

**ANALYSIS ON LABOUR MIGRATION
FROM VIETNAM TO GERMANY:
PROTECTING VULNERABLE AND UNSKILLED GROUPS**

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The dynamics of labour migration between Vietnam and Germany have gained significant attention in recent years, emerging as a potential model for mutually beneficial international cooperation. This migration flow primarily focuses on providing skilled Vietnamese workers to Germany, particularly in the health and care sectors, while simultaneously boosting Vietnam's economy through remittances. However, as both nations seek to expand legal migration pathways, complex challenges arise, especially concerning the safety and well-being of vulnerable groups such as women and minors. This situation calls for a nuanced examination of the current state of German-Vietnamese migration relations, the effectiveness of human trafficking prevention measures, and the steps necessary to ensure that migration benefits all parties involved, including the migrants themselves.

Vietnamese Migration to Germany - Current State

Labour migration from Vietnam to Germany is considered a model of success. Germany is provided with trained Vietnamese workers, especially in the health and care sector. In return, the high level of remittances ensures a noticeable upturn in the Vietnamese economy. An assessment of the situation reveals both benefits and potential challenges.

Vietnamese people have migrated to Germany for work for several decades and, over time, this relationship has taken on different forms. Overall, it can be considered a success for both sides. However, emerging factors are increasing the risk of exploitation for Vietnamese migrant workers during the recruitment process, on their journey to the EU, and after their arrival in Germany. If left unchecked in policies and enforcement, these risks could damage the labour migration programme and the relationship between Vietnam and Germany.

Vietnam has a longstanding remittance culture. This continues to play a significant role in supporting the economies of individual provinces and that of the country as a whole. According to the World Bank, in 2023, Vietnam ranked 7th in Asia-Pacific for remittances, receiving USD 14 billion, which made up 3.2 percent of total GDP¹ (These figures do not include remittances sent through informal channels). The funds are often reinvested in local communities and economies,

and much of this money comes from Vietnamese working in factories, construction, restaurants, and nail salons in countries with severe labour shortages such as Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, the Czech Republic, Poland, Germany, Slovakia, Romania, and Hungary.

Vietnam is currently in a “golden population age” with 52 percent of the population of working age, but this is projected to end around 2036.² Therefore, Vietnam has a finite amount of time to send workers overseas to earn salaries higher than those they could earn at home. For example, a Vietnamese migrant working in a restaurant kitchen in Berlin can earn 2,500 to 3,000 euros per month. That is more than double what they could earn as a higher-skilled worker in Vietnam. Most of the lower-skilled Vietnamese migrants I have interviewed over the years do not intend to stay overseas permanently. They stay for around five to seven years, earn money, gain some life experience and make new friends, then return to Vietnam.

1 Prokhorova, Anna. “Unpacking the miracle of low-cost remittance corridors in Asia and the Pacific.” UN ESCAP Expert Group Meeting and Capacity-building Workshop, Almaty, 4-5 June 2024. https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/event-documents/session3_Anna_Prokhorova_Eng.pdf.

2 “Vietnam likely to end golden population period in 2036: experts.” Tuoi Tre News. 6 January 2024. <https://tuoitrenews.vn/news/society/20240106/vietnam-likely-to-end-golden-population-period-in-2036-experts/77677.html>.

Two Sides of Migration

The expansion of the labour migration programme to focus on training higher-skilled Vietnamese migrants in industries such as healthcare and technology, along with financial support from the German government and private sector, is very welcome. These future migrants tend to come from major urban areas such as Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City and are willing to spend the months or years in the training programme learning skills and the German language because they usually plan to settle there forever, or at least for the foreseeable future. They are well-prepared and have access to comprehensive information about the migration process and adjusting to life in Germany. As such, they are at low risk of labour exploitation or human trafficking.

However, the vast majority of Vietnamese migrants still come to Germany to work in lower-skilled jobs in restaurants, retail shops, and nail salons because the demand for this type of labour is still enormous. Migrant workers at this level have long been the major source of remittances from Germany to Vietnam, starting with the guestworker programmes in the 1980s and continuing today. They also contribute greatly to building and maintaining close economic and cultural ties between the two countries.

These migrants are at high risk of debt bondage, labour exploitation, human trafficking, and modern slavery. This starts with exploitative recruitment practices by unethical labour brokers who provide misinformation about salaries, broker fees, adapting to life in Germany, and the overall visa process. Moreover, without comprehensive integration support services for these migrants after they arrive in Germany, they may continue to be exploited by unscrupulous members of the Vietnamese diaspora who are connected to the greater transnational Vietnamese human smuggling network.

