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Strengthening Viet Nam's Social Protection System with a Focus on Child-Sensitivity and Shock-Responsiveness

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3.1. INTRODUCTION

This article summarizes recommendations to strengthen Viet Nam's social protection system – with a focus on child-sensitivity and shock-responsiveness – drawn from recent analyses commissioned by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). It takes stock of the development, strengths and challenges of social assistance in Viet Nam, including UNICEF activities and the organization's partnership with the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA). Moreover, it discusses how UNICEF has supported the Government of Viet Nam in fine-tuning its social protection policies toward child-sensitivity and shock-responsiveness.

In the past decade, Viet Nam has positioned itself among the most rapidly developing economies in the world. The impressive rate of economic growth has also translated into trends of decreasing poverty and improving living standards across the country (General Statistics Office, 2020). From 2016 to 2020, the share of the Vietnamese population living in multidimensional poverty halved, with an even greater reduction in rural areas (General Statistics Office, 2020). Child poverty has also shown a stark decline in recent years, with the rate dropping from 21.2 per cent in 2014 to 12.5 per cent in 2018 (General Statistics Office & UNICEF, 2021). However, pockets of poverty exist. Children, especially those from vulnerable backgrounds or ethnic minorities or with disabilities, are at a higher risk of deprivation (Gassmann et al., 2017; General Statistics Office & UNICEF, 2021).

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Viet Nam has a relatively well-developed, multi-pillar social protection system with social and health insurance, social assistance, and social care services (Gassmann et al., 2020). Social protection as a right of Vietnamese citizens is firmly embedded in the country's legal fabric, and political will to strengthen its implementation appears to have increased in the past decade. Social assistance has been an important safety net for vulnerable children in the country – yet there is considerable room to improve how effectively it supports children. Institutions' overall capacity and the delivery of social protection interventions may limit investment in social protection (Vinci et al., 2022). Simpler, more inclusive approaches to targeting, as well as efforts to modernize the system, could go a long way towards improving the status quo.

MOLISA is the government body responsible for the administration, implementation and general oversight of social protection. MOLISA and UNICEF have developed a strong partnership to promote and protect children's rights in Viet Nam. The previous country programme cycle, for the period 2017–2021, focused on ensuring that all people benefit from a social protection system and poverty reduction services that are inclusive and equitable.

3.2. METHODS AND DOCUMENTS REVIEWED

This article is a desk review of UNICEF-commissioned analyses of social protection, as well as legal documents issued by the Government of Viet Nam. Since 2019, UNICEF Viet Nam has commissioned three major studies to review the non-contributory social protection system for families and children. These studies aimed to assist MOLISA with evidence on the needs of Vietnamese children and the strengths and challenges of the programmes targeted at them (*for a summary of the three studies, see Table 3.3 in the Appendix*).

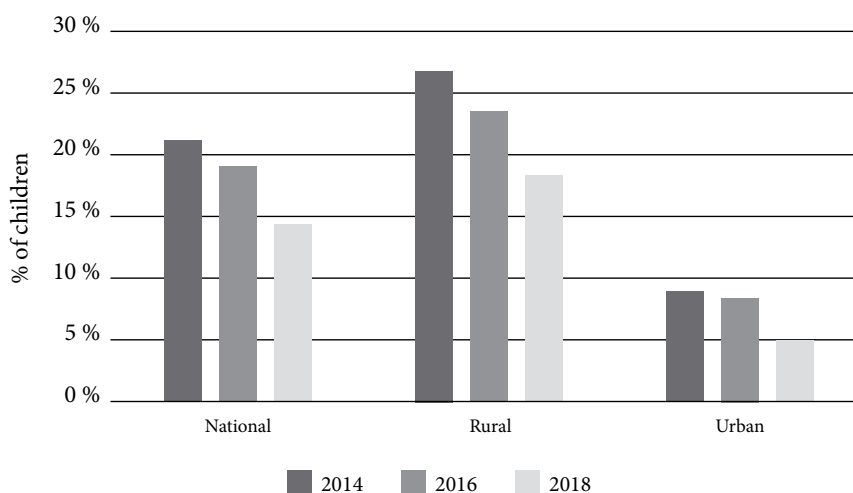
Key legal and strategic documents included in this review are the:

- decrees guiding regular and emergency social assistance: Decree No. 20/2021/ND-CP on Social Support Policies for Social Protection Beneficiaries and its predecessor, Decree No. 136/2013/ND-CP
- resolutions on the Government's support to families affected by the COVID-19 pandemic: Resolution No. 42/NQ-CP on Assistance for People Affected by COVID-19 and Resolution No. 68/NQ-CP on Certain Policies to Support Employees and Employers in Difficulty due to the COVID-19 Pandemic
- Master Plan for Social Assistance Reform and Development (MPSARD) 2017–2025
- National Target Programmes (NTPs).

3.3. THE SITUATION OF CHILDREN IN VIET NAM

Recent statistics show that children's living standards in Viet Nam have improved over the last decade. From 2010 to 2014, multidimensional poverty decreased in both the overall population and among children (UNICEF, 2017).⁴ From 2014 onwards, child poverty has continued to decline (General Statistics Office & UNICEF, 2021). Still, the incidence of poverty has remained higher among children than among the general population as a whole (UNICEF, 2017) and consistently higher poverty rates have been recorded for children in rural areas than for those living in cities (General Statistics Office & UNICEF, 2021) (*see Figure 3.1*).

