistants fluent in local languages, and conditional cash transfers to encourage school attendance. Education can also be a platform to tackle prejudice and stereotyping, focusing on appreciating and respecting the diversity of Vietnamese ethnicity and culture.³⁸⁶

- **Incorporate gender-sensitive policies to eliminate barriers for girls**, especially in rural and ethnic minority communities, ensuring equal access to education. Include discussions about sexual orientation and gender identity in the curriculum to provide students with access to accurate information, contributing to understanding and inclusion.
- **Support children with disabilities**, ensuring that children with disabilities can fully participate in school and reach their academic potential, improving their opportunities for social inclusion and future independence.

Healthcare

- **Enhanced maternal and child nutrition** - Launch a national nutrition programme inspired by successful models, such as Thailand's, to reduce malnutrition for all children, irrespective of socio-economic status or ethnicity. Promote exclusive breastfeeding, extend maternity leave, fortify staple foods with essential nutrients, and distribute nutritional supplements to women of childbearing age.³⁸⁷
- **Improved sanitation and hygiene** - Address malnutrition and disease by implementing targeted sanitation programs with community-driven behavioural incentives. Focus efforts on ethnic minority regions where access to improved sanitation is limited.³⁸⁸ Recognising that inadequate sanitation disproportionately affects girls – who often bear the burden of water collection and require safe, private facilities for menstrual hygiene – these interventions will yield significant benefits. Improved sanitation will enhance the health and safety of women and girls, empowering them to participate more fully in education, work, and community life.
- **Expand inclusive health coverage via healthcare programs** that address disparities faced by children in low-income and ethnic minority households. Ensure rural communities have access to quality care and immunisation services.³⁸⁹

Social Services

- **Strengthen disability inclusion by** regularly monitoring the implementation of the Law on Disabilities and ensure comprehensive service provision for children with disabilities. Promote social organisations that empower families of children with disabilities to advocate for their needs and support effective policy implementation.³⁹⁰

Promote equity and inclusion

- **Promote the value of daughters:** Reduce the sex ratio imbalance by reforming population policies, expanding pension systems, and conducting public campaigns to highlight the contributions of daughters. These measures can shift societal attitudes and foster gender equity from an early age.³⁹¹

386 Ibid.

387 Ibid.

388 Ibid.

389 General Statistics Office of Viet Nam (GSO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) 2021.

390 World Bank and Ministry of Planning and Investment of Vietnam 2016.

391 Ibid.

- **Strengthen the Gender Equality Law (GEL)** by explicitly recognising sexual and gender minorities, ensuring equal opportunities across education, healthcare, and social services.³⁹² This will create a safer and more supportive environment for children of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations.
- **Improve the representation of women.** More opportunities for women in public leadership roles could be created by eliminating gender discrimination in the retirement age and using affirmative action as a short-term measure.³⁹³ This creates visible role models for young girls. This can inspire children to pursue leadership positions and challenge gender stereotypes from an early age.
- **Representation of ethnic minorities and other marginalized groups:** Encourage ethnic minority representation in local governance and the Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs. Support social organisations representing ethnic minorities, children with disabilities, and sexual and gender minorities to influence policy development and implementation.³⁹⁴ This will ensure that the needs of marginalized children are understood and addressed in public policies, fostering greater inclusion and equity.

9.2 Climate Change

Viet Nam is among the countries most severely impacted by climate change, requiring continued efforts to strengthen resilience against natural disasters and climate-related risks. Viet Nam's susceptibility to climate change is exacerbated by its geographical and economic context. The country's diverse climate zones experience increasingly extreme weather, with rising temperatures and precipitation intensifying risks. Viet Nam's 3,200 km of coastline, combined with the concentration of over 75% of its population in the Red River and Mekong deltas, heightens exposure to flooding and sea-level rise. The agricultural sector, employing 40.3% of the labour force and contributing 15.3% of GDP, is particularly vulnerable, with rice production – critical to livelihoods and exports – at significant risk. These disruptions disproportionately affect disadvantaged groups and threaten the country's economic growth and development.³⁹⁵