To protect this vulnerable but in-demand class of Vietnamese migrants, the German government

should adjust their migration policies to reflect the risks that these migrants face, work with the Vietnamese government and civil society/migrant support organisations in Vietnam and Germany, and invest in safeguarding the migration process from recruitment in Vietnam to post-arrival in Germany. Only then can all Vietnamese migrants, German employers, and both countries' economies benefit while reducing the market share of the transnational human smuggling and trafficking networks that currently dominate.

History of Labour Migration

There has been high demand for overseas labour migration services from lower-skilled Vietnamese workers since the Soviet-era guest worker programmes of the 1980s, serviced by hundreds of labour brokers, many of which still exist today. For a migrant worker from one of the handful of provinces that send the majority of workers overseas, such as Nghe An, Ha Tinh, or Quang Binh, the only way to find work in Germany is to go through one of these services. Workers are completely reliant on them for the latest information on visas, salaries, and job placements.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the democratisation of former Soviet bloc countries, Vietnam's labour export programme to Europe slowed down. The demand to migrate overseas for work increased as Vietnam was still a poor country – at that time, it was just embarking on the *Đổi Mới* economic reforms. However, migrants now had to go through circuitous and sometimes illegal channels to reach their final destinations such as Germany, the Czech Republic, or the UK. Today, many Vietnamese migrants still believe that they must go through these convoluted, expensive, and protracted routes. They do not believe that a wealthy, developed country like Germany would make it easy for them to move there to live and work, especially since it is difficult for working-class Vietnamese to obtain tourist visas to most western countries. Migrants lack access to the

latest trustworthy information on labour export programmes, safe migration pathways, labour visa application processes, or how to find work and housing in their destination country.

The migration service industry in Vietnam and within the Vietnamese diaspora in Germany, which includes labour brokerages and overseas study agencies, exists in both physical (often short-lived) storefronts and online, including social media posts and forums on Facebook and websites such as www.chovinh.com. Online postings are filled with advertisements about migrating abroad with 100 percent guarantees of employment and high salaries. Germany, Japan, South Korea, Australia, Spain, Poland, the Philippines, and New Zealand are just some of the many destinations repeated across advertisements. At the same time, Eastern and Central European countries are experiencing severe shortages in low- and high-skilled labour. Companies in these countries have centered their recruitment on Vietnamese people because of their past reputation as diligent guest workers.

The Policy of Vietnam on Labour Migration

Meanwhile, Vietnam has made exporting workers the centerpiece of its economic plan, negotiating bilateral labour export programmes with EU countries such as Germany and Hungary. The government has also registered and approved hundreds of recruitment companies in Vietnam to implement labour supply contracts for Vietnamese workers who then register with the Vietnamese Department of Overseas Labour (DOLAB). As of 2020, 421 Vietnamese labour brokers were licensed to provide services to send Vietnamese workers abroad to countries such as Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Romania, and Portugal, among many others.³



According to official DOLAB figures, the number of Vietnamese migrant workers in European countries remains low relative to those in East Asia. However, many Vietnamese migrant workers go through unofficial or independent recruitment programmes. These higher numbers – in the thousands – are reflected in the D-visas (labour visas) issued each year by European embassies and consulates. This convergence of a constant and growing supply of Vietnamese migrants seeking work overseas; high demand for migrant labour in Europe; and an opaque, poorly-regulated labour migration process creates a perfect storm for migrant exploitation, human trafficking, and modern slavery.

Legal Loopholes

Unscrupulous labour brokers will use legal labour export programmes to advertise themselves as the only way for Vietnamese workers to migrate abroad. The misinformation they provide is reinforced through word-of-mouth in local communities, and there are no sustained community-based information campaigns to counter this narrative. Without closer regulation of labour brokers and comprehensive labour migration policies between Vietnam and Germany that recognise and address risks, it is very easy for brokers to manipulate legal labour

3 “Vietnam’s labour exports eye the European market in 2020.” Center for WTO and International Trade-VCCI. 3 February 2020. <https://wtocenter.vn/chuyen-de/15030-vietnams-labour-exports-eye-the-european-market-in-2020>.

programmes and opportunities to entrap and exploit Vietnamese migrant workers who are trying to migrate legally.

This becomes problematic because labour migration to Germany often involves exploiting legal labour opportunities in other countries such as Poland, Hungary, or Slovakia. One common example is for a labour broker to advertise that they can help a migrant worker get a factory job in one of the Eastern or Central European countries actively recruiting Vietnamese workers, promising them an above-average salary, extra benefits, the ability to bring over their family within three to six months, and other perks. The worker will borrow around USD 12,000-15,000 to pay for the service, estimating that they can repay the debt within two years, which is acceptable for most Vietnamese.

