

Policy Levers for Empowering Decent Work

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This briefing was produced under the project “Empowering Ethnic Minority Youth in Vietnam to Re-Vision the Future of Decent Work (“Re-WORK”)”, funded by the British Academy’s GCRF Youth Futures Programme [award number YF\190099].

Introduction

There is a global rise of precarious work which does not pay enough or is not secure enough for people to live, or which is physically or emotionally toxic. The International Labour Organization (2022) describes ‘Decent Work’ as work which is

productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men.¹

Decent Work is an ambition to empower marginalised groups from histories of disadvantage. As it describes a category of work related to income and social integration, it directly connects to other global challenges such as poverty, hunger, inequality, and health and wellbeing.

Despite global policy efforts, the ‘working poor’ are an increasing population even in developed countries like the UK and the US. Policy can be developed to create the conditions for ‘Decent Work for all’ so that no one is left behind.

This policy briefing pinpoints key factors (policy levers) impacting Decent Work for all, drawing insights from Vietnam, one of the world’s fastest growing economies. It draws from a study examining the empowerment of minority ethnic young people (aged 18-25) to re-vision Decent Work in Vietnam with policy makers, employers and university leaders (see *overview of study* below).

This policy brief draws from survey data to examine the links between exclusionary factors and Decent Work (as defined through 15 characteristics indicated by the International Labour Organization scope above). It pinpoints key principles which can act as policy levers, such as addressing mismatches in localised labour and education markets, problems in policy implementation at the local level, through to a deficit in the range of empowerment capabilities of young people to change their employment prospects at a national level.

Whilst the recommendations in this report are directly relevant to policy makers across the fields of education and work in Vietnam and similar developing countries (see *context of study* below), the underlying principles have a wider resonance and applicability to policy makers across other geographic contexts with similar characteristics. For example, the rising occurrence of informal and unstable work opportunities which do not provide sufficient wage ‘to live’ has been noted for over two decades in the UK and US. We invite all policy makers in the fields of education and work to consider the practical value of the recommendations and principles within this brief.

¹ International Labour Organization (2022) *Decent Work*. Accessed 23/1/22. Available at <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/decent-work/lang-en/index.htm>

Overview of study

Our study involved exploring social practices across geographic regions of Vietnam through surveys ($n=1275$), interviews ($n=117$), and appreciative inquiry groups ($n=90$) with young people (aged 18-25) and policy and practice stakeholders related to their recruitment (e.g. employers, employment agencies, and policy makers) (more information can be found online: www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/projects/youth-futures-empowering-ethnic-minority-youth-vietnam-vision-decent-work). This forms part of a series of three briefings, Policy Levers for Empowering Decent Work, Policy Interventions for Minority Ethnic Young People and Decent Work, and Inclusive Policy-Working with Minority Ethnic Young People for Decent Work.

Context of study

Vietnam has an aging population (a median age of 30.5 in 2015) and one of the few countries with continued GDP growth during 2020-2022 (ranging from 2.95% to 7.15% per annum since 2016). Minority groups represent 15% of the population, but there are over 54 ethnicities in this 15%. Most minority ethnic people are employed in farming (75.1%), and formal contracts outside of farming are fairly uncommon (8.1%) compared to the majority group (25.4%). Self-employment and unpaid work (within the family) are common, reflecting other growing Asian economies such as Bangladesh, Cambodia and Nepal that are becoming increasingly engaged in international trade. Vietnam, like other fast-growing economies in Asia, has experienced high graduate unemployment as high as 27% in 2014. Graduate employability figures are difficult to establish but available figures indicate employment levels as low as 30% in some institutions. (Sources and further information: Demombynes & Testaverde, 2018; Tong, 2019; Statista, 2022).

Below: Young people in the North of Vietnam working with policy-makers and employers to re-vision Decent Work through Appreciative Inquiry workshops.



Key points

1

Economic and trade policy set the broad parameters for Decent Work, especially in terms of actual or perceived economic growth. All policies which impact business, family, and community resources can impact access to and participation in Decent Work. But this is only part of the story.

2

After economic conditions, Decent Work is heavily influenced by location, so improving Decent Work means taking a local perspective.

3

However, empowering people to change their employability improves access to and engagement in Decent Work. Social networks have been found to be particularly useful for minority ethnic communities in engaging in Decent Work.

4

Involvement of people in policy making enables the integration of complex sets of information locally.

5

Target policy interventions at employability empowerment which enhances awareness, collective action, and abilities to influence employment conditions.

6

Encourage the connectedness between disparate social contexts to enable learning transferability and empowerment.