Children's vulnerability to climate change

Key biophysical climate change hazards in Viet Nam are variable rainfall, increased temperatures, sea level rises (SLRs) and extreme weather events and related disasters. All have secondary impacts: flooding and landslides, biodiversity loss, drought, saltwater intrusion, storm surges and typhoons. These impacts then have tertiary impacts: decreased agricultural yields, compromised infrastructure of schools and homes, water scarcity, poor water quality and migration.³⁹⁶

Children are particularly vulnerable to these impacts due to their stage of growth and development, dependence on caregivers, and lack of influence in decision-making processes.³⁹⁷ According to the Children's Climate Risk Index 2021, Viet Nam scores 6.8 (ranked 37 globally), with climate and environmental risks rated very high (8.8) and child vulnerability at 3.0.³⁹⁸ Alarming, 99.5% of children in Viet Nam (26.2 million) face three or more types of climate shocks, compared to

³⁹² World Bank Group 2023.

³⁹³ World Bank and Ministry of Planning and Investment of Viet Nam 2016.

³⁹⁴ World Bank Group 2023.

³⁹⁵ UNICEF Viet Nam 2024b.

³⁹⁶ Ministry of Planning and Investments and UNICEF Viet Nam 2021.

³⁹⁷ Ibid.

³⁹⁸ UNICEF 2021b.

89% regionally and 73% globally, and 94.6% face four or more types of shocks.³⁹⁹ Despite some recognition of children in climate change policy and strategies in Viet Nam, there are notable gaps in child-specific references across the national legal and policy landscape. There are also relatively few legal instruments that recognise children's rights in relation to climate change to express their views and to participate.⁴⁰⁰

Emerging evidence highlights a strong correlation between climate change and poverty, particularly impacting children. Children from the poorest households are disproportionately affected by the economic consequences of extreme weather events. In Viet Nam, half of the children from the poorest households had experienced at least one extreme weather event that negatively impacted their household economy by the age of 15, compared to only 17% of children from the wealthiest households.⁴⁰¹ According to a UNICEF Viet Nam survey,⁴⁰² young people in Viet Nam report significant effects of climate change and natural disasters on their lives and communities. Among respondents, 69% noted that their environment is polluted, 46% observed a reduction in the quality and quantity of meals, and 43% experienced decreased family income due to climate change and natural disasters. These findings highlight the pervasive and multifaceted impacts of climate change, particularly on children and their immediate surroundings.

Health Impacts:

Environmental degradation, exacerbated by Viet Nam's reliance on fossil fuels, significantly affects children's health and well-being. Viet Nam remains a major greenhouse gas (GHG) emitter and contributor to air pollution, leading to high rates of lower respiratory infections linked to air quality. Water pollution increases the prevalence of diarrheal and waterborne diseases, which disproportionately affect rural children. The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that 88% of diseases attributable to climate change impact children under five. Rising temperatures contribute to increasing cases of dengue fever, hand-foot-mouth disease (HFMD), and other illnesses, compounding health risks for children and the elderly.⁴⁰³ Unregulated practices such as overuse of toxic pesticides, poor land management, and reliance on coal further intensify these challenges, harming both health and the environment.⁴⁰⁴

Malnutrition Impacts:

Climate change threatens food security, particularly for children. Rising sea levels and saltwater intrusion render water sources unfit for human and agricultural use, reducing crop yields and family incomes. Periods of food insecurity result in undernutrition, delaying children's development, lowering school attendance, and increasing long-term health vulnerabilities. Malnutrition remains a critical issue, with around one in four Vietnamese children under five suffering from stunted growth, particularly among ethnic minorities.⁴⁰⁵

WASH Impacts:

Climate shocks and stresses severely impact the Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) sector. Reduced access to safe water and sanitation facilities during floods and droughts increases public health risks, particularly in densely populated areas like the deltas. Inadequate WASH

³⁹⁹ UNICEF 2023.

⁴⁰⁰ Ministry of Planning and Investments and UNICEF Viet Nam 2021.

⁴⁰¹ Young Lives 2023.

