Labour Export from Viet Nam: Issues of Policy and Practice

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Introduction

The international labour migration has been an important aspect of East Asia development since the turn 1980’s. The differentials in income and employment opportunities among the Asian economies have led to the movement of labour from low wage to high wage countries. Rather than decreasing, international labour migration is likely to increase in the future, becoming a global phenomenon. As the scale, scope and complexity of migration has grown, Asian governments have become aware of the challenges and opportunities presented by international migration. There is now an common understanding that the economic, social and cultural benefits of international migration must be more effectively realized, and that the policy issues of labour migration could be better addressed. Migration can benefit all parties – source and destination countries and migrant workers themselves, assuming it is governed well.

However, both source and destination countries (or both labour-importing and labour exporting countries) often pursue short-term aims. The former are concerned with obtaining a flexible, low cost labour force. The latter are mainly concerned with generating jobs for an underutilized and low-skilled workforce and with getting the maximum possible inflow of foreign currencies (Abella, 1995). For these purposes, many countries actively encourage labour export and actual government involvement in recruitment and deployment of workers, regulation and supervision of placement agencies. Some Asian governments have set up special departments or agencies to manage labour emigration. However, regulation and license from labour sending countries are often ineffective, as the large number of irregular migrants, exploitative employment and abuses have demonstrated.
**Labour Export from Viet Nam**

Labour export has been part of official government policy in Viet Nam since the 1980s, when the government started sending workers to Eastern bloc countries. However, it did not play a significant role until the 1990s. Compared with other Southeast Asian countries, Viet Nam entered the international and Asian labour markets fairly late and has not yet been a major exporter of labour in the region. When neighboring countries such as South Korea, Singapore, Thailand and Malaysia were achieving high economic growth in the 1980s, Viet Nam was suffering severe poverty, unemployment and low growth.

As a labour sending country, Viet Nam is a comparatively poor country in the midst of a relatively prosperous region of East Asia. The country has been described as a labour surplus country; its large population coupled with a history of wars creates significant pressures of labour migration. Overall, the "demand-pull" factor of income differentials and the "supply-push" factor of excess labour supply interact to induce labour migration from Viet Nam. With a large, underemployed workforce, the government has followed other Asian migration players in actively promoting labour export with the multiple aims to ease domestic under- and unemployment, to increase the inflow of hard-currency remittances and national revenue.

International labour migration from Viet Nam is extensively shaped and directed by the government. The importance of labour export to Viet Nam’s socio-economic development has been consistently mentioned in official documents and statements by high-ranking government officials. The country’s labour export policy is marked by three main waves (Dang, 2000).
The first and second waves were directed to Eastern Europe and the Soviet bloc, aimed at partly financing Viet Nam’s mounting debts to these countries. The third wave started in 1994, with East Asia becoming the main destination for contract workers. International labour migration has increased significantly since the late 1990s with East Asia and some Middle East countries being the major destinations of Vietnamese workers. Indeed, labour migration from Viet Nam will probably scale up in the future as trade links between Viet Nam and the East and Southeast Asian nations are fully developed. Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, Laos and Malaysia are important ‘importers’ of Vietnamese workers. At the same time, the oil-rich Gulf countries become a promising market for Vietnamese workers.

The destinations of the workers are diversified, reflecting Viet Nam’s adoption of an “open-door” policy. As of mid-2006, over 400,000 labour migrants were working in over 40 nations and territories (MOLISA, 2006). Nevertheless, this official figure for contract labour migrant compiled and reported by the government are underestimated as many workers are sent by unauthorized employment agencies. The feminization of labour migration has just begun with more and more women migrants going to Malaysia and Taiwan to work in response to the demand for Vietnamese female migrant workers within these economies during these years. However, the large scale employment of migrant workers in some occupations of service and manufacturing sectors indicates that the feminization of migration is virtually an irreversible trend.