Other brokers will tell migrants who want to work in Germany that the only way to get there is to go through these other countries first by using their legal labour visas. The brokers hide the fact that workers can apply directly to work in Germany as a way to justify the high fees they charge the worker, which could be as much as USD 50,000. The Vietnamese worker has no reason to question this logic as this has been one of the most common routes to get to Germany and the UK since the 1990s, and they do not know that there is a legal, direct labour pathway for them to Germany.

The worker's stay in a country like Hungary or Poland will often be short-lived. Those who want to work in Hungary will find that the salary given by the labour broker is actually much lower than advertised, so it will take longer for them to repay the debt. In addition, working conditions are not what they expected and other promised perks do not materialise. The labour migration service will then offer to help them go to Germany, because the salary is much higher and there are more Vietnamese employers. However, the migrant worker will have to go

into further debt to pay for this "extra" service, perhaps another USD 10,000 to USD 20,000, and they are under the impression that their visa allows them to work in Germany legally. By the time the migrants arrive in Germany, they will be in tens of thousands of dollars in debt bondage and closer to the sphere of influence of the ethnic Vietnamese criminal groups that operate throughout Europe.

The use of legal labour pathways to turn countries like Hungary into channels to smuggle Vietnamese migrant workers to Germany, Spain, UK, and other western European countries is having a negative impact on the reputation of the reliability of Vietnamese workers. Employers in Hungary, for example, are increasingly becoming frustrated with a labour migration process that sees them spend large sums of money to recruit Vietnamese workers in good faith, but end up with no workers because the labour visa system is being exploited by transnational human smuggling, trafficking, and organised crime networks.

Vulnerable Groups

Female and child migrants are especially vulnerable during this stage of the migration journey, as they are completely at the mercy of the human smuggling networks and their affiliates. At this point, they are no longer viewed as human beings, but more as products with a market value, and human smuggling and organised crime networks exist to generate as much profit as possible wherever they can. In general, women and girls globally are valued less than men as members of society. As a product, however, women and girls are more valuable because there are more ways to exploit them, such as labour and sex, and the exploitation can be systematic or opportunistic depending on who is in control of her journey at that moment and demands of the local market.

For example, former female Vietnamese trafficking and modern slavery victims I have interviewed in Europe worked for 10 hours per day in a nail salon six days per week, then forced into prostitution in the evenings in a brothel or if a client demanded it. At this point, it becomes a matter of survival for the woman or minor. They are in debt bondage and also fearful of reprisals against themselves or their families back in Vietnam, so they suffer through the abuse and are afraid to tell “outsiders” such as social workers or law enforcement the truth. Human trafficking statistics will often split exploitation for labour or sex into two distinct categories, but the risk for women and children will always be both at the same time. Data-gathering should be updated to reflect this risk.

Irregular Immigration

Even though there are now several legal labour pathways for Vietnamese migrants to work in Germany, many arrive illegally without working papers and under enormous debt bondage to labour brokers affiliated with the ethnic Vietnamese transnational organised crime and human smuggling networks. The exploitation of these migrants will often continue after they arrive in Germany because there are no standard integration support services in Vietnamese that they can easily access, so they often have to add to their debt and pay hundreds and sometimes thousands of euros to “fixers” for basic services such as registering a mobile phone or finding housing.

The exploitation of legal labour pathways by labour brokers and human smuggling networks is frustrating for employers, visa and law enforcement officials of affected countries, and migrant victims and their families, and is beginning to negatively impact Vietnam’s reputation as a reliable country for migrant labour. The safety of migrant workers is the top priority – they must be able to travel to and work and live in Germany without risk of

exploitation. Otherwise, workers, employers, and the German and Vietnamese economies will not benefit from labour migration. Instead, the groups that benefit the most will be criminal gangs and human smugglers who exist to generate as much profit as possible through the exploitation of people and the system.

The Business of Brokers

The most important thing to consider when reaching out to the most vulnerable migrants is culture. Most low-skilled labour migrants that go to Europe and Germany are from just a handful of provinces in central and northern Vietnam, such as Nghe An, Ha Tinh, Quang Binh, which all have their own distinct dialects, traditions, and histories. People from these provinces have been migrating to Europe for decades and the belief that the only path to prosperity is found working overseas is now deeply embedded in their culture. This belief is reinforced by new houses, cars, and motorbikes that have appeared over the years, transforming entire rural villages into modern towns. Labour brokers do not need to do much active recruiting beyond posting on social media, as nearly everyone in these provinces is seeking work abroad. Moreover, brokers will often give presentations for grade 12 high school students to recruit them to work abroad after graduation, often following in the footsteps of their parents, grandparents, and extended family members.