⁴⁰² UNICEF Viet Nam 2022b.

⁴⁰³ Ministry of Planning and Investments and UNICEF Viet Nam 2021.

⁴⁰⁴ UNICEF Viet Nam 2024b.

⁴⁰⁵ Ministry of Planning and Investments and UNICEF Viet Nam 2021; UNICEF Viet Nam 2024b.

services heighten exposure to waterborne diseases and weaken resilience to future climate-related disasters. Investing in robust WASH systems is critical for reducing vulnerabilities and protecting public health.⁴⁰⁶

Education Impacts:

Climate change significantly disrupts children's education. Droughts and water scarcity reduce food and water availability, impacting children's ability to concentrate and perform well in school. Heat stress and related diseases lower both students' learning capacity and teachers' ability to instruct effectively. Flooding and extreme weather events often damage school infrastructure, leading to closures and increased dropout rates. These disruptions contribute to underachievement and failure, exacerbating inequalities in education access and outcomes.⁴⁰⁷

Development and wellbeing Impacts:

The loss of biodiversity diminishes recreational, cultural, and spiritual benefits crucial for children's development. As ecosystems degrade, opportunities for outdoor activities and connections to nature are reduced, affecting physical and psychological well-being.⁴⁰⁸ Climate change drives migration, as families are forced to leave areas where livelihoods are no longer sustainable due to extreme weather events. Displacement exposes children to neglect, increased school dropouts, and heightened risks of violence and exploitation, particularly for girls. Disrupted routines and loss of stability contribute to mental health and psychosocial challenges for children and youth.⁴⁰⁹

Worsening Disparities Impacts:

Children, women, and ethnic minorities face heightened vulnerabilities to climate risks. Limited access to clean water and proper sanitation in rural areas increases susceptibility to disease. Women and girls bear additional burdens, such as traveling long distances to fetch water, which often leads to missed school or work and increased exposure to violence. Informal settlements further exacerbate health risks due to reliance on unsafe water sources.⁴¹⁰

9.2.1 Policy recommendations

A vision for 2035 emphasizes fostering a sustainable environment that safeguards Viet Nam's air, land, and water quality. This includes integrating climate resilience into economic strategies, social policies, and infrastructure development to mitigate the most severe impacts of climate change. The approach also focuses on advancing a diverse, clean, and secure energy portfolio, as outlined by the World Bank and Viet Nam's Ministry of Planning and Investment in 2016.⁴¹¹ These recommendations emphasise the urgency of integrating child-centred considerations into Viet Nam's climate policies and the importance of collaborative, multi-sectoral approaches for sustainable and resilient growth and development towards 2045.

Social protection

- **Expand cash transfers.** Viet Nam's Master Plan on Social Assistance Reform and Development (MPSARD) includes provisions for regular and emergency cash assistance.

406 Ministry of Planning and Investments and UNICEF Viet Nam 2021; UNICEF Viet Nam 2024b.

407 UNICEF Viet Nam 2024b.

408 Ministry of Planning and Investments and UNICEF Viet Nam 2021.

409 Ibid.

410 UNICEF Viet Nam 2024b.

411 World Bank and Ministry of Planning and Investment of Vietnam 2016.

While these measures help prevent school dropouts, health service disruptions, and food insecurity during crises, they require enhancements to address systemic risks such as climate change, economic crises, and pandemics flexibly.⁴¹²

- **Integrate emergency clauses in regular social assistance** to adapt to climate shocks effectively, complementing the short-term relief provided by current policies.⁴¹³

Child-centred climate policies

- **Incorporate child-specific considerations into Viet Nam's National Adaptation Plan (NAP), Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), and other key strategies** such as the National Strategy on Green Growth (NSGG) and the National Strategy on Climate Change (NSCC). These frameworks should explicitly recognise children as stakeholders and integrate their needs into sectoral action plans. Policies should address child health, WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene), and education by integrating eco-design principles, climate-smart schools, sustainable urbanisation, and awareness campaigns.⁴¹⁴
- **Engage children in climate policy discussions** to empower them as advocates for their own futures and priorities.⁴¹⁵