7

Ensure education and work policy value and embrace cultural differences to enable opportunities.

8

Develop the consistency, coordination, and clarity of policy implementation.

Point 1

Economic and trade policy set the broad parameters for Decent Work, especially in terms of actual or perceived economic growth. All policies which impact business, family, and community resources can impact access to and participation in Decent Work. But this is only part of the story.

Big picture economics sets the scene of available conditions and resources within businesses, communities, families, and educational settings. All of these conditions and resources impact the availability and engagement in Decent Work – it is not just about employment protection or laws governing how businesses treat their staff.

Economic growth generally supports conditions for employment and mobility, in terms of the employment opportunities needed in growing businesses with increased sales, but also in terms of psychological motivations to move.

Here, when an economy is doing well, people see and are motivated to move to improve their employment terms and conditions, pay, or work environment. And conversely, people generally do not see opportunities in an economic downturn, and are motivated to stay and ensure a stronger sense of job security.

However, international trade policy decisions create national level possibilities or constraints on the possibility for Decent Work. For example, Vietnam's open trade and liberalisation – alongside the relative lower cost of labour – has led to increasing numbers of low-skilled and low-waged jobs becoming available from Chinese businesses. All of these political decisions need to be factored in to the availability and engagement in Decent Work.

In the fast-growing economy of Vietnam, we have witnessed the high mobility of students and graduates to improve their conditions, but we also witnessed high levels of graduate unemployment, especially for minority ethnic groups and young women. This is why it is important to recognise that whilst economic and trade policy are big levers for Decent Work in an economy, they are only part of the story.

Point 2

After economic conditions, Decent Work is heavily influenced by location, so improving Decent Work means taking a local perspective.

We find that Decent Work is highly localised, which means that the specific issues of accessing or engaging in Decent Work depends on the particularities of a geographic setting. In Vietnam, for example, there are highly populated urban areas with a great diversity and density of industries and jobs, but with strong competition. In such circumstances, it might be much easier to switch jobs or even occupations.

In contrast, there are mountainous areas in which people are heavily dependent on the land for their livelihoods. Here, work might predominantly be unpaid, working in family, subsistence settlements. And then there are rural, coastal areas where communities are heavily reliant on fishing, and can be immobilised by the financial impacts of climate change on the coast.

The historical and geographic development of industries means that locations develop particular profiles of industries and occupations, some of which have particular challenges. Again, in Vietnam for example, some locations develop a large pool of jobs in tourism. Here, jobs are typically seasonal to reflect the vacation periods, but are also highly susceptible to changes in weather conditions. This makes employment highly precarious in the sense of temporary, unstable, and informal contracts.

Coordinated knowledge of localised issues is therefore an important policy lever for decision makers in government and non-governmental agencies shaping regional workforce plans or community development priorities in policy work.

Point 3

Empowering people to change their employability improves access to and engagement in Decent Work. Social networks have been found to be particularly useful for minority ethnic communities in engaging in Decent Work.

Evidence now tells us that within these wider economic constraints and the local supply of jobs, individuals can influence broad employment outcomes. Research suggests that a person's capabilities to change their employment and work situation can influence their engagement in Decent Work, and have consequential effects on their own life opportunities and that of their family. This is about a person feeling they can influence their life and future, and being flexible enough to do it over time – what we term 'employability empowerment'.

Here, employability empowerment is about: **power within** (e.g. the self-awareness and confidence to believe they can change their employment situation), **power with** (e.g. being able to contribute to collective action to change their employment situation), **power to** (e.g. being able to deliver effective action to change their employment situation), and **power over** (e.g. expressing authority over others to change their employment situation).

For young people in Vietnam, we have found a strong link between a person's sense of employability empowerment and Decent Work in populations who are most likely to experience precarious work (and least likely to experience Decent Work) – minority ethnic young people.

Although all aspects of employment empowerment are important to Decent Work, we also found that the most commonly associated aspect of realising Decent Work is the use of **social networks** to help people improve how people earn a living.

This joins an increasing evidence base that suggests subject knowledge and skills are generally not the strongest predictor of mobility in graduate employability contexts – and our evidence echoes this in the context of Decent Work. However, this insight should be interpreted very carefully, as this depends on the specific location.

Point 4

Involvement of people in policy making enables the integration of complex sets of information locally.

Because of the localised nature of Decent Work, policy across the fields of education, work, and culture needs to integrate knowledge of local labour markets and the common issues and opportunities for that area. For greater policy effectiveness, this knowledge needs to reflect the diversity of the population, including those most typically affected by precarious working environments, such as minority ethnic groups, young people, and people with disabilities. For example, work to promote digital skills in a geographic region will be problematic for all groups if there is no local demand. Industrial investment and development can be foundational to stimulating Decent Work.

