

# IMPACTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON MIGRANT WORKERS ACROSS VIETNAM - LAOS BORDER (CASE STUDY OF NGHE AN AND HA TINH PROVINCE, VIETNAM)

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**Abstract:** *in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused great harm and difficulties to employees, especially to migrant workers. During the pandemic, although Vietnam has accomplished outstanding achievements in disease prevention as well as in economic and social security, in the downturn of the global economic background, economic structures and global order have undergone profound adjustments and changes, inevitably having negative impacts on the economy, society in general, and people's livelihood in particular. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused great harm and difficulties to workers from Vietnam across the Vietnam-Laos border. This article focuses on the case study of Vietnamese people who migrated across the Vietnam-Laos border in Nghe An, Ha Tinh, to assess the impact of COVID-19 on migrant workers across the Vietnam-Laos border on the following issues: employment, income, etc.*

**Keywords:** *migration, migrant workers, COVID – 19, Vietnam, Laos.*

## ПОСЛЕДСТВИЯ ПАНДЕМИИ COVID-19 НА ТРУДЯЩИХСЯ-МИГРАНТОВ ЧЕРЕЗ ВЬЕТНАМО-ЛАОССКУЮ ГРАНИЦУ (НА ПРИМЕРЕ ПРОВИНЦИИ НГЕАН И ХАТИНЬ, ВЬЕТНАМ)

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**Аннотация:** *в 2020 году пандемия COVID-19 нанесла большой вред и трудности работникам, особенно трудовым мигрантам. Во время пандемии, несмотря на то, что Вьетнам добился выдающихся успехов в профилактике заболеваний, а также в области экономической и социальной безопасности, в условиях ухудшения глобального экономического фона экономические структуры и глобальный порядок претерпели глубокие корректировки и изменения, что неизбежно оказало негативное влияние на экономику общества в целом и жизни людей в частности. Однако пандемия COVID-19 нанесла большой вред и трудности рабочим из Вьетнама через вьетнамско-лаосскую границу. Эта статья посвящена изучению случая вьетнамцев, мигрировавших через вьетнамско-лаосскую границу в Нгеан, Хатинь, для оценки воздействия COVID-19 на трудящихся-мигрантов через вьетнамско-лаосскую границу по следующим вопросам: занятость, доход, и т. д.*

**Ключевые слова:** *миграция, трудовые мигранты, COVID-19, Вьетнам, Лаос.*

### Introduction

At present, international migration is considered as one of the global issues with great influence and challenges to international relations as well as the development of individuals and countries. The flow of migration from Vietnam across the Vietnam-Laos border to Laos or Thailand and other countries is a historical issue and has been happening for a long time. This tendency is increasing, especially as Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand integrate more and more deeply in the region. Since the establishment of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), regional cooperation has promoted investment, free trade, and travel among member nations. Many major initiatives and labor cooperation agreements in the region have been implemented, including the ASEAN Framework Agreement on visa exemption for citizens of ASEAN countries; The Mekong sub-regional labor migration program and the ASEAN Economic Community Integration Plan... have protected and created conditions for migrant workers in the region, including Vietnamese workers who have migrated across the Vietnam - Laos border.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused great harm and difficulties to employees, especially migrant workers. The crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that migrants, especially those who migrate through unofficial channels, have lost their jobs and are not entitled to social protection policies. However, evidence on the socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Vietnamese workers who migrated across the Vietnam-Laos border is still fairly meager. This makes migration, especially in the context of the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, inadequate. Therefore, the study of migration flows across the Vietnam-Laos border is indeed necessary.

This article focuses on the case study of Vietnamese people who migrated across the Vietnam-Laos border in Nghe An, Ha Tinh, to assess the impact of COVID-19 on migrant workers across the Vietnam-Laos border on employment, income, etc.

### **Overall impact of COVID-19 on Vietnam**

In 2021, with the strong outbreak of COVID-19, a large number of workers returned due to the impact of unsustainable livelihoods, causing a serious labor crisis. By the fourth quarter of 2021 and the first quarter of 2022, with adjustments in guidelines and policies, the labor market has changed more positively. However, the International Labor Organization (ILO) believes that the slow and uncertain labor market resilience due to the pandemic will continue to have a significant impact on the global labor market [3].