Data and evidence

- **Strengthen national climate systems** by incorporating detailed climate risk monitoring data, focusing on outcomes that directly impact children.⁴¹⁶
- **Regularly assess the implementation of prioritized climate solutions** to identify bottlenecks and gaps in governance.⁴¹⁷ This requires investing in more accessible data and information for decision making and monitoring progress.⁴¹⁸
- **Collect sex- and age-disaggregated data** to better understand the unique impacts of climate change on children and inform evidence-based advocacy.⁴¹⁹

Multi-Sectoral Approaches

- **Engage the Ministry of National Resources and Environment (MONRE), Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA), Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), and Ministry of Health (MOH)** in cross-sectoral efforts to mainstream child-sensitive climate actions into social, health, and educational policies.⁴²⁰
- Partner with relevant development partners and sustainability organisations to address biodiversity loss, pollution, and child participation in advocacy. Strengthen collaborations with local communities and NGOs to integrate climate adaptation strategies into education, health, and child protection initiatives.⁴²¹

412 Ministry of Planning and Investments and UNICEF Viet Nam 2021.

413 Ibid.

414 Ibid.

415 Ibid.

416 Ibid.

417 UNICEF Viet Nam 2024b.

418 Ministry of Planning and Investments and UNICEF Viet Nam 2021.

419 Ibid.

420 Ibid.

421 Ibid.

Building a Low-Carbon, Resilient Economy

- **Update technical guidelines and service standards for climate-resilient infrastructure.** For instance, promote climate-adaptive designs in health facilities, schools, water and sanitation, transportation networks, and housing.⁴²²
- **Create national task forces to enhance coordination** between key stakeholders across sectors (e.g., education, health, agriculture, and energy). Develop policies to attract private sector investments and better leverage climate finance.⁴²³
- **Train stakeholders**, including policymakers, local authorities, and community leaders, on climate resilience strategies specific to their sectors. Increase public awareness of climate risks and sector-specific adaptation strategies. Use accessible platforms to inform communities about sustainable practices and resilience measures (e.g., efficient energy use, water conservation, and disaster preparedness).⁴²⁴ Introduce climate change adaptation topics into school curricula and provide training for educators to raise awareness of environmental challenges.⁴²⁵
- **Shift towards diverse, clean, and secure energy sources** to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution. Promote incentives for private sector participation in sustainable energy solutions.⁴²⁶
- **Ensure economic and infrastructure planning accounts for environmental and climate costs**, fostering inclusive and sustainable growth.⁴²⁷

9.3 Digitalisation and Technological Change

Impacts of technology

Education (for further details, see chapter 4)

The impact of technology on education is twofold. First, technological innovation has changed labour market demands, necessitating education systems to upgrade the technical skill sets of future generations. Second, technology offers tools that can significantly improve access, inclusion, performance, and competency development in education. Achieving these benefits requires an effective educational technology ecosystem, supported by robust infrastructure, well-trained administrators and teachers, effective inter-agency coordination, and adequate funding with proper management. Despite challenges, notable progress has been made in Viet Nam by governments, local authorities, and schools in integrating technology into education to promote equity and inclusion across all levels of education.⁴²⁸

Health and nutrition

The impacts of technology on children's health are multifaceted, offering both opportunities and challenges. Advances in genomics and life sciences, such as genetically modified crops, have the potential to improve food quality and security by enhancing livestock feed and reducing import

⁴²² UNICEF Viet Nam 2024b.

⁴²³ Ibid.

⁴²⁴ Ibid.

⁴²⁵ Ministry of Planning and Investments and UNICEF Viet Nam 2021.

⁴²⁶ World Bank and Ministry of Planning and Investment of Viet Nam 2016.

⁴²⁷ Ibid.