The background and mechanism of labor export system in the 1980s were fundamentally different from those in the 1990s and 2000s. In the first ten
years, the government signed “labour cooperation” agreement with COMECON, which set the number of workers to be dispatched, areas of work, wage levels etc. Since 1990s, labour export activities have been subject to licensing, and enterprises are responsible for recruiting and dispatching workers. Viet Nam made the transition from a labour cooperation scheme to a labour export system based on commercial activities by individual enterprises. To negotiate and implement the labour export agreements, an organization called the Department for Overseas Labour Management was established under the Ministry of Labour, War Invalid and Social Affairs (MOLISA). Since 1991, MOLISA has granted licenses to qualified labour recruitment enterprises and supervise their operation. These enterprises are responsible for monitoring overseas markets and securing service contracts, and recruiting, training and sending the workers. The workers are required to pay a number of service fees and a deposit amount of money to the labour export enterprises to guarantee their fulfillment of the obligations of the contract).

Figure 1. Trends of labour exported from Viet Nam by major regions of destination.
Since the beginning when it was first called a labour export program, policy makers have sought to justify the institutionalization of the phenomenon of contractual overseas migration by citing the importance that such employment will have on the nation, its people and upon the economy. As such, Viet Nam has emphasized the promotion of labour export as a key plank in its socio-economic development strategy. Labour export is aimed to contribute to the development of human resources, technical skills, employment creation and incomes for workers, increase in foreign currency earning, and enhancement of international cooperation relations. Because labour export is an important and long-term strategy which are believed to contribute to the industrialization and modernization of the country, labour export is promoted and evaluated annually in terms of steadily increased number of labourers sent to work overseas.

Each year no less than 70,000 Vietnamese leave the country for jobs overseas. Last year, Viet Nam sent 79,000 workers and experts abroad, and planned up to around 100,000-200,000 workers in 2010. Approximately 400,000 Vietnamese labourers are now working abroad in over 40 countries and territories worldwide. Annual inflows of labour migrant remittances have reached about 2 billion US$ in recent years, showing the economic relevance of labour export. The labour workers concentrate in such fields as construction, mechanics, electronics, textiles, aquatic processing, shipping industry, health care, education, and agriculture. Data in Table 1 show the situation of Vietnam’s labour migrants to selected countries up to March 2006.
Table 1. Viet Nam’s export workers to selected countries, 2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country of destination</th>
<th>Total (worker)</th>
<th>Job types</th>
<th>Average income per month (US$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>90,000</td>
<td>- Production workers</td>
<td>US$ 300-500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Construction worker</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Boat workers/sailors in shipping industry</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Housekeeper</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Nurse assistant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>&gt;100,000</td>
<td>- Electronic production workers</td>
<td>US$ 150-200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Garment workers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Construction workers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Services</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republic of Korea</td>
<td>50,000</td>
<td>- Production workers</td>
<td>$450-1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(South Korea)</td>
<td></td>
<td>- Trainees</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Agricultural sector workers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Workers/sailors in shipping industry</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>19,000</td>
<td>- Trainees</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Electronic production workers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Workers/sailors in shipping industry</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>Hotel chamber, maids</td>
<td>US$ 1,300 – 2,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Farmers</td>
<td>US$ 1,250 – 1,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Arab Emirates</td>
<td>&gt;1,000</td>
<td>- Construction workers</td>
<td>US$ 400 – 1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Electronic workers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Services, restaurant and hotel staff</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>- Construction workers</td>
<td>US$ 160-300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Charwomen</td>
<td>(&gt;US$ 1,000 for an engineer)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Data collected up to March 2006
There have been around 90,000 laborers working in Taiwan in different domains such as production workers, construction worker, boat workers/sailors in shipping industry (male workers only) and housekeepers, nurse assistants (female workers). Taiwan used to accept 30,000 Vietnamese workers annually. In January 2006, Taiwan suspended employing guest workers as domestic helpers, which caused the number of Vietnamese workers on the island to drop to 22,784. Currently, the monthly average income per worker in Taiwan is in a range of US$ 300-500. The occupations that Vietnamese workers are most likely to accept are the unskilled (construction workers, domestic workers, farming labour, etc) and semi-skilled (electronic workers, factory workers, etc) job categories. Women now represent an increasing number in annual outflows involved mostly work in garment factories and household services.