There may well be local intelligence gathering processes which can target these groups, but it is common that formal processes do not facilitate the engagement of those typically marginalised and who experience the issues first-hand. Formal processes can be intimidating or even threatening for some people. Some can also feel that their opinions do not count or would not be recognised even if they did share their opinions.

In the case of Vietnam, previous research has suggested that populations are increasingly distrusting of institutions because of variability in implementation of policy and law. This research has suggested that the lack of regulation means it is difficult to hold states and related stakeholders accountable for violations or deprivation. This makes engagement more challenging, especially for marginalised groups.

The involvement of a diversity of people can significantly enrich the intelligence which informs the shaping and implementation of policy at national level. This is because it integrates grounded knowledge or insights that would not otherwise be collected or known by governing bodies or officials who are typically removed from the specific locations which need Decent Work opportunities.

This integration of local knowledge is a typical outcome of ‘poverty truth commissions’ where people with lived experience of poverty work with local government policy makers and local organisations to make and monitor changes at the local level (see for example West Cheshire Poverty Truth, 2020).²

² *Policy interventions for minority ethnic young people and Decent Work and Inclusive policy-working with minority ethnic young people for Decent Work* available at <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/projects/gcrf-policy-briefings/>

Point 5

Target policy interventions at employability empowerment which enhances awareness, collective action, and abilities to influence employment conditions.

The above points highlight the wider economic and geographic factors which determine access and engagement in Decent Work, but that employability empowerment can disrupt those dynamics. A policy lever is to directly target employability empowerment interventions by encouraging individuals to engage in **activities, roles, and interpersonal relationships** which promote:

- **Self-awareness, confidence, and a belief in changing their livelihood situation.** This might include creating education or work policies which encourage or incentivise community organisations, universities and vocational training establishments to create mentoring or coaching opportunities.

It is important that at least some of these are undertaken by those belonging to minority ethnic groups who have transformed their own employability story as a form of positive role modelling in society.

- **Contributions to collective action in relation to improving their livelihood situation.** This might include creating education or work policies which encourage or incentivise communities to work together to establish new enterprise ventures which fulfil market or social need at the local level, but with Decent Work as an organising principle.

In the case of Vietnam, the national social enterprise and employment protection centres, who promote enterprise and employability at national and provincial levels, could coordinate this in more targeted geographic areas.

- **Abilities to influence others in relation to their livelihood situation.** This might include developing targeted minority ethnic leadership training and development opportunities for community leaders (elders) and for those in educational establishments as a form of affirmative or positive action to raise the confidence and visibility of minorities in leadership positions. This is a longer-term investment towards creating wider cultural recognition and validation of minority ethnic communities in workplaces.

In addition, it is important to replicate such investments for the leaders of workplaces across industries, and especially growing industries, to establish, early on, more diverse workplaces. This emphasises the complexity of this policy level across several policy fields and sectors.

Point 6

Encourage the connectedness between disparate social contexts to enable learning transferability and empowerment.

Policy work can also drive employability empowerment by enabling individuals to make linkages between social contexts to help them improve their access or engagement in Decent Work. By making linkages, individuals can realise, for example, that a mindset, experience or skill which is useful in a family context can be transferred to other contexts such as education or work.

For example, in having to manage younger siblings, a young person may have mastered the art of conflict negotiation, which is valuable for group projects at university and managing teams in workplaces. This applies to wider social networks, where for example, a teacher at a vocational training institute might not just be a tutor, but could know a new business that needs new staff in a different part of the city.

Policy can do this, first, by enabling individuals and communities to recognise their own differences and the inherent value of it to society and employers. Although a typical remit of careers counselling services at educational establishments, recent evidence suggests that such services may not yet be sufficiently equipped or resourced to promote such levels of empowerment.

Second, policy can promote this proactive behaviour through stimulating or incentivising the opportunities and resources that higher education and vocational training institutes dedicate to such activity. This investment becomes, in effect, part of a wider policy effort to value and embrace cultural difference.

For both of these levers, educational policy might rejuvenate teacher training and careers counselling services to build intercultural awareness and the transferability of knowledge, skills and mindsets.

Point 7

Ensure education and work policy value and embrace cultural differences to enable opportunities.

Locations vary in terms of the opportunities immediately available to populations, and the ways in which groups are discriminated against in Vietnam – perceived ethnicity, race, colour, language, gender, age and so on. This discrimination may have lasted generations, so it can be internalised for new generations entering the labour market.