⁴²⁸ UNESCO 2023.

dependency. However, these innovations also raise concerns about health risks, prompting demands for greater transparency and regulation.⁴²⁹ In healthcare, the integration of digital and patient-centred systems can improve service delivery, reduce systemic pressures, and promote health equity for children.⁴³⁰

Child protection (for further details, see chapter 8)

Approximately nine in ten children 12-17 years use internet, almost all of whom are online on a regular basis.⁴³¹ Digital technology provides young adolescents with opportunities for knowledge development and self-expression but also poses significant risks. The rapid advancement of mobile technology has introduced new dating practices, increasing adolescent relationships, which can lead to premarital pregnancies and child marriage.⁴³² Additionally, adolescents, particularly girls, face heightened risks of grooming, human trafficking, and exploitation due to sharing personal information online.⁴³³ Despite widespread internet use, only 36% of children aged 12-17 have received online safety training. Alarmingly, about 1% of these children, or an estimated 94,000, have experienced online sexual exploitation, including blackmail, unauthorized sharing of sexual images, or coercion into sexual activities through promises of money or gifts.⁴³⁴ Realising the full potential of digitalisation requires a dual focus on inclusive access and robust protections to ensure children's safety, well-being, and digital empowerment.

9.4 Policy Recommendations

Education

- **Secure funding through partnerships with private and public sectors.** Foster collaboration among educators, administrators, EdTech providers, and parents to build a robust digital education ecosystem aligned with SDG4. Develop professional learning communities and involve stakeholders in decision-making for adopting educational technologies.⁴³⁵
- **Provide targeted training on new technologies and digital transformation,** emphasising the intersection of technology, pedagogy, and content knowledge. Ensure technical, administrative, and peer support during the introduction of technology in education. Partner with technology providers to deliver effective training programs.⁴³⁶
- Health and nutrition
- **Introduce a national ID linked to social insurance to support electronic health records.** Simplify insurance enrolment processes, provide incentives for participation, and adopt a systematic approach to social protection to increase insurance coverage.
- **Promote collaboration** between the Ministry of Health (MOH), Ministry of Science and Technology, and Ministry of Information and Communications to develop a digital health strategy. Secure funding from domestic and international sources, including government agencies, private businesses, and social entrepreneurs.

⁴²⁹ World Bank and Ministry of Planning and Investment of Viet Nam 2016.

⁴³⁰ Dang et al. 2021.

⁴³¹ ECPAT, INTERPOL, and UNICEF 2022.

⁴³² UNICEF and UNFPA 2018.

⁴³³ ECPAT, INTERPOL, and UNICEF 2022.

⁴³⁴ Ibid.

⁴³⁵ UNESCO 2023.

⁴³⁶ Ibid.

- **Strengthen information technology platforms** to protect patient privacy and prevent cybersecurity breaches in EHR and electronic medical record (EMR) systems.
- **Invest in resources to demonstrate the effectiveness of digital health initiatives** and build a network of collaborators, including administrators, clinicians, researchers, and community representatives. Raise public awareness about the benefits of digital health and encourage community engagement to enhance adoption and self-management behaviours.

Child protection

- **Educate children on online safety skills** and integrate this into the school curriculum. Foster collaboration among relevant agencies to ensure the internet is safe and supports children's learning and creativity.⁴³⁷
- **Clarify and expand legal definitions of child abuse and exploitation**, including grooming, live streaming of child sexual abuse, online sexual extortion, and harassment. Place children at the centre of policymaking related to digital technology to ensure their needs and safety are prioritized.⁴³⁸

Privatisation and Market Opening

The United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGP) emphasise several core responsibilities – the state's duty to protect children's rights, the corporate responsibility to respect those rights, and the role of the government in holding businesses and companies accountable. This framework highlights the importance of integrating Child Rights and Business (CRB) principles into both government policy and corporate practices to safeguard children's well-being.