Malaysia is currently hosting more than 100,000 Vietnamese guest workers. The labour market there remains opened for Vietnamese workers after temporary pauses due to fluctuating demand. Yet many migrants refuse to go there for various reasons, mainly low wages. Vietnamese migrants work in factories of garment, electronics, construction, etc in Malaysia with the average income per worker per month is only US$ 150-200. A recent regulation adopted by the Malaysian government to shift the management of guest workers from employers to mediating agencies has caused problems for labour migrants. Many labour export companies in Viet Nam have expressed their concerns about the growing number of labour disputes over the implementation of work contracts in Malaysia. This situation makes migrant workers reluctant to sign contracts and lose confidence in labour export companies to negotiate on their behalf. Despite these challenges, Malaysia is still considered a popular labour pool for Viet Nam, receiving mainly rural low-skill or unskilled labour.
Different from Malaysia, Japan and South Korea are considered higher-class markets which attract skilled workers and job trainees from Viet Nam. They work in garment, electronics, food processing and shipping industries. The average income per month in South Korea and Japan ranges from US$ 450 to US$ 1,000. Some migrants work in fishery in the seas of South Korea in harder conditions. In accordance to the agreement signed between Viet Nam and Japan, between 2,000 and 3,000 guest workers can be sent to Japan annually, in addition to a total of 20,000 trainees already there. Approximately 50,000 Vietnamese workers currently work in South Korea. Every year between 7,000 and 8,000 guest workers depart Viet Nam for this Peninsular. In their agreement, Vietnamese labour export companies recruit and send laborers to South Korea, but the workers have to pass the language exams in Viet Nam among other stricter requirements. For many rural laborers, this criteria is quite difficult. However, it is said that the regulated program would help to reduce the contract breaking situation and illegal work and residence in South Korea. Over the past years, many Vietnamese guest workers have acted in breach of their labour contracts by working for higher paying jobs or residing illegally.

In recent years, Viet Nam has tried to expand its overseas labour market to new destinations such as Australia, Italy, Canada, US, UK, Brazil, and the Middle East. However, the main stumbling block has been inadequate guest-worker quotas or insufficient number of qualified workers to meet the needs of the ‘difficult’ labour markets. A labour contract between MOLISA and the National Recruitment Association of Saudi Arabia was signed to deploy Vietnamese workers to the Gulf as Saudi Arabia suffers from a serious shortfall of labour. Last year, the country was ready to receive 50,000 Vietnamese workers, mainly
skilled, for factory work and construction projects. So far, only 200 workers have gone to work in Saudi Arabia with an average income per month of US$ 160-300. Higher skilled worker such as engineer can earn a monthly income of US$ 1,000 and above in Saudi Arabia. In a similar way, Vietnamese workers first entered United Arab Emirates in 2000. Since then, there have been over 1,000 workers. Currently in the market of Dubai, Vietnamese hired construction workers can earn a monthly salaries of DHS660 (or US$177) and electronic workers with salaries of HDS700 (equivalent to US$ 190). Services, restaurant and hotel staffs are normally paid US$150-$1,500 based upon their positions held and experience. In general, these new countries of destination provide a promising market for labor export from Viet Nam, though not opened to unskilled workers.

**Problems in countries of destination**

Once migrant workers have left the country of origin, the sending countries’ influence on their nationals’ protection is limited. There are two main types of trouble occurring in destination countries in relation to labour export from Viet Nam. One is the violation of rights of workers by employers, and the other is breach of contracts and desertion by the workers. In this section, the paper will examine these problems in details.

**Working conditions and ill-treat by employers**

Given their low status, low-skilled workers face vulnerability to the violation of their rights. These problems are more serious when migrants often do not speak the language and are unprotected by laws of their destinations countries. In emergence, they have very limited or no access to remedies and supportive social networks. This is a great disadvantage from which labour workers suffer.
Most overseas companies hire foreign labour to reduce production costs, and gain more profits. They see investing in living and working conditions for labour migrants not their responsibilities. It is often that migrant workers work longer and earn less than their native counterparts.