Figure 3.1 Multidimensional child poverty rates over time



Source: General Statistics Office and UNICEF (2021).

Children from ethnic minorities are at a higher risk of poverty than the Kinh majority. Since ethnic minority populations often live in remote, mountainous areas, they have little access to either public services or economic opportunities. In 2018, 6.8 per cent of children from Kinh and Chinese backgrounds were multidimensionally poor, while the corresponding rate for children from other ethnicities was 46.4 per cent (UNICEF, 2017). Compared with Kinh and Chinese children, twice as many ethnic minority children lacked birth registration in 2018, undermining their access to a range of public services. Analyses of child poverty have noted substantial room for improvement in children's access to health care; water, sanitation and hygiene; and leisure (General Statistics Office & UNICEF, 2021; UNICEF, 2017).

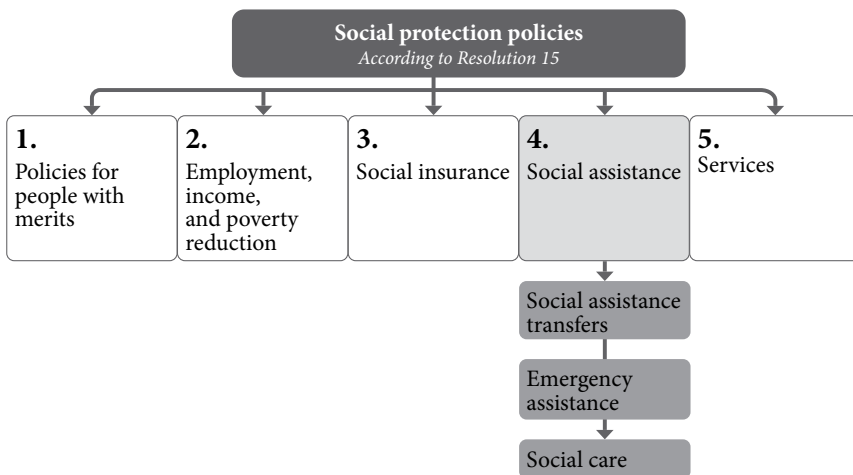
⁴ Viet Nam uses a multidimensional concept of poverty to measure deprivation and monitor progress towards achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Children’s vulnerabilities have increased due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and related physical distancing measures (MOLISA & UNICEF, 2021). Some households have resorted to negative coping strategies that may have severe consequences on child well-being, such as cutting household expenditures, reducing the quality of meals, selling productive assets and accumulating debt. There have also been infrequent reports of an increased prevalence of child labour and child marriage. Children have been less likely to receive their mandatory vaccinations or attend periodic health check-ups. School closures have widened the learning gap between children from different socio-economic backgrounds.

3.4. THE SOCIAL PROTECTION LANDSCAPE: LEGAL CONTEXT

Social protection is recognized as an important tool to tackle poverty and share the benefits of economic development in Viet Nam. The Vietnamese legal framework refers to social protection in various documents, ranging from the new Constitution (adopted in 2013) to laws, decrees and circulars.⁵ Viet Nam has a unique concept of social protection consisting of five pillars, in which social assistance includes targeted, recurrent transfers, as well as emergency assistance and residential care (*see Figure 3.2*). This multi-pillared system was developed in Resolution 15,⁶ the Politburo’s agenda setting document accepted in 2012.

Figure 3.2 Viet Nam’s multi-pillar social protection system



Source: Authors’ own elaboration based on Resolution 15 of the Communist Party of Viet Nam (2012).

⁵ Laws are typically concerned with specific groups of beneficiaries, their needs and their vulnerabilities and the responsibilities of various state and non-state actors in supporting them. For instance, the Law on Children (2016) stipulates the rights of children, those groups of children in particular need of support and the forms of support and services that should be available to them. Decrees, decisions and circulars are legal documents that fall below laws in the legal hierarchy. These documents provide guidance on how to implement the rights and responsibilities set out in laws.

⁶ Resolution 15-NQ/TW issued by the Politburo on social policy issues for the period of 2012–2020.

While social insurance is secured by the relevant law (Law on Social Insurance of 2014), social assistance has a lower-level legal basis. It is governed by a government decree: Decree No. 20/2021/ND-CP on Social Support Policies for Social Protection Beneficiaries (Decree 20).

Decree 20 is the key policy document guiding social assistance. The decree includes three components: regular social assistance, emergency social assistance, and social care. Regular social assistance refers to targeted, long-term, monthly cash transfers, while emergency social assistance provides ad hoc support in response to shocks. Although regular and emergency assistance are part of the same decree, they are separate programmes, with no apparent synergies. Decree 20 also includes guidance on social care services (including community-based services) for elderly people, people with disabilities and children without adequate parental care (whether alternative or community-based care).

3.5. REFORMING SOCIAL ASSISTANCE FOR CHILDREN

Social assistance in Viet Nam is currently undergoing a long reform process. UNICEF, along with other United Nations agencies, has been a key strategic partner of the Government of Viet Nam in the process. The reform was initiated by Resolution 15 of the Communist Party of Viet Nam in 2012, following which the Social Assistance Department of MOLISA started to draft a plan of action to strengthen social assistance in the country.

The resulting Master Plan for Social Assistance Reform and Development (MPSARD) 2017–2025 and a Vision to 2030 is the strategic document outlining the Government's vision for the reform. This rather ambitious document envisages drastic changes to social assistance, with the overall aim of progressively realizing universal social protection. MPSARD targets are used to guide the periodic revisions to the government decrees governing social assistance. UNICEF has been rather influential during the drafting of MPSARD, successfully advocating for increased social assistance coverage of young children.