Among other impacts of businesses on children, the impacts of privatisation in social services draws attention the broader need for responsible business practices that centre children's rights in Viet Nam. Privatisation in social services reveals mixed impacts for Vietnamese children, addressing gaps in quality and accessibility while also deepening disparities. In education, privatisation has led to a mix of public and private schools, particularly at the upper-secondary level, where 15% of schools are non-public, with numbers growing in urban areas. Public education relies on a combination of government subsidies and parent payments, creating disparities in funding and quality. Private tutoring, often essential for academic success, exacerbates inequalities as poorer families struggle to afford it, raising concerns about fairness and system effectiveness.⁴³⁹ In health, privatisation offers improved service quality and accessibility for some but highlights significant disparities. Families often opt for private healthcare due to better service conditions, yet marginalized groups, such as ethnic minorities and rural communities, face barriers due to costs and lack of insurance. Without robust regulations and strengthened public infrastructure, privatisation risks worsening inequalities in healthcare access and outcomes, particularly for vulnerable children.⁴⁴⁰

Within the UNGP framework, governments must strengthen regulatory oversight to ensure private actors respect children's rights and uphold equity in access, quality, and affordability, while businesses must adopt Child Rights and Responsible Business Practices (CRB) to minimise disparities and promote inclusive development. Robust accountability and grievance mechanisms should also be established to safeguard against violations, to help ensure that privatisation is in compliance with the overarching goal of protecting and promoting children's

437 UNICEF 2017a.

438 Ibid.

439 Dang and Glewwe 2017.

440 Nguyen et al. 2023.

rights. By integrating CRB principles into business practices, companies can more effectively safeguard children's rights, while governments can enhance their regulatory frameworks to ensure compliance and accountability. This alignment promotes ethical business conduct while reinforcing the government's commitment to protecting children's rights in business settings.

9.4.1 Policy Recommendations

- **Creation and enforcement of regulations to promote quality, safety, and equity** of social services in education and healthcare in the mixed public-private system.⁴⁴¹

441 Ibid.

10. Conclusion


Today, Viet Nam's pathway to inclusive growth, faces new and evolving challenges. Rapid urbanisation, demographic shifts, environmental pressures, climate change, and rising inequality risk leaving vulnerable populations, including children, behind. While the country has made remarkable progress in education, health, and poverty reduction, significant gaps persist. In densely populated urban areas, industrial zones, and ethnic minority regions, children continue to face barriers to accessing quality education, healthcare, and social protection. These gaps are further exacerbated by migration, climate change, and limited child-focused policies within critical sectors like nutrition and healthcare, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), child protection, social protection, and early childhood development (ECD) and education (ECE). These inequities, if left unaddressed, risk undermining the sustainability and inclusiveness of Viet Nam's growth. Investing in children's comprehensive development is not only a moral obligation rooted in Viet Nam's commitment to international agreements such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, but it also serves to build a critical foundation for a skilled, healthy, and equitable workforce, which is critical for achieving Viet Nam's aspirations for 2045.

In light of Viet Nam's ambition to become a high-income country by 2045, policy discussions have also referenced an aspirational HCI target of 0.75 to 0.80. Achieving this ambitious goal will require a decisive shift toward early, equitable, and sustained investments in children. Specifically, it will require improvements across the HCI's core components⁴⁴², improving child survival and nutrition outcomes, ensuring every child accesses high-quality learning from early childhood through upper secondary, and expanding inclusive healthcare and WASH services. It will further require investments in cross-cutting enablers such as social protection including through universal child grants to protect all children and especially the most vulnerable, to reduce inequities, buffer against shocks, and promote investments in human capital. Preparing for the future by addressing climate resilience and disaster risk reduction will further be critical to prevent learning and health disruptions that could stall this progress, alongside ensuring governance, financing, and digital equity are strengthened and reach every child.

This report sought to address these challenges by presenting evidence-based policy recommendations for the comprehensive development of children, up to 2045, as a pathway to enhancing human resources and capital. Our findings support the integration of child-centred approaches into key national priorities, including education reform, healthcare access, and climate resilience, to ensure that no child is left behind. A key component of this vision includes a robust social protection system that responds to the needs of children in emergencies and a supportive school climate that prioritizes mental well-being alongside academic achievement. Furthermore, the report emphasises the importance of resilient systems and infrastructure and sustainable practices, particularly in vulnerable communities, to safeguard children's futures in the face of climate risks.