Table 2. Ill-treatment of migrants workers at workplace in South Korea, 2003.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Forms of ill treatment</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical attack or punishment</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>88.4</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal abuse or violent language</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body search</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>89.8</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forbidden to leave to workplace</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>82.1</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual harassment or violence</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>97.7</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Injury at work</td>
<td>28.3</td>
<td>71.7</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illness due to work</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>77.4</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seizure of passport</td>
<td>47.6</td>
<td>52.4</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breach of employment contract</td>
<td>44.3</td>
<td>55.7</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unit: Percentage

Note: Sample size was 741 (APMRN, 2004)


Data in Table 2 shows different kinds of accidents for general migrant workers in South Korea, including Vietnamese workers who are obviously not exceptional cases out of ill-treatment. Migrant workers encountered different kinds of bad treatment from their employers. They are particularly vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. These incidents are both verbal abuse and violent language, being attacked or punished, physically, body search although they are female workers, or prohibition to leave their workplace even though the workers got to use toilets or need some break.
As afore-mentioned, Malaysia is one of the labour markets for general labour workers, but Vietnamese migrant workers seemed not interested in going there, partly but importantly is the low wage. After deducting meals cost and income tax, each person could only save US$100 per month at most. On average it is only US$50. Although migrants’ monthly salaries were already mentioned in their labour contracts, the reality is different from what they expected or imagined before departure. The Malaysian Trade Union Council (MTUC) has reported that 600 case files opened involving 1,200 international migrants, the top violation of labour rights during the period 2000-2005 was nonpayment of wages, followed by unfair dismissal (MTUC, 2005).

Taiwan, a major destination in East Asia, witnessed a similar situation. Twenty Vietnamese laborers working in a cruiser boat named “China Sea Discovery” had been abandoned their salaries for months. These laborers had to call MOLISA for financial assistance for them to return to Viet Nam (see VNExpress, 25/2/2004). Another study reported that Vietnamese workers in South Korea were required to work intensively, for 8-10 hours a day, five and a half days a week. Although overtime hours were recorded, it was so complicated that the workers did not now clearly how their wages were calculated and converted into salaries (Pairaudeau, 1997). Language barrier is one of the major causes that deteriorate the relationship between migrant workers and their employers. The workers cannot understand the instructions or guidance from their managers or supervisor properly. They also cannot explain or defend when things is not going on the right ways.

Due to long working hours, burden of intensive labour, hard working conditions, less protection from occupational safety equipment, migrant
workers are easily prone to get sick. Living in different weathers of the East Asian countries (Japan, South Korea, Taiwan) where “summer is too hot and winter is too cold” or even in Malaysia where the climate is warm, the workers are not doing well and may suffer from headaches or cold flues, their health situation is not in good shape. Numerous cases have been reported attesting to the many socio-psychological problems and traumas confronting migrant workers. They are loneliness, anxiety, discrimination, exploitation, and physical abuse, among others (APMRN, 2004).

Desertion and runaway
The second problem in destination countries in relation to labour export is the desertion of workers. This seems most alarming in Japan, Taiwan and South Korea. It has been reported that on average, the ratio of desertion of Vietnamese workers in Japan, South Korea and Taiwan is 27-30%, 20-25% and 9-12%, respectively of the total number of Vietnamese laborers deployed in these countries (MTUC, 2005; APMRN, 2004; VNExpress Jan 5, 2005). It should be recognized that some workers have borrowed money to pay high commissions and fee to be selected to go to these countries. They are under pressure to earn more than they can legally do to pay the debts. On a somewhat different reason, the weak discipline of Vietnamese workers is a factor responsible for desertion of workers. Not many deserting workers have been discovered and deported. Desertion is a complex problem made up of many factors variously connected with individual workers, employers, labour export agencies, and policy in home and host countries.

The main motives for desertion and run-away are higher salaries outside their contracted jobs or escape high fees they are required to pay local labour
suppliers for overseas jobs. It is also reported that many cases were fired after accidents with a small bill of medical expenses. Bearing a heavy burden of responsibilities and a big debt waiting for them at home, these fired workers chose to work illegally with unrecognized and fewer rights, less protection and in a strong fear of being deported. As most of laborers would work in private factories or small businesses without work permits or signed contracts, the probability of being exploited and cheated by employers has been increasing. The vicious circle for illegal workers includes: migrant rights became lesser, their protection became lesser. They are exploited and cheated and may not sue their employers due to the fear of being deported.

After several years working abroad, tens of thousand of labour workers returned to Viet Nam from Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Malaysia. They are potentially valuable human resources for Viet Nam in realizing industrialization and modernization goals. Returnees are more likely to be successful if advised and supported. However, it has been reported that some become unemployed (Viet Nam Trade Catalogue, 2006). Though the rate of unemployment among the returnees is not available, policy makers and managers believed that the figure is high. From the policy perspective, there is a lack of coordinated strategies to assist returning migrants with reintegration. Labor export strategy and specific policies do not consider returnees. Most migrant workers are left to their own devices and frequently face difficulties in finding employment commensurate with the skills they have acquired abroad.