3.5.1 Reforming regular social assistance

UNICEF support has been essential in identifying challenges and opportunities for reforming social assistance in the country.

For instance, review studies commissioned by UNICEF have highlighted issues with targeting and application processes. Social assistance is provided monthly, in cash, to individuals recognized by the Government of Viet Nam as belonging to one of several vulnerable groups (some, but not all, of these are groups of children). Various studies (including those led by UNICEF) have noted that these eligibility categories are narrow and rigid and that the targeting process is complex (Evans et al., 2011; Gassmann et al., 2017, 2020; Kidd et al., 2016; Vanore et al., 2017).

Further, regular social assistance employs a hybrid approach to targeting, which includes elements of categorical targeting, means-testing and community verification (Gassmann et al., 2017). Viet Nam uses a multidimensional definition of poverty for both targeting benefits and monitoring living standards. The means test for social assistance combines a monetary means test with a multidimensional, non-monetary definition of poverty (including assets and access to basic services). Applicants have to prove their eligibility by providing official documentation of their status, such as a disability certificate or parental death certificates, which are often costly and awkward to obtain (Gassmann et al., 2020; Vanore et al., 2017).

Although improvements to social assistance have been seen in Viet Nam in the last decade, a recent review pointed to significant problems with both the design and implementation of the country's social assistance policy (Gassmann et al., 2020). Regular social assistance has achieved relatively low coverage of children due to its tight and complicated targeting process. The eligible categories exclude from support many children in vulnerable life situations. On the one hand, some children may, in fact, fall into one of the eligible categories but be unable to prove their situation for lack of documentation (e.g., children informally left without parental supervision). On the other hand, many families are facing challenges that are simply not recognized by the decree.

The last detailed assessment of the targeting performance and poverty reduction effect of regular social assistance uses data from 2014. This review found large exclusion errors and (in contrast) small inclusion errors (Gassmann et al., 2017). The first reason for exclusion errors was the inaccuracy of the means test – more specifically, the inadequate list of poor households that is used as the targeting frame (the so-called 'Poor List'). Of 100 children living in a household below the extreme monetary poverty line, 41 were not identified by government officials as poor (*see Table 3.1*).⁷

⁷ These calculations were, however, based on survey data from 2014: the Government of Viet Nam has since revised the methodology for listing poor households. To the authors' knowledge, no assessment has been made of the targeting performance of the new, multidimensional Poverty Census. Therefore, there is no evidence on how well the new targeting frame works and where identification gaps remain.

Table 3.1 Share of monetary poor children (aged 0–15 years) listed and not listed on the Poor List, 2014

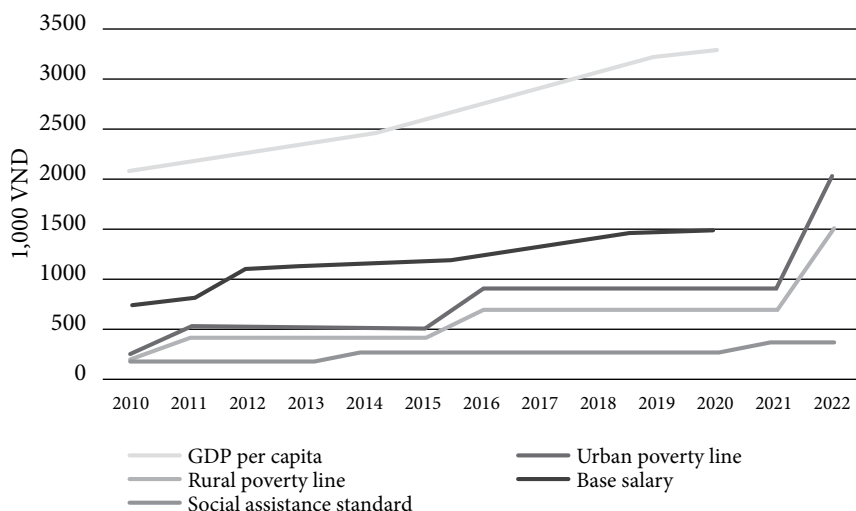
	Non-poor (%)	Poor (%)
Not on Poor List	95.8	58.9
On Poor List	4.2	41.1
Total	100	100
	Non-extreme poor (%)	Extreme poor (%)
Not on Poor List	92.9	40.6
On Poor List	7.1	59.4
Total	100	100

Source: Gassmann et al. (2017).

Transient poverty due to idiosyncratic or covariate shocks is likely one of the most common challenges uncatered for by regular social assistance, which is also due to the targeting method. This is because the Poor List is compiled annually and is therefore not sufficiently flexible to capture the ‘new poor’ and those moving in and out of deprivation.

Transfer values are not linked to an empirically derived standard of living – they are rather a function of the available budget and the projected number of beneficiaries. Linking the transfer value to a standard, such as the poverty line, average wages or a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, would provide grounds for periodically increasing the transfer as the benchmark standard evolves over time. MPSARD envisions setting the social assistance benefit as a percentage of GDP per capita. This is an attractive solution as it would align with the Government of Viet Nam's commitment to increase the level of protection as the country's economic resources allow.

Figure 3.3 Evolution of transfer values and socio-economic standards over time



Note: Values are defined in Vietnamese Dong (VND). The underlying numbers are presented in Table 3.5 of the Appendix.

Source: General Statistics Office.

The adequacy of regular social assistance decreased dramatically from 2013 to 2021, particularly when compared with GDP per capita (see Figure 3.3). The benefit level of Decree No. 136/2013/ND-CP to Provide for Social Support Policies for Social Protection Subjects (Decree 136) had been set in 2013 and was not adjusted until Decree 20 was adopted in July 2021. Increasing the base transfer from VND 270,000 to VND 360,000 has undoubtedly improved benefit adequacy; this increase raised the benefit to 40 per cent of the poverty line. A rapid assessment of the impacts of COVID-19 pointed out, however, that consumer prices have skyrocketed during periods of physical distancing, which has likely had a negative impact on the purchasing power of transfers. Moreover, the poverty line for the period 2022–2025 has been set to VND 1,500,000 and VND 2,000,000 for rural and urban areas respectively, which means that the value of the base assistance will drop again relative to these living standards.

The evidence and technical support provided by UNICEF has contributed to the recent revision of the government decree guiding regular social assistance. In July 2021, when Decree 20 replaced its predecessor (Decree 136), some important adjustments were made to the eligible categories of people and to transfer adequacy. The most important change affecting children has been the introduction of a new eligible group: children under 3 years of age. While initial discussions raised the prospect of covering all children under 3 years of age,

the transfer remains narrowly targeted: only those children in poor or near-poor households, and ethnic minority children living in hamlets, communes or mountainous regions are eligible. Nevertheless, the inclusion of children under 3 years as an eligible category is a big step towards simplifying the targeting process and thereby reducing exclusion errors. Although this is not (yet) a quasi-universal child benefit, the transfer's implementation departs from the rigidity and specificity of the targeting seen in the earlier decree by combining age and geographic location to target children in deprived parts of the country. Once survey data for 2022 are available, the effects of the policy reform on targeting performance and poverty reduction can be estimated.

As mentioned above, the standard level of social assistance was also increased in 2021, from VND 270,000 to VND 360,000. Eligible groups of children and the corresponding transfer values as set out in Decree 20 are listed below (*see Table 3.2*). Italicization indicates changes made since the previous decree.

Table 3.2 Summary of eligible groups of children and corresponding transfer values as set out in Decree 20

	Group	Sub-group	Coefficient	Transfer value (VND)
1	Children under 16 years of age who are abandoned, orphaned or half-orphans, or with parent(s) in prison or a social institution or missing	Under 4 years	2.5	<i>900,000</i>
		Aged 4 to 15 years	1.5	<i>540,000</i>
2	Youth aged 16 to 21 years who are in school (studying for first degree) and who are abandoned, orphaned or half-orphans, or with parent(s) in prison or a social institution or missing	N/A	1.5	<i>540,000</i>
3	HIV-infected children from poor or near-poor households	Under 4 years	2.5	<i>900,000</i>
		Aged 4 to 15 years	2.0	<i>720,000</i>
		Aged 16 to 22 years	1.5	<i>540,000</i>

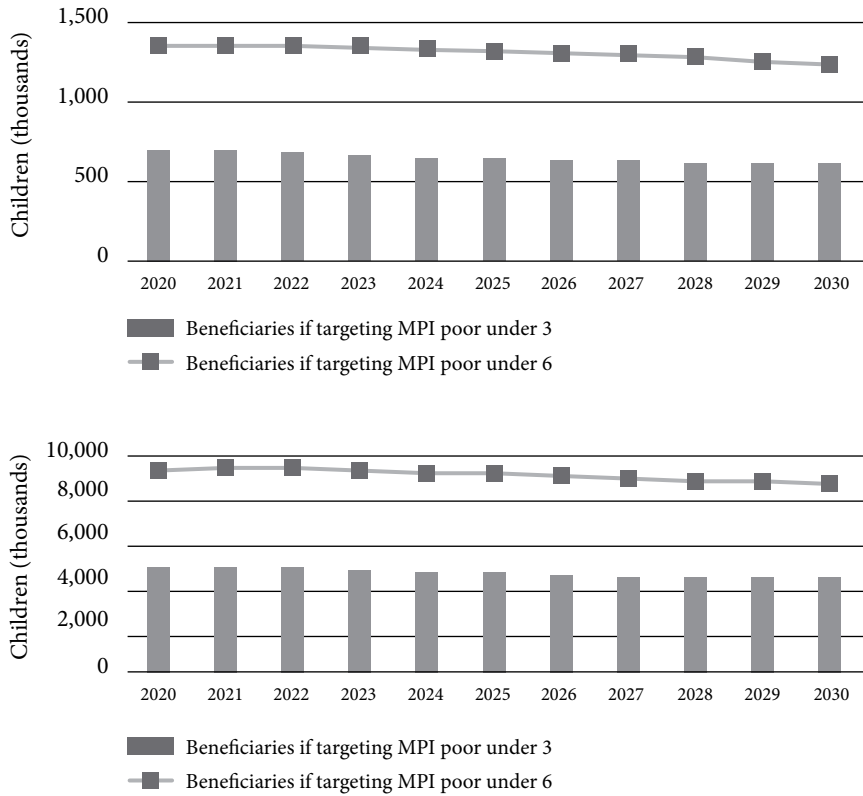
Group	Sub-group	Coefficient	Transfer value (VND)	
4	Single parents or caregivers of children under 16 years (or of children aged 16 to 22 years who are in vocational or higher education) living in a poor or <i>near-poor</i> household	Raising one child	1.0	360,000
		Raising two or more children	2.0	720,000
5	Children with severe disabilities who are entitled to social assistance in line with the Law on Persons with Disabilities	Extremely severe disabilities	2.5	900,000
		Severe disabilities	2.0	720,000
6	<i>Children under 3 years old</i>	<i>In poor or near-poor households</i>	1.5	540,000
		<i>Ethnic minority children in hamlets, communes or mountainous regions</i>	1.5	540,000

Source: Decree 20/2021/ND-CP on Social Support Policies for Social Protection Beneficiaries.

3.6. OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUTURE REFORM

The partnership between UNICEF and MOLISA has also considered policy options for making regular social assistance more effective at reducing child poverty and vulnerability. The latest review of regular social assistance included microsimulations and fiscal space analyses to estimate the poverty reduction effect and medium-term costs of various targeting options. Universal and quasi-universal benefits for all children under an age threshold are expected to achieve the highest poverty reduction, but they also require the most financial resources (Gassmann et al., 2020). Figure 3.4 depicts the authors' own calculations of the number of eligible children for four options: universal benefits for children under 3 or 6 years of age, and transfers targeting children in multidimensional poverty in the same age groups. As the number of children being born in Viet Nam is expected to decrease in the next five years, the number of eligible children would show a slow but steady decline.

Figure 3.4 Number of eligible children under universal (top) and means-tested (bottom) scenarios, 2020 to 2025



Note: MPI: Multidimensional Poverty Index. The underlying numbers are presented in Table 3.5 of the Appendix.

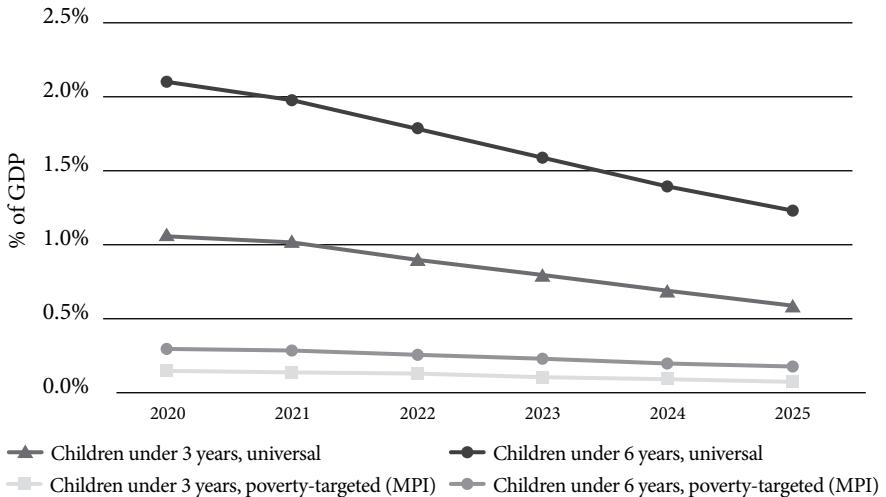
Source: Authors' own calculations based on population projections by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2019) and the multidimensional child poverty rate from UNICEF and General Statistics Office (2021).

Even if every eligible child received a monthly flat rate benefit equivalent to the new rural poverty line (VND 1.5 million), programme costs would still be affordable and would decline as a share of GDP over time.⁸ The most expensive option (providing a monthly transfer to all children under 6 years) would initially cost 2 per cent of GDP, which would drop to 1.2 per cent of GDP by 2025 (see Figure 3.5). A universal transfer to children under 3 years of age would start at

⁸ Since the Government of Viet Nam has set the rural poverty line to VND 1.5 million per month until 2025, the authors' calculations do not include the indexation of transfers. These scenarios expect nominal transfer values to remain the same, but it should be acknowledged that real transfer values would decrease over time as consumer prices increase.

a little over 1 per cent of GDP and decrease to 0.6 per cent of GDP by the end of the period. Targeted options would be considerably cheaper, but governance and implementation challenges mean they are also less likely to effectively reduce child poverty.

Figure 3.5 Projected cost of transfers as % of GDP, 2020–2025



Note: MPI: Multidimensional Poverty Index. The underlying numbers are presented in Table 3.5 of the Appendix. Figure 3.5 presents rough calculations with limitations. First, the population and GDP numbers are projections and may prove to be inaccurate. Second, we use the percentage of multidimensionally poor children for 2018 and assume that the poverty rate will remain constant until 2025. This is due to a lack of more recent data on child poverty in Viet Nam. For example, if the Government of Viet Nam succeeds in reducing poverty in line with the relevant national target programme, the costs for poverty-targeted options would significantly decrease over time. Third, these costs assume perfect implementation (100 per cent targeting accuracy and benefit take-up) and thus should be interpreted as upper-bound estimates.

Source: Authors’ own calculations based on population projections from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2019), GDP projections from the International Monetary Fund (2021) and multidimensional child poverty rate from UNICEF and General Statistics Office (2021).

A complicated political environment surrounds social assistance reform in Viet Nam. Long-held preferences for subsidiarity compete with an emerging universalist vision for social protection (Gassmann et al., 2020). A preference for the latter is not only advocated for by development partners but also shared by (some of) the state stakeholders – this is demonstrated by MPSARD. It appears that UNICEF (and other United Nations agencies such as the United Nations Development Programme [UNDP]) have been successful in using evidence and technical advice to promote a rights-based and universal approach to social assistance.

3.7. SHOCK-RESPONSIVE SOCIAL PROTECTION IN VIET NAM

Viet Nam is one of the countries in the world most affected by natural disasters. Its geographical location makes the country prone to environmental risks, including floods and landslides in the wake of extreme weather events. Recognizing this vulnerability and the need for social protection that can respond to these shocks, UNICEF and MOLISA commissioned a feasibility analysis of cash-based emergency support for children.

3.7.1. Emergency social assistance

'Regular' and 'emergency' social assistance are understood as two distinct components of the system, but both are guided by Decree 20 and overseen by MOLISA. Strengthening shock-responsive social protection is one of the targets envisaged under MPSARD. Shock-responsive social protection, however, does not require two parallel systems: a well-functioning, modern social protection system should be flexible enough to adapt and scale up existing programmes to respond to increased needs. Despite an explicit vision to integrate the two, there are currently no linkages or complementarities between regular and emergency support in the decree.

In Decree 20, eligibility criteria for emergency support are based on categories as similarly rigid as those for regular social assistance. Hamlet officials play the largest role in beneficiary identification for emergency support. At the onset of an emergency, it is their responsibility to compile a list of households that have been affected and are eligible for support. As mentioned above, in the section on regular social assistance, the Poor List cannot capture transient poverty or the new poor, since it provides a snapshot of poverty at the time of the Poverty Census. Vulnerable households sitting above the poverty line can easily be pushed into poverty in the aftermath of an emergency. Since emergency assistance is targeted at poor households, these new poor remain ineligible for support. Instead of poverty targeting using the paper-based Poverty Census, applying simpler targeting approaches and using digital registries of poor, near-poor and other vulnerable households could speed up identification of those affected by shocks.

While regular social assistance is provided in cash and over the longer term, Decree 20 stipulates that emergency social assistance is short-term, in-kind support. Households affected by a disaster are eligible for either food assistance (in the form of rice) or supplies such as drinking water, tents, boats or blankets. In specific cases, such as loss of crops or the death of a household member, a cash-based benefit is provided to compensate for direct damages.

Benefit modality thus requires fine-tuning as well. In-kind assistance is preferable in some instances (e.g., when markets are not functioning or accessible); in other cases, cash enables families to fulfil their needs more flexibly (Economic Policy Research Institute, 2021). Part of the rapid assessment related to COVID-19 was a survey of needs, where respondents were asked about the type of short- and long-term support they most needed: A clear preference for cash-based support was apparent (MOLISA & UNICEF, 2021). Cash and tuition fee waivers were referenced most often, indicating that, in an emergency, loss of income is the largest challenge faced by households with children. In the longer term, respondents envisaged investments in their productivity – such as employment and livelihood support and loans to purchase productive assets – to enable them to bounce back from economic shocks.

A further key obstacle to expanding social assistance to populations affected by natural disasters and other shocks is the inadequacy of the national budget for emergency support. Underfunding has resulted in low benefit adequacy and low coverage of the population experiencing emergencies. Benefits levels are often too low to make a difference to families hit by shocks. Moreover, given the varying levels of affluence of individual provinces, great inequalities can result in the amount of support provided. This came to light in 2021, when worse-off provinces ran out of money to provide support to the population affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (UNDP Viet Nam & Institute of Labor Science and Social Affairs, 2021). At the same time, provinces with budget surpluses kept disbursing assistance to employees and employers.

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government of Viet Nam has also introduced additional support, such as a tax break and cash transfers, for those affected by the lockdown orders. In addition to the support provided by the Government, various United Nations entities and other humanitarian agencies have a strong presence in emergency responses in the country. These efforts exemplify how social assistance can mitigate the harms caused by covariate economic shocks.

3.8. SUPPORT TO EMPLOYEES AND EMPLOYERS AFFECTED BY THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government of Viet Nam has issued policies aimed at cushioning employees and employers against pandemic-related financial shocks. These policies are at the intersection of social assistance and social insurance: although they are not financed by contributions, they do require a history of formal employment. The first iteration (Resolution 42) was replaced after a few months by Resolution 68/NQ-CP on Certain Policies to Support Employees and Employers in Difficulty due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. This second iteration places more emphasis on children, based on challenges identified by a rapid assessment that UNICEF conducted.

While Resolution 42 did not provide child-sensitive benefits, Resolution 68 includes a lump sum supplementary support of VND 1 million for pregnant employees and those raising children under 6 years of age. Moreover, according to Resolution 68, people cared for or quarantined because of COVID-19 are eligible for a daily food stipend and should be reimbursed for health care costs. Children placed in isolation or requiring medical care because of being infected by COVID-19 are eligible for an additional VND 1 million.

The Government of Viet Nam has been fast to respond to some of the challenges families have faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, providing support to both employers and affected employees. Still, more child-specific and multisectoral approaches are needed to protect all children from future shocks – during the pandemic and beyond.