This can present itself in some minority ethnic young people as what might appear as a lack of proactive behaviour to find Decent Work or indeed any work. This judgement might itself lack a recognition of the circumstances of these individuals where their behaviour adheres closely to societal norms. Here, there may well be familial expectations that they will contribute to the running or upkeep of the household, or work in the family’s subsistence farming arrangement. Similarly, these young people may also make judgements about the benefits and costs of moving to find Decent Work, and the likelihood of such judgements.

To find Decent Work with good pay (benefit), they may need to travel far away from safe familial environments (cost), but feel that even if they were able to move, they may not be able to compete with majority groups (likelihood). Policy work can address this through recognising the positive assets and particular circumstances of groups in their populations.

This recognition can include representing: (1) the diversity of its populations in mainstream policy (to show an equality of minority and majority groups), (2) the circumstances of groups (showing an awareness of the particular circumstances of diverse groups), and (3) the positive attributes of the diversity of its populations, to include their ability to improve their working conditions.

Addressing recognition in these ways extends beyond education policy to work and employment policy, as employers have a clear role in implementation. This might be part of affirmative or positive action initiatives in governmental and non-governmental institutions and employers. Additionally, support mechanisms might stimulate localised vocational education and training which has been associated with the most characteristics of Decent Work (see the other GCRF Policy Briefings by the team).³

³ Policy interventions for minority ethnic young people and Decent Work and Inclusive policy-working with minority ethnic young people for Decent Work available at <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/projects/gcrf-policy-briefings/>

Point 8

Develop the consistency, coordination, and clarity of policy implementation.

Because of the localised nature of Decent Work, policies related to work, education and community development should reflect the localised issues and opportunities. However, because of the possibility of migration between geographic areas, it is important to have some centrally coordinating mechanism setting principles and indicators which are meaningful to the governing body.

The longer-term goal is to essentially alter the balance of power between different groups within society, which is challenging because social norms are embedded across society. Despite this, progress is possible with strong political will. We see this with, for example, affirmative or positive action in the US which when implemented by employers can effectively tackle localised issues. Vietnam's governing framework provides the decentralised structure to enable a provincial approach to decision making which means they can interpret wider policy with greater freedom. This means that the same national policies can be implemented differently across provinces.

Coupled with local implementation issues in practice, this can mean that there is inconsistency in the implementation of policy nationally, locally, and between neighbouring provinces. Our findings suggest, for example, that the inconsistent implementation of policies related to supporting the education and work of minority ethnic young people can impact the awareness and motivation to engage in initiatives specifically designed for these groups. This means that the level of empowerment related to employment and changing own circumstances is highly variable depending on location. Stronger mechanisms and governance of such measures might lift achievement of Decent Work outcomes.

Conclusion

This briefing outlines policy work that can tackle the global challenge of Decent Work. It recognises that Decent Work is an aspiration which is complicated to achieve. This is partly because it is largely determined by economic policy and conditions, and partly because it responds to long-established societal norms related to discrimination which can vary from location to location.

Fundamental to enabling access and engagement in Decent Work is a localised perspective from minority ethnic groups who have knowledge of the local issues and opportunities. This provides a strong platform to take effective action in ways which value and embrace cultural difference and diversity.

This platform, however, must be clear, coordinated, and implemented effectively and consistently, so that localised action works towards aspirations for Decent Work on a national scale. This is critical given the possibility of movement of communities between geographic locations.

As Decent Work can mean improving pay and working conditions to afford more realistic living conditions, it will enhance the ability of some of the most marginalised in society to move out of poverty and hunger, and enjoy a greater sense of life satisfaction.



Above: A group of young people in the North of Vietnam celebrating traditional dress as part of a wider voluntary commitment to sharing computers with students who would otherwise not be able to afford it.

Acknowledgements

In addition to all of the young people contributing to the project, we want to acknowledge the time and effort of our Youth Advisory Panel who have shaped, supported and promoted the project. We are also highly appreciative of the Project Advisory Committee which consisted of stakeholders across Vietnam and Australia. We also thank the blind reviewers involved in developing and improving this brief.

This briefing was produced under the project “Empowering Ethnic Minority Youth in Vietnam to Re-Vision the Future of Decent Work (“Re-WORK”)”, funded by the British Academy’s GCRF Youth Futures Programme [award number YF\190099].

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To cite this briefing:

Wall T, Hindley A, Ho T. H. T., Ngo N, Luong M. P (2021) *Policy Levers for Empowering Decent Work*. The British Academy, London

ISBN 978-0-85672-679-8

DOI <https://doi.org/10.5871/gcrf/9780856726798.001>

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