

VIET NAM

POLICY DIALOGUE AND OPERATIONAL SUPPORT FOR LONG-TERM SHOCK RESPONSIVE SOCIAL PROTECTION

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Key Facts and Data

Table 1. Timeline

First case of COVID-19	Outbreak declaration and measures	Date and type of social protection responses	Days to implement SP since first case of COVID-19
23 January 2020	20 January 2020 – First National Response Plan	29 March / March, April 2020 Vertical and Horizontal expansion	66

To contain the COVID-19 outbreak, the Government of Viet Nam put in place regulations restricting the mobility of people, closing schools and non-essential service facilities. As of March 2021 the country had 2,567 confirmed cases, and 35 deaths. The National COVID-19 Response Plan – a multi-sectoral response to the crisis – was first issued on 20 January and updated on 31 January and in November 2020. Resolution No. 42 included a social protection package worth VND 62 trillion (approximately \$2.6 billion) to provide cash support of VND 1 million (approximately \$43) for those most vulnerable and workers per month per household or worker who lost an informal sector job from April to June 2020; and it provided enterprises impacted by the pandemic with low interest credit to pay workers' salaries.

Yet, just as regular social assistance in Viet Nam is challenged by exclusion and low coverage – less than 1 per cent of children aged 0–3 years and 9.5 per cent aged 4–15 years receive any benefit – the

design and implementation of the Government's social protection support package during COVID-19 omitted or underserved several specific groups. In particular, many families with children were not eligible for the cash assistance package under Resolution No. 42 due to narrow beneficiary categories, complex eligibility criteria and cumbersome administrative processes.

Many families with children struggled to make ends meet due to lost or reduced income and weak social protection systems, forcing many to cut spending on food or borrow money. Those who were already socioeconomically disadvantaged before the pandemic have experienced even more severe impacts during COVID-19, particularly poor and near-poor families, families with children with disabilities, single-parent families, migrants, families in remote areas (primarily ethnic minorities) who already had limited access to health care, welfare and education services.

Table 2. Evidence-base generated by UNICEF

Evidence, Data and Research	Area of Expertise	Partners
Rapid Assessment on the Social and Economic Impacts of COVID-19 on Children and Families in Viet Nam	Socioeconomic research	Ha Noi University of Public Health, JICA
Rapid Assessment on Social Assistance Needs of Children and Families in Viet Nam Affected by the COVID-19 Pandemic	Socioeconomic research; Monitoring and Evaluation	MOLISA
UN Analysis on Social Impacts of COVID-19 and Strategic Policy Recommendations	Social protection policy options; Social protection system reform	FAO, ILO, IOM, UNAIDS, UNDP, UNESCO, UNFPA, UNODC, UN Women, WHO
Review of Decree 136 with a focus on social assistance for children and propose policy options for the development of a new Decree in line with MPSARD targets and relevant to the context of a lower middle-income country	Social protection systems building and reform; Shock-responsive social protection	Maastricht Graduate School of Governance

UNICEF Technical Support

In response to the shortcomings in emergency social protection response in Viet Nam, over the past years, UNICEF and other UN agencies stepped up technical support to develop the Master Plan on Social Assistance Reform and Development 2017–2025 and Vision to 2030. The Master Plan aims to increase the benefit level of social assistance and expand coverage to more children, especially to children under 3 years of age as well as emergency assistance to all affected children. UNICEF has provided technical support for the revision of Decree 136 proposing the expansion of regular cash assistance as a basis for strengthening shock responsive social protection, with some important policy recommendations:

- The ultimate goal of the reform in the coming years, should be to expand cash assistance to all children, starting with those 0-3 years. Universal benefits for all 4,105,179 children under 3 (equivalent to approximately 20% of the child population) will cost between 0.32% or 0.64% of 2018 GDP. By implementing at scale, we will be able to see visible impact of cash assistance on child poverty and overall poverty when it is implemented in scale.
- The financial resources needed for universal child benefits are expected to decrease over time owing to Viet Nam's stable and rapid GDP growth combined with the downward trend in child population growth (i.e., a decline in birth rate). Coverage of all children under 3 years of age will require an investment of around 0.66 per cent of GDP (if benefit level is raised to VND 720,000 or US\$ 31 per month, which is increased twofold compared to the current value) or 0.89 per cent of GDP (if benefit level is raised to VND 1,000,000 or US\$43). Simulations indicate that universal benefits for all children under 3 years of age will cost only 0.45 per cent of GDP in 2025 and 0.32 per cent of GDP in 2030 (if benefit level remains at VND 720,000 per month).
- Decree 136 in particular and social assistance policies in general should become more shock-responsive to proactively protect children from compounding risks affecting both themselves and their families as well as their communities at large.

- Establish a mechanism for timely collection, analysis and dissemination of data on the impacts on children as a way to institutionalize rapid assessments into the social assistance system and design policy responses, including emergency social assistance package financial resources.

UNICEF has generated extensive evidence and synthesized it into concise briefs for policy dialogue and external communication to strengthen the social protection system in the long term, as follows:

- Assessment of Targeting Approaches and Mechanisms (Inclusion and Exclusion Errors) in Existing Social Assistance Schemes.
- Study on Improving the Effectiveness and Coverage of Social Assistance for Children with a Focus on Consolidation Policy.
- Protecting Public Investment in Children in Viet Nam.
- Building a Shock-Responsive Social Protection System in Viet Nam with a Focus on Children.
- Rapid Assessment on the Social and Economic Impacts of COVID-19 on Children and Families in Viet Nam.
- Rapid Assessment on Social Assistance Needs of Children and Families in Viet Nam Affected by the COVID-19 Pandemic.
- UN Analysis on Social Impacts of COVID-19 and Strategic Policy Recommendations for Viet Nam.

UNICEF engaged in high-level policy advocacy through a 2-tier approach:

1. Through further strengthening the partnerships with Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs, National Assembly, Office of the Government, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Planning and Investment, Ministry of Justice, UN agencies, development partners (such as GIZ), and international finance institutions (particularly the International Monetary Fund).

2. Through high-level advocacy events with key Government leaders, and public advocacy channels including multiple media interviews and articles.

Critical Success/Failure Factors

Diversifying partnerships – In addition to long-standing cooperation with UN agencies, leveraging new, yet like-minded partners that have strategic partnership with crucial ministries is important – for example, as a result of a series of high-level dialogues, the International Monetary Fund is emerging as a key partner in policy advocacy to expand social assistance in the immediate and long-term and to increase broader social spending, including vis-à-vis the Ministry of Finance.

COVID-19 as an opportunity to push policy advocacy agenda – The partnership with the Government has enabled a nationwide survey and highlighted the importance of institutionalizing rapid assessments as part of a shock responsive social protection system. Evidence was generated and disseminated in a timely manner for policy reform processes, acknowledged by key Government leaders (for example, the Deputy Prime Minister, the National Assembly and line ministries), development partners and international finance institutions.

Way Forward

UNICEF will continue with its policy advocacy in revising the related social assistance policies and use the evidence from the on-going feasibility study on shock responsive social protection to inform the reforms of social protection system.

This work has been possible thanks to all our partners and donors:

