

Quantity or quality?

A dilemma of Viet Nam's labour export strategy

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International labour emigration from Viet Nam has a long history, starting from the late 19th century with French colonial policy of sending Vietnamese labours to work in other French colonies. This flow was however interrupted due to revolution and wars that lasted for nearly fifty years and only resumed in the early 1980s when sending international labour abroad has become a part of the government's socio-economic development strategy. After about two decades of efforts to increase quantity of workers sent abroad, the Government has recently shifted its focus on quality of workers. Sending professionally trained care workers or carefully selected candidates for care job to developed countries such as Japan or Germany is among examples of this new strategy. However, it turned out to be easier said than done. There are numerous issues and challenges that the program has to face, regardless a strong support it receives from the government. Before a more detailed description on how care workers are recruited, trained and sent to work abroad, this paper provides a brief chronology of international labour emigration from Viet Nam. The third section of the paper outlines major challenges and issues of the care worker program and the key features of the governance of labour export as well as some specific regulations regarding care worker program.

1 Brief history of international labour migration in Viet Nam

First recorded international labour migration from Vietnam took place by the end of 19th century. On 12 March 1891, the first group of 791 Vietnamese workers (of whom 50 were women) had been sent by French colonists to work in mines and plantations in New Caledonia on a five year work contract. Until 1940, about 20,000 Vietnamese were sent to work in New Caledonia and Vanuatu.

The second wave of international labour migration from Vietnam occurred within 1980s and early 1990s when labour export became official policy of the Government. During this period, a total of 277,183 workers were sent to work in countries of the socialist bloc, and 5,301 experts and workers to Middle-East and Africa.

The third wave of international labour migration from Vietnam started in the early 1990s. Labour export has now become an important socio-economic development of the country in the *Doi moi* era. Major destinations were more developed countries of Asia such as Taiwan, Republic of Korea,

Japan and Malaysia and few countries of Middle East. Currently there are 540,000 Vietnamese migrants workers overseas.

Viet Nam first sent workers to Japan in 1992. By January 2019, the total number of Vietnamese workers in Japan reached 126,000. Viet Nam has surpassed China to become the country with the largest number of dispatches to Japan per year. Among the 15 sending countries, Viet Nam currently has the highest number of trainees practicing their internship in Japan. Obviously Japan is now the most attractive market for Vietnamese workers today.

A clear tendency of feminization has also been observed among the flow of international labour migration from Viet Nam. The proportion of female workers has significantly increased from a few per cent in the early 1990s to almost 40 percent in 2018.

International labour migrants make a significant contribution to economic development of the country through remittances. According to the World Bank, in 2017, Vietnam received a total of US\$13.8 billion in remittances. This figure constitutes over six per cent of Vietnam's GDP and made Vietnam second in the Southeast Asia after the Philippines in term of remittance value received.

However Vietnam is still a major source of unskilled labour for the countries in East Asia. There are concerns that as the Government's promotion of international labour migration as a strategy for poverty reduction, the program thus encourages poor populations to migrate. The Government is now trying to increase proportion of skilled labour among workers overseas. One of the key tasks is expanding the proportion of labourers with technical and professional qualifications to work abroad and improving the quality of vocational training, foreign languages, and raising awareness for labourers at the pre-departure course. Sending nurses and trained care workers to Japan and Germany perfectly fits to this new policy direction.

2 Care worker program

Taiwan is the first destination of care workers (housekeeper/domestic workers and care workers for people with special needs) from Vietnam. Vietnamese workers in Taiwan work as home-based and hospital-based care workers. Both groups have no professional training for care job, but received basic caring skills as part of pre-departure training. The size of Vietnamese care workers in Taiwan by 31 Aug 2018 is 13,600 person-times.

While Japan received Vietnamese workers as early as 1992, only until 2012 the two countries

signed agreement on care workers (VJEPA). According to this agreement, Vietnamese nursing interns must have N3 level of Japanese language in order to be accepted to work in Japan. Recruitment criteria for care workers to Japan are much more specific and require professionally trained candidates as compared to the criteria for care workers to Taiwan.

By December 2018, a total of 1,440 candidates have been recruited and trained in Japanese language. By September 5, 2018, a total of 892 Vietnamese care workers were sent to Japan, of whom 732 females, 97 nurses and 795 assistant nurses. The 234 care workers of 7th cohorts will leave for Japan in May 2019.

Since 2015, Viet Nam and Germany has developed a training program on the care for the elderly in Germany. According to the program, Germany will receive 100 trainees from Vietnam every year since 2017 onward.

3 Challenges and Issues

Although care worker program, particularly to Japanese and German markets, is strongly supported by the Government of Viet Nam and receiving countries, it is not necessary the most attractive option among Vietnamese people who intend to work abroad.

First, caring for elderly or sick people is not a favorite occupation in Vietnam. However, as Viet Nam is currently experiencing rapid population ageing, the demand for care workers in the country is also increasing steadily. Professionally trained nurses and assistant nurses can easily find a decent job with good earning in Viet Nam. Second, to many people, the high requirements or criteria of recruitment to Japan and Germany are discouraging. Another challenge to the program is the widespread illegal labor brokering which often involve deception in many areas across the country. High broker fee due to poor management and control of recruitment process is another challenge to the program. Multi-layered brokerage network has led to high pre-departure costs and is found to be an important cause.

Since *Doi moi* or renovation policy adopted in 1986, labour export has been increasingly important socio-economic development strategy of the Government of Viet Nam. Over the last three decades, various policies and regulations have been passed to regulate labour export and to improve legislations in this area.

By the end of 2018, there were 376 enterprises licensed to send employees to work abroad. In order to improve the quality of activities of sending workers abroad, MOLISA adopted more stringent regulations and conditions to ensure that only enterprises who really meet the requirements of the law can participate in the activities of dispatching labourers to work abroad.