In-depth analysis in Vietnam shows that migrant workers often suffer more disadvantages than other types of workers. Migrant workers participate in both formal and informal labor force, but in multiple perspectives, informal migrant workers may not yet entitle the full benefits of promulgated social security policies, such as labor, employment, poverty alleviation, social insurance, social patronage, basic social services (healthcare, education, housing, clean water, information assessing).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, although Vietnam has accomplished outstanding achievements in disease prevention as well as in economic and social security, in the context of the global economic downturn, economic structures and global order have undergone profound adjustments and changes, inevitably having negative impacts on the economy, society in general, and people's livelihood in particular.

*Economic:* Compared to many other countries, Vietnam's epidemic prevention is proactive and effective so that the economy is less affected, but in general, it is still greatly influenced. The pandemic has impacted most economic sectors such as services, industrial and construction, which are key economic sectors of Vietnam, to unprecedented levels. GDP continued to grow in the first 6 months of 2020, reaching 1.8% but was the lowest rate in the past three decades. Generally, in the first 8 months of 2020, the whole country had 88.7 thousand newly registered enterprises, decreased to 2% compared to the same period last year with the average registered capital per enterprise was 13.8 billion dong, up 8.7%; the number of enterprises returning to operation increased by 27.9%; enterprises temporarily suspending operations pending dissolution procedures decreased by 5.9% and enterprises completing dissolution procedures decreased by 1.9% [2].

*Finance and employment:* According to a report by the General Statistics Office, in the second quarter of 2020, the labor force aged 15 and above was 53.1 million people, a decrease of 2.2 million people compared to the previous quarter and a decrease of 2.4 million people compared to the same period last year. As of the end of June 2020, up to 30.8 million people aged 15 years and above were negatively affected by the COVID-19 epidemic [1] including those who lost their jobs or had to take time off/rotary leave, reduce working hours and income, etc.

Statistics show that 2020 is the first time in the 2015 - 2020 period that the average monthly income of employees in the second quarter has decreased compared to the same period last year. Informal workers experience a greater reduction in income than formal workers. The higher qualifications workers have, the lower their incomes will be reduced. The impact due to income reduction accounted for the highest proportion with 57.3% of the total affected people (17.6 million people)... The services sector was hardest hit by the COVID-19 epidemic with 72.0% of employees being affected. Next is industry and construction, with 67.8% of employees affected; the proportion of affected labor force in the agriculture, forestry and fishery sector is 25.1%.

*Education and health:* The COVID-19 pandemic also affects the education sector, causing schools to temporarily close. That affected the school attendance of 20 million students. COVID-19 has also caused many schools to switch to online teaching and learning. This, on the one hand, makes it difficult to transform infrastructure, but on the other hand, it is a pressure for schools to access distance teaching and learning technology. The health sector, the frontline of epidemic prevention during the COVID-19 pandemic, has made great efforts in disease prevention and accomplished great achievements, affirming Vietnam's healthcare before the international community. However, for people during the epidemic, access to medical services is also limited, resulting in treatment for some common diseases being affected...

### **Impact of COVID-19 on migrant workers across the Vietnam-Laos border**

#### **- Situation of migration flows across the Vietnam-Laos border**

Migration, both within and across borders, is common in the Asia-Pacific region. Asia is the region of origin for 40% of the world's international migrants (111 million), 66 million of whom live in other Asian countries [9]. From 1990 to 2017, the largest number of migrants to Laos was from Vietnam, followed by China and Cambodia.

Vietnamese people come to Laos in the 21st century mainly for economic reasons, mainly trading. A large number of people went to work in Laos. According to the Report of the Association of Vietnamese Investors in Laos (AVIL) in 2016, there are about 13,000 Vietnamese workers in Laos, serving in many industries, from hydropower, construction, forest products to rubber and coffee plantations. The number of Vietnamese people going to Laos tends to increase. According to statistics of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), an estimated 20,076 Vietnamese people migrated to Laos in 2019. In recent years, according to a representative of the Department of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs, before the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of people going to Laos and Thailand from Ha Tinh was over 10,000 people/year [4].

Among the political, economic and social factors that motivate Vietnamese to migrate across the border to Laos or through Laos to Thailand and other countries, economic factors such as low income, poverty, lack of employment, etc. and livelihoods are the main motivation of people's decision to migrate. The disparities in living standards, employment opportunities and higher incomes in Laos, Thailand and some countries in the region such as Malaysia have pushed people in the border areas of Vietnam to migrate in search of work abroad, even if they are temporary jobs.