3.9. LINKING REGULAR AND EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE

Children are particularly vulnerable to deprivations. They also have complex needs that cash or in-kind support cannot always meet. An important observation from UNICEF-commissioned assessments is that the linkages between different forms of support are not yet well-developed. Although Decree 20 guides both regular and emergency assistance, it does not include a comprehensive framework for how beneficiaries from one programme can be linked to the other (EPRI, 2021). Nor is the need to enhance synergies and complementarities limited to referrals between regular and ad hoc social assistance. Ultimately, and in line with MPSARD, the objective should be to create a *social protection system* that is sensitive to children's needs and able to adapt to shocks.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown at least three ways in which beneficiaries of regular social assistance can be further affected by covariate shocks. First, during economic downturns, a regular social allowance can become the only stable source of income for beneficiaries. This proved especially true during periods under physical distancing measures, when many employees and entrepreneurs lost their labour income. Second, families experiencing a shock are likely to incur additional costs. For example, hygienic and personal protective equipment (hand sanitizer, soaps, face masks) are expensive and tend to overstretch the budgets of households that are already struggling. Digital education is extremely costly, in terms of both the necessary equipment (laptop or smartphone) and internet access (mobile data plan). Third, if the shock affects market prices, it can become more expensive for households to meet their basic needs. An increase in food prices has been reported during the pandemic (MOLISA & UNICEF, 2021). And as food has become more expensive, the purchasing power of transfers has therefore decreased. Under such circumstances, beneficiaries may need additional support to make up for additional costs incurred as well as for lost income. Linking existing beneficiaries to emergency support could help them to weather the perfect storm of increased expenses on top of a reduced income.

The new poor may also need longer-term support in the aftermath of an emergency. Thus, linking the beneficiaries of emergency assistance to social services or regular cash transfers could help them to build back their livelihoods (EPRI, 2021).

3.9.1. Challenges and opportunities

Some missing elements appear to hinder a systems approach with synergies between different forms of support. First, implementing staff appear to be overburdened and inadequately trained to perform case management. The need to invest in the social services workforce has been recognized by the Government of Viet Nam: Decision No. 32/2020/DQ-TTq (dated 25 March 2020) includes a blueprint for developing the social work profession. It aspires to create comprehensive training and competency frameworks for social work staff, accompanied by financial investments in the workforce. The drafting of a new law guiding child protection should also accompany this professionalization of social work. Such a law should not only detail children's rights, in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, but also clearly address institutional mandates and protocols for the prevention of family separation, referrals and family reintegration. Social workers could rely on this guidance to link children with the specific form of support that they need, whether in the aftermath of a disaster or to deal with individual challenges.

Second, both the administration and implementation of social protection must be modernized. For example, beneficiary registries are still mostly paper-based (EPRI, 2021), which increases the burden on implementing staff and makes beneficiary identification time-consuming and cumbersome (EPRI, 2021). Particularly in the wake of emergencies, time matters – a digital registry could significantly speed up the process of programme expansion when shocks occur. Moreover, it could make it easier to monitor the situation and needs of households as they recover from hardships.

3.10. CONCLUSIONS

Overall, Viet Nam's social protection system – and social assistance in particular – is an important safeguard of children's rights and has seen major progress in the last decade. Yet simpler, more inclusive and more responsive targeting is needed to achieve the vision of universal social protection outlined in the Constitution, Resolution 15, MPSARD and the national target programmes.

The partnership between UNICEF and MOLISA has contributed greatly to the policy discourse on social assistance. UNICEF-commissioned research has highlighted important gaps in coverage and inefficiencies in targeting, which the Government of Viet Nam has taken seriously, as evidenced by recent changes

to the decree governing social assistance. The broadening of categories of children eligible for social assistance is an ambitious step towards the progressive realization of universal coverage for young children. Notably, the eligibility criteria for children under 3 years of age show the Government's willingness to transition towards simpler, less error-prone methods of targeting. Taking this step while also increasing benefit adequacy shows clear political and financial commitment to making social assistance work for children.

The gradual achievement of universal social protection is financially feasible for Viet Nam. Providing adequate benefits to all children under 3 years of age would initially cost around 1 per cent of the country's GDP, which would drop substantially as the country's economy develops. Transfers targeted at children in poor households may be considerably cheaper, but they are also less effective, owing to challenges in both governance and implementation.

From a high-level perspective, the overall capacity of institutions and authorities delivering social protection should be enhanced. Without improving governance (which includes legal frameworks, coordination and transparency), reform efforts seem to be compromised by fragmentation, path dependency and incremental steps forward (Vanore et al., 2017). At the programmatic level, the strengthening of synergies between regular social assistance, emergency social assistance, and social services is needed. Future work should aim to create a coherent, flexible and adaptable *system* – the present system seems to be too rigid to respond to people's needs, especially in emergency situations. Given that Viet Nam is one of the countries in the world most affected by natural disasters, the Government should prioritize the creation of more flexible procedures that capture vulnerable households slipping into poverty in the wake of an emergency. Moreover, early warning systems could improve the population's resilience and make planning for emergency assistance more effective and efficient.

This cannot be achieved without also investing in ground-level staff, particularly in the social services workforce. Social workers could more effectively identify those in need and connect them to the types of support most suitable for their situations. For children, better case management and more effective social services provision could prevent family separation.

UNICEF Viet Nam and MOLISA are also in the early stages of partnering on the Gender-responsive and Age-sensitive Social Protection initiative. This partnership includes an assessment of the system with a focus on cross-cutting issues experienced at different stages of the life cycle. Evidence from this initiative will provide further lessons on the child-sensitivity of social assistance, as well as information on how the system interacts with the gendered dimensions of poverty and vulnerability.

There is a pressing need for UNICEF to continue to work with the Government of Viet Nam to support a child-sensitive and modern social protection system that can timeously deliver adequate interventions and respond to people's needs

in development and humanitarian contexts. More resources are needed to ensure that adequate protection and support are provided to the country's citizens. Such investments and reforms are essential, however, to ensure that Viet Nam achieves strong, inclusive and sustainable development.