Hung, 35, from Ha Tay Province has just returned from Korea. In 1999 he was honored by the Korean Business Association for several initiatives bringing benefit to his employer, Busan Shipbuilding Company. He is in good health, enthusiastic, disciplined, and can speak Korean and English fluently. Hung is the fifth child in an 11-member
family. His elderly brothers and sisters all have their own families, while his younger brothers farm and go to school. The VND300mil he sent from Korea now seems to be insufficient for his big family. Hung decided to keep VND50mil for himself to look for a job after he returned home; However, no enterprise or state agency have employed him, reasoning that he is only a senior high school, though Hung has acquired good experience, and language skills. After six months of unemployment, Hung decided to buy a motorbike to work as a motorbike taxi driver in Van Dinh town.

Ms. Tinh, 24, from Ky Anh, Ha Tinh Province returned to Viet Nam after three years working at a plant making packaging in Malacca, Malaysia. Tinh has been looking for work for one year, but she has still not been able to find jobs anything. She thought of establishing a farm, breeding pigs and poultry, or opening a grocery shop, but this seem difficult. Tinh believed she could get a good job with her skills and English; however, getting a job in Viet Nam has proven very difficult as she does not have a university degree. Currently Tinh lives with relatives in Hanoi while she is trying to find a job. She is likely to return to the countryside to do begin farming in several months if she cannot find a job soon.

Note: The names are not real in these stories.
Source: Viet Nam Trade Catalogue (February 28, 2006)

Problems in Viet Nam

While the operation of labour exporters without a license is clearly illegal, there are also more ambiguous cases, in particular the ones involving shady activities undertaken by brokers. In poor rural areas, there are many individuals operating as labour export agents or brokers who visit households and spread information on labour export opportunities. They claim that labour export enterprises have assigned quotas to them. Desperately in need of chances to improve their livelihood, the rural labourers mortgage their land and properties and borrow money from the bank or private lenders in order to pay a large sum of money to these brokers in the hope of securing a place (US$5,000-6,000 per person). Indeed, it would be almost impossible for the workers to get an overseas job without their intermediary and involvement. However, many workers have to wait for a year or longer without any knowledge of when they are finally dispatched abroad. In the meantime, the interest on their debts has already been
mounting up. Even if the workers want to drop out and get money back, they cannot as they are afraid of not being able to pay back the increasing debts (because if they ask the brokers to give back the commission, the broker would only pay the amount received, not with interest).

Some workers become deeply indebted in even pre-departure stage, as they must borrow from private money lenders in order to pay overcharging fee and other associated costs. Placement agencies often lack responsibilities in informing workers about the real situation in receiving countries, assisting and compensating unwanted returnees. Privatizing the recruitment agencies and give ways for exploitative brokers and traffickers to manipulate and take advantage people who wish to work abroad. Labour migrants going to the Middle East, to Malaysia or South Korea are not aware of the laws and cultures in these countries. As a result, they can become vulnerable to arrest and deportation. Placement companies and recruitment agents devote very little attention to legal channels and protective mechanisms, making it very difficult for migrant workers to avoid exploitative working conditions. In this regard, communication campaigns for awareness-raising and disseminating information would be greatly useful for potential migrants who seek overseas employment.

MOLISA asserts that all fraud cases related to labour export have been related to the fact that some labour export agencies are violating government regulations on recruitment procedures such as the principle of direct recruitment or the requirement that the agencies should have labour export contracts before recruiting workers. In the last couple of years, the government has issued a number of documents regulating labour export activities. Most recently, a law for Vietnamese labour to work overseas aims to formalize the process of out-
labour migration was enacted in 2006, and becoming effective this year. By defining the rights, and obligations of recruiting and other sending entities, the government ministries/agencies and the workers themselves, the law also enables local labour export agencies and placement agencies to expand to better meet the needs of their foreign partners. Workers are required to take language, culture and vocational training before they are sent overseas. The incidence of desertion of workers may be reduced and controlled by imposing a harsh penalty on the workers who breached the contract and run-away. The law appears to be a very important element of the effort to increase Vietnamese workers’ quality and competitiveness in international labour markets.