Viet Nam currently finds itself at the centre of changing geopolitical realities. With slowing economic growth in some major economies, and potentially growing political and trade tensions across the globe, nations like Viet Nam, may emerge as favourable alternatives for global investment. Major companies are increasingly diversifying their supply chains to ASEAN countries, bolstering their economic integration and regional cooperation. Moreover, ASEAN member states are poised to foster closer intra-regional trade ties and expanding partnerships with global markets and each other. Viet Nam stands well-positioned to capitalise on this shift and accelerate its economic trajectory. Looking toward 2045, Viet Nam's commitments to sustainability, coupled with its emphasis on human capital development, would position it to

⁴⁴² These refer to children's survival (probability of survival to age 5), schooling (expected years of school, harmonised test scores, learning-adjusted years of school), and health (adult survival rate, and not being stunted).



take an important leadership role in transitioning to a more sustainable and inclusive economic model within ASEAN and beyond. Investing in comprehensive child development is crucial to achieving this vision. Children today will be the leaders, innovators, and workers who will navigate these complexities in the following decades. By nurturing a generation of human capital that values equity, innovation, and environmental stewardship, Viet Nam can position itself as one of the regional leaders in ASEAN and a model for inclusive growth in the 21st century.

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Annex I: The Case for Investing in Comprehensive Child Development

Theories on economic growth and human capital formation emphasise that sustained economic growth is driven by strategic, high-quality, and timely investments made in children's education, health, and well-being today, towards maximising the future potential for individual productivity of the labour force. Traditional economic growth theories have identified physical capital and labour inputs as critical factors which drive national productivity and economic growth in the long-term, driven by labour efficiency and quality improvements, technology, and capital accumulation. Refinements of these theories to include human capital highlight that comprehensive child development is not merely a moral or social imperative but also an essential economic strategy, as investments in both the quantity and quality of the labour force – through improvements in their health, education and skills– improve worker productivity and therefore maximise the potential for long-term economic growth and output.⁴⁴³

Research by Heckman and other authors in the field of economics and developmental neuroscience further emphasises the importance of timely investments in early childhood, especially of children from disadvantaged backgrounds, as these significantly impact children's socio-emotional, cognitive, and physical development, and therefore the development of physical and cognitive capacities, which form the basis of individual learning, skills development and productivity later in life.⁴⁴⁴ The first 1,000 days of a child's life, are a critical window for ensuring that investments made in children are not wasted, as this period is marked by rapid brain development and the formation of foundational executive functions.⁴⁴⁵ Early childhood interventions have been shown to lead to improved cognitive and emotional development, better educational outcomes, and enhanced economic well-being.⁴⁴⁶ Ensuring proactive early interventions – such as prenatal care, proper nutrition, immunisation, and early childhood development and education, social protection and clean water and sanitation – and preventing early life deprivations and disparities, therefore maximises not only the potential for optimal development and learning capacities later in life, but also ensures that returns on early investments are realised.⁴⁴⁷ These interventions benefit children directly and also contribute to a more skilled workforce, increased productivity, and reduced social costs, making them a strategic social and economic investment for society and businesses alike.

These interventions are also essential as even short periods of extreme deprivation can lead to irreversible negative outcomes affecting long-term health, education, and life opportunities⁴⁴⁸, but also because, as demonstrated by the Heckman Curve (Figure 29), the returns to society

443 The Cobb-Douglas production function, typically expressed as $Y = AK^a L^{1-a}$, establishes that total output (Y) (i.e. real GDP) is generated as a function of both physical capital (K) and labour (L). A represents total factor productivity (i.e. technological change), and a and $1 - a$ respectively represent the output elasticity of capital and labour. Expanding this model to include human capital, via the function $Y = AK^a (hL)^{1-a}$, reflects the integration of both the quantity and quality of labour through the human capital per worker variable, h . This modification of the model accounts for the importance of investments in education, health, and training of the workforce, to improve labour productivity as a necessary factor for driving economic growth. See Cobb and Douglas 1928; Solow 1956; Denison 1967; Maddison 1984.

