Social protection for rural-urban migrants in Vietnam: current situation, challenges and opportunities

Vietnam lacks a formal framework for social protection policies. This particularly disadvantages migrants coming from rural areas to the big cities to live and work. A comprehensive approach to social protection based on rights, entitlements and inclusion would drastically improve the wellbeing of migrants.

Introduction
Over the last decade, Vietnam has become one of the fastest growing economies in Asia. This growth, together with expanding job opportunities in large cities, has resulted in a steady increase in rural-urban migration. Being away from home, migrants miss the social support of family and friends. And because of inadequate social protection policies, migrants are exposed to multiple risks, especially during times of economic crisis.

This paper examines social protection for migrants in Vietnam. It looks in particular at the residence-based nature of current social policies and how these sustain the disadvantages of rural-urban migrants.

Main findings
In Vietnam, social protection essentially provides a safety-net for the very poor in difficult situations. Even this provision, however, fails to cover most migrants. The Vietnamese government has tried to discourage spontaneous unauthorised migration, including by restricting the access of migrants to key economic and social resources.

One of the main difficulties faced by migrants is the ho khau, or household registration system. This system classifies people into one of four categories, ranging from permanent residents and authorised migrants, to spontaneous migrants who have only temporary registration for up to three months.

When the Vietnamese economy was centrally planned, the household registration system helped the government control the movement of people. While this is no longer the case, a person’s residency status still determines their access to housing ownership and a range of social services and civil rights.

Because spontaneous migrants do not have ho khau in the places where they live and work, they face a number of risks and vulnerabilities including in relation to employment, housing and living conditions, health care, education for their children, and social participation in the host community. Despite recent relaxation in the conditions for household registration, it is still very difficult for migrants to obtain permanent residency status.

The paper reviews the disadvantages faced by two groups of migrants: rural-urban migrants who have come to Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City to work in the so-called day labour market, and migrants working in Hanoi’s industrial zones.

Being classed as temporary residents without ho khau, migrants find it almost impossible to get formal sector jobs. The vast majority get temporary, informal sector jobs with low pay. Migrants are usually forced to accept poor, and often dangerous, working conditions. Living conditions are also poor, with most migrants living in rented rooms in low quality boarding houses in poor neighbourhoods.

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Key research findings
- Spontaneous migrants face various risks and vulnerabilities caused by ho khau policy.
- Migrants have very limited access to social protection mechanisms.
- Most migrants are poorly integrated into the community in their place of destination, adding to their social exclusion and sense of isolation.
- Poor enforcement of the labour laws has also exposed spontaneous migrants to various risks.
- Trade unions are failing to protect workers’ rights.

Spontaneous migrants face various risks and vulnerabilities caused by the ho khau, or household registration system.
Poor living and working conditions expose migrants to severe health risks, but without ho khau they have very restricted access to affordable healthcare. Access to education for the children of migrants is also restricted: they are not allowed to go to public schools, so those who can are forced to pay the higher costs of private schools. Many migrant children simply cannot go to school.

Migrant workers in industrial parks are also exposed to poor working conditions. The Vietnamese government does not have a strong institutional mechanism to enforce labour laws, and workers lack sufficient knowledge of the law and their rights. Channels for workers to voice their concerns are also extremely limited.

Conclusions
Social protection for migrants in Vietnam is still at the stage where the State’s interest in controlling the movement of people is influencing the social policy framework. Although the conditions for obtaining permanent residency status have been relaxed in recent years, rural-urban migrants still face huge obstacles to finding decent jobs and housing and accessing affordable healthcare and education. Unless gaps in the policy and legal framework are effectively addressed, migrants will continue to be socially excluded, creating a growing urban underclass.

Key policy lessons
• The Vietnamese government needs to adopt a comprehensive approach to social protection based on rights, entitlements and inclusion.
• The legal status of migrants in their place of destination should be recognised.
• The access of migrants to key social and economic resources should be increased.
• Better supervision of labour laws is needed by the government, the trade unions, and workers themselves.
• Housing for workers should be integrated into the development of industrial parks and other urban areas.

Credits
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