On the one hand, it is noteworthy that despite the strengthened management of labour export and the development of the rights and obligations of concerned parties, a major issue identified in this area is the implementation of the laws and related decrees, which is not simply technical but also, to a large extent, structural. The operations and performance of labour export are explained less by the formal legal texts or official policy statement than by the characteristics of the labour export system that largely relying on profit-oriented commercialized enterprises, deposited fees, and the mediation of broker networks. Management of the sector may not be better if possible weakness inherent in the system. The experience of the last couple of years seems to have indicated that the question of implementing polices is a matter of concern. There are a number of concerns with placement agencies and their associated brokers which often overcharge high fees for migrant workers.

On the other hand, Viet Nam is not a signatory of the 1990 International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and
Members of Their Families. This furthers the impression that Viet Nam remains a passive partner in migration, not wishing to endanger established markets for its surplus labour. The preparing process to ratify the Convention would take time and requires the amendments and adaptation of current legal framework and domestic law instruments. ¹ Nonetheless, the ratifying of the Convention would provide a basis from which to address the violations of rights of Vietnamese migrant workers abroad. This seems a critical need, given the large numbers of Vietnamese laborers overseas and the continuing outflows of migrants from the country.

**Conclusions**

The main intent of this paper is to examine the emerging issues that help to better manage labour migration from Viet Nam in the context of long-standing policies. More precisely, it focuses on emerging issues of policy and practice related to labour export from Viet Nam to place its manpower and workers overseas. The present did not examine the problems related to all types of international labor migrants, neither it attempts to assemble statistical data on migration flows from Viet Nam.

Viet Nam’s increasing openness has accelerated the inflow of foreign capital, on the one hand, and opened up greater opportunities for Viet Nam to export labour. International labor migration in Viet Nam is far from being laissez-fare. Rather, it has been largely influenced by the government that has benefited from

¹ Signature is a preliminary step to ratification for the International (UN) Convention, indicating that the Convention standards are incorporated into domestic law and the country has become a state party to the Convention. There have been so far 36 state parties to the 1990 International Convention (ILO, 2007)
the process. The government actively wants to expand this trade, and like other countries in Asia, is aiming to upgrade the skills of migrant workers to fill new niches in the increasingly international labour market of Asia.

From the mid-1990s, labour export from Viet Nam took a prominent place on the development strategies. More and more labour workers left home in search for better income opportunities overseas. With the collapse of the Soviet bloc, they now go to East Asia (Japan, South Korea, Taiwan) Malaysia, Laos, and some Middle-East countries. While the economic value of labour export is acknowledged, most migration takes place with the involvement of various intermediaries such as labour recruiters, brokers, agents and officials, making the migration process an expensive and unsafe enterprise.

The issue of labour export has now become broad and complex. How effectively can the government can influence migration processes through the use of legal regulations and policy measures? The answer is obviously not simple. There is an urgent need to first ensure that labour export corresponds with social and economic goals to safeguard the rights of workers, to prevent exploitation by agents and brokers, and to make migration safe and beneficial for the people. Labour export should also be linked to the long-term socioeconomic national development strategy of Viet Nam. Labor export is a positive but not a significant force in the country’s sustainable development. The Vietnamese government’s task is and will always remain that of maximizing growth with equity as the means for creating decent jobs and raising the standard of living of all peoples.

What Vietnamese officials should agree on is that the country’s labor export industry needs to be strengthened in quality, especially when faced with rising
numbers of workers from other economies looking harder for jobs wherever they can. In view of policy and development strategy, it is equally important to call for education and training of migrant workers. In the ever-changing world of international labor markets, what matters today is quality and competitiveness. It is necessary to direct attention toward strengthening policies to promote the return of skilled migrants and to address issues of the return migration and reintegration of migrant workers. These require a close and effective collaboration between labour importing and exporting countries, so that the former can benefit from the active young workers they need, in return for remittances, skills transfer and returned human resources which will facilitate development in labour exporting countries. Respect for migrant rights and upholding human dignity of migrant workers are essential for ensuring and sharing benefits from migration. It is urgent to eliminate all forms of exploitation and abusive practice of migrant workers because this will eventually bring about mutual interests and benefits for all.
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