Past information campaigns implemented or funded by well-meaning donors have been unsuccessful because they were not specific enough in their: 1) Message content, and; 2) messenger. Locals from these provinces are generally less open to believing information delivered by outsiders who tend to lecture them in a different accent and be seen as more privileged. They are more likely to trust labour brokers promising them and their families a life of prosperity by working overseas.

Migrants and victims of trafficking and exploitation will rarely tell their families the truth about their suffering. In my experience working with trafficking victims in Europe over the last 12 years, they will go to great lengths to hide their suffering and difficult situation from their families because they do not want them to worry and lose face or be shamed. Consequently, knowledge of risks and dangers that migrants face once they leave Vietnam are never transmitted back to the home communities; what families receive in place of the truth is a social-media-filtered story of an exciting new life with easy earnings.

A Way Forward

To have a real impact and reach the most vulnerable groups, an intervention has to have two parts. Part one is a sustained, consistent national and grassroots awareness-raising and communication campaign that features people from the most affected provinces and engages with influential community groups, such as the local Women's Union or Union of Friendship Organisations, to help promote the messages. The content should be delivered as close to the local dialect as possible, take place in person and online, and cover the real steps of the migration process, including actual service fees as set by the Vietnamese government, real salaries, the cost of living in the destination country, and the risks of going with unethical labour brokers. Most awareness-raising campaigns failed in the past because there was no change in the choices available to the Vietnamese after the campaign ended. Eventually, they ended up making the riskier decision anyway because there was no alternative available to them.

Part two is providing safer migration opportunities and options for lower-skilled migrants by regulating labour brokers and ensuring that the loopholes and gaps are closed from both the Vietnamese and German sides. Labour brokers can be incentivised into ethical business practices if countries like Germany, Hungary, and Poland coordinate

with the Vietnamese DOLAB to restrict visa applications to a list of vetted labour brokers trained by the DOLAB and a third party, such as the International Labour Organization (ILO). By taking market share away from unethical labour brokers, Germany and Vietnam can ensure that brokers are positively motivated to obey the law, provide correct information, and not overcharge their clients. The labour recruitment process must be consistently monitored and regulated by both Vietnam and destination countries with full awareness of the many tactics used by labour brokers and smuggling networks to take advantage of the labour migration system.

Improving the Relationship between Germany and Vietnam

Germany is fortunate and different from other countries with large Vietnamese diaspora communities in Europe in that Vietnamese have been in Germany for several decades and are relatively well integrated into most parts of society. There are Vietnamese-German social workers and law enforcement officers, for example, as well as NGOs and volunteer community and cultural associations that support new migrant integration into German society while keeping them connected to Vietnamese culture. In addition, many Vietnamese-German employers, particularly in the hospitality and restaurant industries, have come together to support labour migrants with their integration, including obtaining legal status, as they recognise the risks and vulnerabilities faced by these migrants.

Germany should recognise these efforts and formalise them by funding a Vietnamese migrant integration programme in Germany. This would coordinate services already being provided by German migrant support NGOs, social workers, Vietnamese diaspora volunteers, and employers helping to reduce the risk of exploitation of Vietnamese labour migrants once they arrive in Germany. So far, these efforts are uncoordinated and only reach a small number of migrants.

Moreover, this programme should coordinate with the German Embassy and Consulate visa sections in Vietnam so that support services have a list of Vietnamese workers coming to Germany and are connected with them before they even leave Vietnam. This will provide a safety net for Vietnamese migrants so that, when they arrive in Germany, the integration programme already has their name and information to help them with tasks such as finding housing, registering a mobile phone, learning how to use public transportation, and connecting them with Vietnamese-German community members. This will help ease migrants' culture shock and transition so that they can have the best possible living and working experiences in Germany.

We often speak about Vietnamese migrant workers in the context of their utility and economics. But it is also important to remember that these are mostly young people who are not just earning money to support their families, but also yearning for new life experiences and stepping out of their comfort zones to live in a new country, meet new people, learn a new language, experience new cultures, and travel. These are universal desires of most young

people, including many Germans who spend time after high school or university to live and work overseas. There is no reason why young Vietnamese should not be able to have these same experiences in Germany or other countries without being exploited. Many or most will return to Vietnam after a few years; others will stay permanently. But all have the potential to contribute to building long-lasting, strong, and meaningful economic and cultural connections between Germany and Vietnam.

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