3.11. REFERENCES

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3.12. APPENDIX

Table 3.3 Overview of reports on social assistance in Viet Nam reviewed for this article

Report	Objectives
<p><i>‘Review of Decree 136 with Focus on Social Assistance for Children, and Proposal of Policy Options for the Development of a New Decree in line with MPSARD Targets and Relevant to the Context of a Low Middle-income Country’ (final draft)</i></p>	<p>Review Decree 136, with a focus on assessing the social assistance available to Vietnamese children, especially those living in special circumstances (the most vulnerable children).</p> <p>Propose policy alternatives to develop a new Decree that is in line with the Master Plan for Social Assistance Reform and Development (MPSARD) 2017–2025 and other recently issued strategic documents.</p>
<p><i>Feasibility Analysis on the Delivery of Cash Assistance for Children in Emergencies in Viet Nam</i> (Economic Policy Research Institute, 2021)</p>	<p>For the delivery of cash during emergencies, identify the most suitable implementation modalities in terms of targeting, registration, and payment methods.</p> <p>Identify the risks and potential challenges associated with the delivery of cash during emergencies.</p> <p>Identify coordination and cooperation needs and opportunities in terms of working with other ministries and partners involved in the delivery of cash during emergencies.</p>
<p><i>Rapid Assessment on Social Assistance Needs of Children and Families Affected by the COVID-19 Pandemic in Viet Nam</i> (Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs [MOLISA] & UNICEF, 2021)</p>	<p>Understand the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on families with children and on children in social protection centres.</p> <p>Collect evidence on the vulnerabilities that arise from the pandemic and its socio-economic impacts.</p> <p>Identify policy gaps related to these vulnerabilities.</p> <p>Help MOLISA to propose revisions to Resolution 42 and further policy responses for current and future pandemic waves.</p> <p>Contribute to the review of Decree 136 under MPSARD, specifically with regard to shock-responsiveness (beyond COVID-19).</p>

Table 3.4 List of legal documents guiding social assistance for children in Viet Nam

Document type	Content
Constitution (2013)	Article 34: Citizens have the right to social protection. Article 59: The state shall create equal opportunities for citizens to enjoy social welfare; develop a system of social security; and provide a policy assisting the elderly, people with disabilities, the poor and people in other difficult circumstances.
Law	Law on Children (2016) Law on Social Insurance (2014) Law on Persons with Disabilities (2010) Law on the Elderly (2009)
Decree, Resolution, Decision of the Government and the Prime Minister	Decree No. 20/2021/ND-CP on Social Support Policies for Social Protection Beneficiaries (replacing Decree No. 136/2013/ND-CP) Resolution No. 42/NQ-CP on Assistance for People Affected by COVID-19 (2020) Resolution No. 68/NQ-CP on Certain Policies to Support Employees and Employers in Difficulty due to the COVID-19 Pandemic (2021) Decision No. 23/2021/QĐ-TTg guiding the implementation of Resolution No. 68/NQ-CP (2021) Decree No. 56/2017/ND-CP on guidelines on the Law on Children (2017) Decision No. 488/QĐ-TTg on approval of the Master Plan for Social Assistance Reform and Development (MPSARD) 2017–2025 and a Vision to 2030 (2017) Decree No. 103/ND-CP on the Establishment, Operation, Dissolution and Management of Social Relief Establishments (2017) Decree No 28/2012/ND-CP on guidelines on the Law on Persons with Disabilities (2012) Decree No. 06/2011/ND-CP on guidelines on the Law on the Elderly (2011) Decree No. 68/2008/ND-CP dated 30 May 2008, supplemented by Decree No. 81/2012/ND-CP prescribing Conditions and Procedures for the Setting Up, Organization, Operation and Dissolution of Social Relief Establishments (2008, 2012)

Source: Gassmann et al. (2020).

Table 3.5 Underlying Data for Figure 3.3, Figure 3.4 and Figure 3.5

Number of eligible children					Gross domestic product (GDP) (million VND)
	Children under 3 years, universal	Children under 6 years, universal	Children under 3 years, poverty-targeted	Children under 6 years, poverty-targeted	
2020	4,735	9,287	687	1,347	7,966,321,548
2021	4,730	9,322	686	1,352	8,389,837,736
2022	4,676	9,307	678	1,350	9,329,244,809
2023	4,589	9,257	665	1,342	10,401,113,602
2024	4,499	9,193	652	1,333	11,735,973,755
2025	4,424	9,124	642	1,323	13,229,692,237
Total programme cost (million VND)					
2020	85,233,600	167,162,400	12,358,872	24,238,548	
2021	85,136,400	167,788,800	12,344,778	24,329,376	
2022	84,164,400	167,529,600	12,203,838	24,291,792	
2023	82,609,200	166,633,200	11,978,334	24,161,814	
2024	80,978,400	165,466,800	11,741,868	23,992,686	
2025	79,639,200	164,235,600	11,547,684	23,814,162	
Total programme cost as % of GDP					
2020	1.07	2.10	0.16	0.30	
2021	1.01	2.00	0.15	0.29	
2022	0.90	1.80	0.13	0.26	
2023	0.79	1.60	0.12	0.23	
2024	0.69	1.41	0.10	0.20	
2025	0.60	1.24	0.09	0.18	

Source: Based on population projections from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2019), GDP projections from the International Monetary Fund (2021) and child poverty rate from General Statistics Office and UNICEF (2021).