Children AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
For the Period of 2021 – 2030
As the first country in Asia and the second globally to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1990, Viet Nam has made rapid progress in human development and economic growth over the past 30 years. Initiated in 1986, economic and political reforms under Đổi Mới transformed Viet Nam from one of the world’s poorest nations to a lower middle-income country - making it one of the most dynamic emerging countries in the Asian region. Poverty rates fell from 58 per cent in 1993 to 9.8 per cent in 2017\(^1\). Infant and under-five mortality rates have decreased significantly, immunization coverage is high, and more children than ever are enrolled in school. Progress is also evident in other areas, such as expanding access to safe drinking water and sanitation.

Despite these many positive strides, children in Viet Nam face unprecedented challenges. Global evidence demonstrates that investment in children is the most effective investment that governments can make to secure future economic growth. Prioritization of investment in children in national development strategies and plans is vital for Viet Nam, especially in light of the demographic transition that will kick-in between 2025-2030. Consequently, Viet Nam must focus on the development of a healthy and well-educated workforce.

Based on a thorough review of indicators relevant for achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), UNICEF has identified the following child-focused priority areas for comprehensive investment in Viet Nam during 2021-2030.

\(^1\) World Bank (2018) Databank
2. ISSUES, PRIORITIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHILDREN

2.1. Poverty and vulnerabilities

A complex array of factors affects a considerable number of children across Viet Nam.

Poverty is a key contributor to child vulnerability, with 80 per cent of ethnic minority children deprived from access to social services and basic living standards. Just 10 per cent of children and less than 1 per cent of those under 36 months have access to cash transfer schemes due to highly fragmented and categorical schemes with limited State budget investment.

Adolescents, accounting for nearly 23 per cent of the total population, are increasingly vulnerable due to mental health issues related to academic stress; physical, emotional and sexual violence at home, school, online and in their community; boys experiencing high rates of mortality; gender norms that adversely affect girls and those with various sexual orientations. Furthermore, access to education, health and protection services varies depending on geographic location. The Law on Children currently sets the age of the child at 16 years, with a major gap in not extending support and protection to those aged 16-17 years.

Key proposed actions include:

• Strengthen legal and policy frameworks, public investment and institutional mechanisms to comprehensively address the multiple vulnerabilities of children.
• Develop and integrate key targets and indicators for children in the National Strategy on Children, national, sectoral and sub-national socio-economic development strategies and plans.
• Approve Multi-Dimensional Child Poverty measurement as part of national poverty measurements to support monitoring of poverty-related SDGs.
• Amendment of the Law on Children through widening the scope of the child definition, to encompass those under-18 in alignment with the CRC, is a critical step that needs to be taken.
• Generation and use of data disaggregated by age, gender, wealth quintile and ethnicity to inform such legal frameworks, plans and budgets in support of inclusive, equitable and quality-focused basic social services, ultimately contributing to achievement of the SDGs.
• Identify and allocate budget for social assistance for children in the 0-3 year age bracket as a key intervention to break the poverty cycle and ensure an equal start in life.

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3. General Statistics Office and UNFPA (2016) National Survey on Sexual and Reproductive Health Among Vietnamese Adolescents and Young Adults Aged 10-24, Ha Noi
2.2. Emerging issues: Urbanization, climate change and pandemics

Viet Nam is among the fastest urbanizing countries. It has the sixth largest urban population in East Asia, with 32 million people (more than one-third of the population) living in urban areas in 2016 - of which children accounted for 26 per cent. Its annual 4 per cent urban population growth is among the region's highest. By 2030, it is projected that 46 million people will live in urban areas. Ho Chi Minh City as the southern business hub, the capital Ha Noi and central Da Nang are the most urbanized cities in the country. Family systems and childcare are under extreme pressure with a younger workforce – 70 per cent women – migrating to cities. Yet, cities are places where the lack of permanent registration still hinders millions of migrants and their children from accessing education, health and social protection services. For young migrant mothers and children, placing children in pre-schools is another hurdle as public ones are overburdened and access to the public education system is hindered by the lack of household registration.