Migration flows from Vietnam to Thailand have appeared for hundreds of years, including labor migration and study migration, in which labor migration predominates due to the proximity of the two countries. Regarding the reasons for migration, the main motivation for Vietnamese to migrate to Thailand is to have higher incomes and better living standards [7; 8].

According to estimates of Thai authorities, the number of Vietnamese people currently working in Thailand is tens of thousands of people. The April 2020 review of overseas workers by the Ministry of Labour - Invalids and Social Affairs of Ha Tinh province shows that Ha Tinh province has 5,999 people working in Thailand and 1,617 people working in Laos. According to the Ministry of Labour - Invalids and Social Affairs of Nghe An province in 2017, the number of workers without contracts under the provisions of the Law on Vietnamese Laborers working abroad in Laos is 5,693, in Thailand is 564 [5; 6].

The majority of Vietnamese workers go to Laos and Thailand in the form of visa-free travel between the two countries and then find a way to stay and find work, mainly doing common jobs such as serving at restaurants, selling goods, doing housework or small business... As unauthorized employment, working conditions and workers' rights are not guaranteed and are vulnerable to risks.

#### **- Impact of COVID-19 on migrant workers across the Vietnam-Laos border**

On January 23, 2020, Vietnam recorded its first case of COVID-19. From March 22, 2020, Vietnam has temporarily suspended entry of foreigners, and at the same time required the returning Vietnamese to be quarantined for 14 days. From April 1, 2020, Vietnam also implemented social distancing for 15 days...

During the outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic, the Government of Lao PDR decided to issue a nationwide closure measure for about 3-5 months depending on the outbreak, including the closure of schools and entertainment locations. The Thai government has taken emergency measures at the national level to prevent the spread of the disease by restricting international commercial flights into Thailand, banning people from traveling between provinces in Thailand, closing sales areas, public business places, closing schools (except for international schools), limiting mass gatherings... Measures to prevent COVID-19 epidemics of countries in this period has a significant influence on migration flows across the Vietnam-Laos border.

*Finance and employment:* The preventive measures against COVID-19 by the governments of Laos and Thailand have had a negative impact on workers in all fields. In which, employees working in the fields of business, tourism, restaurants, hotels, and construction are the most affected occupation groups. These are also the areas where the majority of Vietnamese migrant workers work.

34.7% of migrants said the reason they returned to Vietnam was that their work was affected by the epidemic. Of which 27.7% said their work was not as they expected – lost their job, reduced their income, 4% of migrants could not find a job, 3.3% of people lost their job and 4.7% of migrants were asked to return by their employer because of the impact of the COVID-19 epidemic. Before the COVID-19 epidemic in Thailand (April 2020), there were about 40,000 - 50,000 Vietnamese freelance workers in this country. But since the outbreak, it is estimated that at least 10,000 - 15,000 workers have returned home due to lack of work, loss of income, and fear of COVID-19 infection. Many people are stuck due to very difficult circumstances [10].

While being abroad, migrants' incomes have been reduced or absent due to the impact of the epidemic. When returning home, migrants continue to fall into being unemployed with no income. In addition, some businesses and traders are still in debt or cannot get their money back. Due to the effect of the epidemic, there are significant debts and loans. Therefore, they are forced to face financial hardship.

The proportion of migrants reporting difficulties in accessing jobs is equivalent to the proportion of those who report that their current employment status is underemployment (37%) and unemployed (4.7%). Only 26.7% of those who return are currently in full employment.

In fact, since returning to Vietnam, some migrants have been waiting for the reopening of the Vietnam-Laos border to be able to return to work. They think that the job they are doing in Laos and Thailand is suitable for them, so they do not look for other work in the locality where they live. 25% of people said they are not currently working. 6.7% choose to do housework for the family.

In terms of gender, the most concerning issue is that women have a lower rate of full employment than men (19.4% versus 30.2%). The percentage of females doing housework is higher than that of male workers (16.3% versus 2%).

As for the group employed, the majority of them work in the informal sector (self-employed/self-employed – 58.1% or wage earners 26.7%). The rate of working for the private sector and receiving a monthly salary is 15.2%. There are no cases of working for the state and receiving a monthly salary. Women have a significantly higher rate of self-employment than men (85.7% versus 46.7%) while men have a higher share of daily or monthly wage employment. The percentage of men

working for daily wages is 34.8% (compared to 7.1% of women). Whereas the percentage of men working for monthly wages is 18.5% (with 7.1% of women).