444 Heckman, Pinto, and Savelyev 2013; Samson, Fajth, and François 2016.

445 Diamond 2013; Heckman 2006; Heckman, Pinto, and Savelyev 2013.

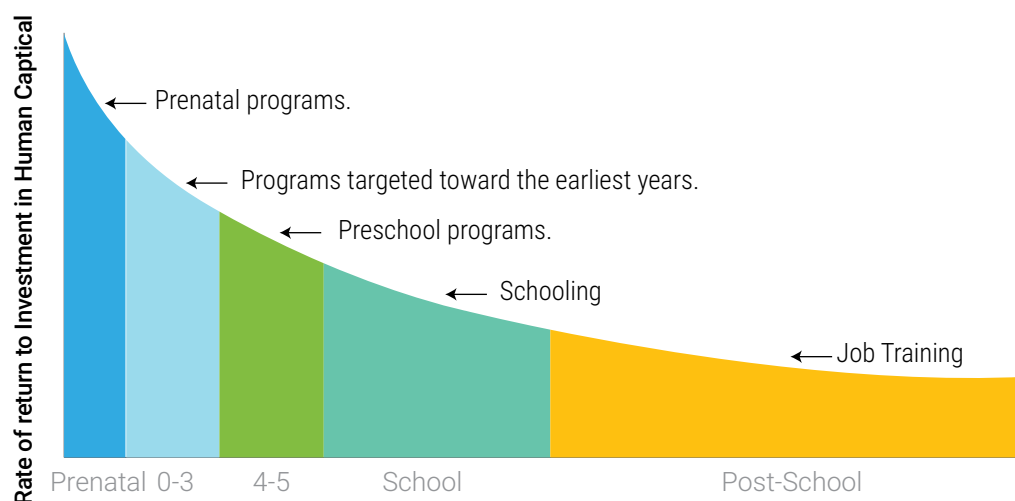
446 Karoly et al. 1998; Knudsen et al. 2006.

447 Doyle et al. 2009; Heckman 2006; Heckman and Masterov 2007.

448 Shonkoff et al. 2012; Bick and Nelson 2016; Todd Pollack et al. 2021; Brooks-Gunn and Duncan 1997; Welsch and Zimmer 2009; Hillemeier et al. 2010; Beckett et al. 2006.

on investment in early childhood are substantially higher.⁴⁴⁹ Early investments, beginning with prenatal programmes and programmes targeted at early years and preschool, are economically efficient, as they lead to better health, education and social outcomes at the individual and societal levels, and higher worker productivity in the long-term, all of which foster economic growth and social wellbeing.

Figure 29 Heckman Curve⁴⁵⁰



Achieving Viet Nam’s vision of becoming a high-income country by 2045 and avoiding the middle-income trap⁴⁵¹ will require a transformative shift in its workforce towards more productive, knowledge-intensive, and high value-added sectors. This shift hinges on equipping the future labour force – today’s children and youth – with advanced skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, and strong interpersonal communication. Investing in comprehensive child development is vital for fostering sustained economic growth and innovation while preparing the future workforce of Viet Nam for the challenges of a digitized and green economy. While early childhood interventions yield the highest returns, investments in secondary education and lifelong learning are equally critical for equipping Viet Nam’s youth with the skills needed for a digitized and green economy. Sen’s framework for capability enhancement posits that the expansion of individuals’ capabilities, which includes access to education, health services, and equitable opportunities, are an investment in human capital and in society.⁴⁵²

Creating supportive and enabling environments to allow all children the opportunity to fully reach their potential facilitates not only individual success and valuable life outcomes, but also national economic objectives by preparing a more capable, innovative, and adaptive workforce in a more inclusive and sustainable economic growth model.⁴⁵³ For Viet Nam, integrating these approaches into its development planning can ensure that its human capital not only supports but drives inclusive and sustainable economic growth in the decades to come.

449 Heckman 2006; Cannon et al. 2017.

450 Conti and Heckman 2014.

451 Jimenez, Nguyen, and Patrinos 2012.

452 Sen 2001.

453 World Health Organisation 2018.

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