Children are vulnerable to intensifying impacts of climate change: Viet Nam is among the 20 countries globally with the worst air quality. Among the multiple threats, air pollution is a silent killer for children. In recent years, children in Viet Nam are increasingly exposed to unhealthy levels of air and environmental pollution. According to the World Health Organization, it is estimated

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5 In line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the term 'children' means all persons under the age of 18 years.
that 1,000 deaths among children under-14 in Viet Nam annually are attributable to climate change, with the majority of deaths among children under-five. Air pollution affects children from conception and is directly linked to pneumonia and other respiratory diseases, causing many children to miss school. Air pollution directly impacts on children’s learning processes, psychological well-being and school performance. Intense and frequent drought, saltwater intrusion, flooding and storms threaten millions of children and women, especially those vulnerable, with issues of inaccessibility to food and clean water as well as education, health and protection services.

**Children are hardest hit during COVID-19 pandemic:** COVID-19 has become a human and developmental crisis. While COVID-19 impacts everyone, the global evidence is clear that it is children who are in great number among the hardest hit and who face long-term consequences. Children’s lives have been disrupted and many have lost the opportunity to access essential and basic social services including education, nutrition, social care and protection services, resulting in a high risk of them falling into poverty and deprivation. This is disturbing as children, unlike adults, are going through critical periods of growth, including and especially cognitive development, and when they miss this window of opportunity for development and growth – they miss it for life. Even if the deprivations are later addressed, the opportunity for children’s optimal development has passed and with that, measurable reductions can be recorded in the nations’ future human capital, and thus its economic growth.

**Key proposed actions include:**

- Strategically address the urban agenda for children and climate change in relevant legal and policy frameworks, particularly the National Strategy on Children 2021-2030 and Green Growth Strategy.

- Raise awareness of communities, families and children on the impacts of climate change, (particularly air and environmental pollution and natural disasters) on children to identify solutions and take precautionary measures with a sense of urgency.

- Sustained human capital development is key to economic recovery and build on hard-earned development gains through: i) Strengthening systems to collect accurate and real-time data to support policy decisions in health, education, child protection and social protection sectors; ii) Providing timely and adequate cash assistance and social care for all children; iii) Safeguarding and redoubling social spending; and iv) Implementing Public Administration Reforms in a way which can ensure adequate trained professionals – teachers, health workers and social workers – function at the community level where they reach all children and families affected by COVID-19.
Stunting is a key indicator of poor socio-economic conditions that undermines children’s physical and cognitive development, future human capital and economic productivity. Some 23.8 per cent of children under-five are stunted in Viet Nam, with significant disparities across regions. The stunting rate is highest in 10 provinces that are poverty ridden with large ethnic minority populations. For instance, in Lai Chau and Kon Tum the stunting rates among children under-five years are 36.4 and 39.3 per cent, respectively (6). Eliminating stunting requires a combination of nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive interventions during a child’s first 1,000 days of life, from conception. Access to improved water and sanitation is an important nutrition-sensitive intervention. Lack of access to water and sanitation can result in repeated diarrheal disease and intestinal parasite infections, all of which contribute to under-nutrition. Approximately 12 million people are practicing open defecation nationwide(7), contaminating water sources and environments that are vital for child survival and healthy development.

While eliminating stunting, particularly among ethnic minority children, is and should continue to be a top government priority, approximately two million children are overweight - 6 per cent of children under-five and another 10 per cent aged 5-19 years. Easy access to the ‘cheap calories’ of fatty and sugary foods and drinks are a major driver. With a heightened risk of diabetes and

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7 General Statistics Office (2014) Viet Nam Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey
coronary heart disease, being overweight can potentially place a heavy burden on the health systems today and in the future.

**Key proposed actions include:**

- Strong coordination across ministries to fully integrate nutrition programming into all development efforts, including an explicit approach to tackle the double burden of nutrition – stunting and excess weight.
- Identification and allocation of budget for nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive interventions, including those under national targeted programmes. Particular focus should be directed towards nutrition benefit packages that include integrated management of acute malnutrition services for an estimated 230,000 annual cases of Severe Acute Malnourished children, multiple micronutrient supplementation for all pregnant women, and multi-micronutrient powder for children aged 6-23 months. These nutrition benefit packages should be operationalized at commune health centres.
- Urgent implementation of the National Action Plan on Open Defecation Free to achieve the target of 95 and 100 per cent of all villages declared open defecation free by 2025 and 2030, respectively.
2.4. Education

While significant progress has been made towards realizing basic quality education for all in Viet Nam, major obstacles to access of quality, inclusive and sustainable education remain for disadvantaged adolescents. Some 8.1 per cent of girls and boys aged 11-14 years are out of school. This rate was much higher for ethnic minority adolescents - 24.5 per cent for Khmer children and 28.6 per cent for H’Mong children of the same age group\(^8\). In addition, only 66.2 per cent of ethnic minority children aged three to five are enrolled in kindergartens\(^9\). Even though the proportion of low-performing students has decreased, the absolute number has remained high\(^{10}\).