Common types of work are farming (42.9%), and construction (30.9%). The division of occupations by gender is quite clear. Women tend to work in agriculture and small businesses more while men work in construction, transportation, etc.

*Social security:* In fact, there are no specific support programs for returning migrants in localities. However, they still have access to the same general social services available as people in the community. The obtained information shows that there have been no cases of difficulties in accessing social services such as clean water, housing, education ... Representatives of commune authorities at the survey sites said that they have created favorable conditions for migrants to return with licensing business and blue-collar workers; facilitate for school-age children to be granted health insurance cards.

The percentage of people who reported having difficulty accessing social services was very low. According to the research results obtained, only 3 people aged 50 and over reported having difficulty in accessing health care (2 men and 1 woman). Only 1 person reported struggling to access mental health support (male, 50-59 years old). In addition, there are also people who have difficulty accessing loans for business.

98% of migrants have been fully vaccinated against Covid, of which 79% have received 2 regular doses and one or two booster shots, and 19% have received two regular doses. The rate that has not received any injections is only 1%.

However, migrants also face difficulties in accessing support services to return to Vietnam. Support services in other countries for migrants to return to Vietnam are almost nonexistent. The percentage of migrants receiving support to return is very low. In which, 1.3% of migrants to Laos are provided with personal protective equipment when returning; 4% of migrants receive information on health and safety when returning to Vietnam; 3.7% of migrants received administrative and logistical support when returning to Vietnam (3.4 migrants to Laos and 4.5% to Thai); 5.1% of migrants receive legal assistance on their return...

Logistic and COVID-19 testing support upon returning to Vietnam has also been recognized by migrants. In addition, returning migrants reported receiving food support from the community during the quarantine period at home, such as rice, food, vegetables, etc. However, there was also a small number of migrants who did not receive this support.

### **Solutions**

Along with the guidelines and policies for socio-economic recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic, our Party and State have policies towards migrant workers. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused great effects and difficulties for workers, especially migrant workers - a more vulnerable group. Therefore, it is necessary to implement synchronous solutions to support the life of migrant workers.

*Firstly*, abroad, it is necessary to further strengthen the responsibility of Vietnam's diplomatic missions abroad to effectively protect the lawful rights and interests of overseas Vietnamese, including migrants who come to work undocumented. In the country, information on migrant workers without contracts should be included in the national labor database. At the same time, it is essential to connect this database with the national database of the population to have a common database conveniently for data management and sharing among stakeholders. In addition, Regarding support solutions, in order to minimize the risks that migrants may face, activities to provide information on migrants' rights and obligations, common risks, and implement guiding on the necessary procedures to obtain legal documents for migrants; Strengthening exchange activities to promote labor cooperation between Vietnam and countries in the region, proposing to expand occupations for Vietnamese workers to work in Laos and Thailand, in the services sector,... to expand the legal employment opportunities of migrants.

*Secondly*, to ensure the lives of returning migrants and support them to maximize the benefits derived from migration, solutions to connect jobs, and assist returning migrants to develop their economy in the locality, employment-oriented programs, and effective use of money from migration, business start-up programs are proposed. In addition, it needs to be concerned with building a long-term strategy for socio-economic development, creating on-the-spot jobs for local workers to minimize spontaneous migration for the purpose of finding work.

*Thirdly*, mobilizing the community's cooperation in disease prevention is a great success of the Party and State, especially the spirit of the intact leaves protecting the tattered ones, community cohesion, and mutual love of the Vietnamese people has been promoted in the recent fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. In the context of labor and employment is not really stable after the COVID-19 epidemic and many social problems arise, it is necessary to further promote the strength of the community as well as specific regulations so that organizations and individuals operate in accordance with regulations, charters, and laws.

### **Conclusion**

Cross-border migration is the most complex and diverse type of migration in terms of work, residence times, number of trips per year, and migration purpose. For many years, Laos has become a transit country for people looking for work in Thailand or other countries in the region. Migration cases across the Vietnam-Laos border can be faced with dangerous, unsafe, and not protected by law. Not only Laos and Thailand, but Vietnamese workers are also having great opportunities in the expanding ASEAN job market. However, in order to protect the rights and safety of employees, the authorities need to have better labor management measures and the workers themselves also need to enhance their legal knowledge and well implement the regulations and laws of both the origin and destination countries.

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