Ethnic minority girls and boys and those from disadvantaged backgrounds have lower scores. Furthermore, there is a mismatch between the outputs of technical and vocational education and training (TVET), secondary education and labour market requirements. Many new graduates lack necessary transferable and digital skills, which results in a gap between the needs of the fast-changing labour market and formal learning options.

**Key proposed actions include:**

- Continue to increase efforts to ensure the current 2.2 million ethnic minority pre- and primary school children equally benefit from quality education. This can be ensured by keeping satellite schools open in remote areas and promote Mother Tongue-Based Bilingual Education Programmes in all schools with ethnic minority children.

- Integrate digital learning and transferable skills into pre-primary, primary, secondary curricula and in TVET to build human capital and productivity.

- Monitor functional learning through MICS6 data collection as well as the SEAMEO regional ‘SEAPLM’\(^{11}\) tool, which assesses Grade 5 students’ learning outcomes across the region.

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\(^8\) Ministry of Education and Training (2016) Education Sector Review

\(^9\) General Statistics Office (2014) Viet Nam Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey

\(^10\) According to the current classification of student performance of Viet Nam.

\(^{11}\) South East Asia Primary Learning Metrix (SEA-PLM)
2.5. Child protection

Children are vulnerable to abuse and violence throughout childhood. Annually, approximately 2,000 cases of child abuse are reported, of which 75 per cent involve sexual abuse\(^\text{12}\). Additionally, 20 per cent of girls and boys aged eight reported being physically punished in school\(^\text{13}\) and two-in-three children aged 1-14 suffered from physical or psychological punishment at home\(^\text{14}\). Some 16.5 per cent of children aged 5-17 years engage in some form of work. Furthermore, 80,000 children under-18 encounter the justice system every year, including 18,000 juveniles in conflict with the law. It is pertinent to note that two-in-three alleged juvenile offenders brought to court are sentenced to imprisonment, rather than diversionary measures in line with international standards\(^\text{15}\). Child protection systems are not fully developed with inadequate human and financial resources. Only part-time and untrained child protection workers are present at commune level. To date, there is no dedicated budget for child protection nor targets on child protection in national and local socio-economic development plans (SEDPs). Moreover, Viet Nam still lacks a comprehensive law on justice for children, in line with the CRC, to handle children’s cases.

Key proposed actions include:

- Develop a 10-year visioning national programme on child protection system building, including establishment of child protection social work positions with clearly defined milestones and end-results.
- Undertake a costing of the child protection system to inform development of a dedicated budget for child protection in the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA) sectoral plan and national and sub-national SEDPs.
- Strengthen human resources through development of teams of professional child protection social workers at provincial and district levels to provide professional child protection services, and to provide technical supervision for child protection workers at commune level. Ensure one full-time child protection worker in every commune is responsible for coordinating the prevention, case management, and management of child protection services.
- Establish specialized child justice structures and personnel (e.g. specialized courts and dedicated child protection police units) to ensure children are better served and protected by the justice system, in accordance to their age, development and unique needs.

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\(^{14}\) General Statistics Office and UNICEF (2014) Viet Nam Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey

Viet Nam is faced with the “last mile challenge” of leaving no child or adolescent behind. It is critical that Viet Nam further strengthens its legal framework in alignment with international standards. This should include revision of the Law on Children so that children are defined as all persons under 18 years old. Children must be protected by law from all forms of violence, including corporal punishment, child molestation, and any form of child pornography or sexual exploitation. Meeting this challenge requires political will and scaled-up investments in: reducing child and maternal mortality, preventing and ensuring treatment for stunting, improving access to safe water and sanitation for all children, and enhancing the quality and inclusiveness of education. At the same time, we must act now to reduce the impact of climate change, air pollution, epidemic and pandemics, urbanization, and online hazards on children. Viet Nam’s commitment to urgent, concrete action to protect and promote the rights of every child within the socio-economic development strategies and plans for the period 2021-2030 will ultimately contribute towards the strategic achievement of the SDGs.

CONCLUSION