

FORUM

SUPPORTING INFORMAL WORKERS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN VIETNAM: LESSONS LEARNED

LINH PHUONG DINH¹

ABSTRACT: *Workers in the informal sector constitute a disadvantaged group of employees in Vietnam. Though they contribute significantly to national GDP, they do not have a chance to benefit from social security policies. In 2020, the proportion of workers in the informal sector increased rapidly and then decreased slowly in the following years, which reflected a negative shift in the employment structure of the country under the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. With the understanding that workers in the informal sector are those most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Vietnamese government has integrated the goal of supporting this group into national social support packages for people affected by the pandemic. However, implementing these packages faced several difficulties and did not succeed. This article discusses Vietnam's experience in supporting informal workers during COVID-19 and analyzes reasons for the policies' failure using the social welfare policy analysis framework by Gilbert and Terrell (2014). Despite being unsuccessful, we argue that these policies also have implications concerning how to create a more comprehensive social security system with a higher level of emergency preparedness.*

KEYWORDS: *COVID-19, Vietnam, informal workers, social assistance policy, social security*

¹ *Linh Phuong Dinh* is a Post-doctoral Fellow at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Hanoi, Vietnam; email address: linh.dinh110@gmail.com. This research is solely funded by VNU University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi under project number USSH-2024.46.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic started at the end of 2019 and, since then, has had a huge impact on all aspects of human lives. Not only did COVID-19 become a global public health challenge, but it also triggered economic and social crises all over the world. According to the Asian Development Bank Institute (Sawada–Sumulong 2021), in 2020, the global losses were 5.5–8.7% of world GDP; in 2021, the rate was 3.6–6.3%. Besides its economic impact, COVID-19 has also unveiled and widened inequality and the social security gap between social groups and between high- and low-income countries. Workers in the informal economic sector were particularly vulnerable, as they suffered harsh impacts from COVID-19 and yet lacked social support from the social security system. In lower-middle-income countries, including Vietnam, informal employment accounts for a significant proportion of total employment, and the share of informal workers affected by COVID-19 in these countries was also the highest (80% of total employment) (ILO 2020). They were street vendors, transport workers, waste recyclers, domestic helpers... In normal times, these workers faced numerous challenges due to their unstable employment, income insecurity, and lack of social and health protection, and during COVID-19, their burdens were just exacerbated.

In order to provide social protection to informal workers during COVID-19, many governments introduced immediate policy responses. These included extending health coverage and financial protection for all (e.g. Ecuador, Peru) and providing income support to informal workers (e.g. Thailand, Morocco, and Costa Rica) (ILO 2020). Being a lower middle-income country with a large share of informal workers (66.7%) (GSOV 2022), the Vietnamese government made efforts to extend social security coverage to this disadvantaged group through the implementation of *Resolution No. 42/NQ-CP* and *Resolution No. 68/NQ-CP*, which that allocated contingency budgets to financially support informal workers. However, the design and implementation of this resolution were controversial, revealing the current limitations of Vietnam's social security system. This article presents Vietnam's experience in addressing the needs of informal workers in the emergency situation caused by COVID-19. Based on the social welfare policy analysis model developed by Gilbert and Terrell (2014), we discuss the policies' dimensions of choice and their competing and social justice values. The article also seeks to explain how such efforts by the Vietnamese government faced challenges yet opened up opportunities for expanding the social security net post-COVID-19, potentially providing a better social policy response to other upcoming emergencies.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The model of social welfare policy analysis

For this article, we adopt Gilbert and Terrell's model (2014) to investigate the policies that supported informal workers in Vietnam during COVID-19. This model focuses on essential components of social welfare policy design identified as dimensions of choice, which include:

- The basis of social allocations (Who?);
- The types of allocated social provisions (What?);
- The strategies applied to delivery such provisions (How?);
- Ways to finance provisions (Finance?).

The first and second dimensions of choice regard the identification of benefit recipients based on numerous eligibility criteria and what kinds of benefits may be delivered. In contrast, the others involve the design of the benefit delivery system and its financing mechanism. For the consideration of the dimensions of choice, various values were assessed, including both competing values and social justice values. Competing values concern variations in how individual interests are harnessed in common service. They are divided into conservative perspectives (cost-effectiveness, freedom of choice, freedom of dissent, and local autonomy) and progressive perspectives (social effectiveness, social control, efficiency, and centralization). Meanwhile, social justice values, which include the value of equality, equity, and adequacy, are concerned with whether the distribution of provisions is fair. Applying this model to the case of Vietnam's support packages for informal workers affected by COVID-19 helps to identify the substance of the policies and sheds light on the reasons for their ineffectiveness.

The concept of informal worker

There are differences in the definitions of informal employment of the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the General Statistics Office of Vietnam (GSOV). While the ILO has defined informal employment as "employment arrangements that do not provide individuals with legal or social protection through their work, thereby leaving them more exposed to economic risk" (ILO 2021: 16), according to GSOV, informal employment is "employment without social insurance (especially compulsory social insurance) and an absence of at least a three-month labor contract" (GSOV–

ILO 2018: 5). It can be seen that the definition of GSOV focuses on social insurance and labor contracts, while the definition by ILO is concerned more with protection for informal workers. In this article, we have used the GSOV definition of informal employment. Accordingly, as of 2021, most informal workers in Vietnam were from 35 to 44 years old, had primary education, were based in a rural locality, or worked in the market service sector (according to ILO statistics based on GSOV's definition of informal worker and employment) (ILO 2021).

The concept of social security

The concept of social security has diverse interpretations. As defined by the ILO,

Social security is the protection that a society provides to individuals and households to ensure access to health care and to guarantee income security, particularly in cases of old age, unemployment, sickness, invalidity, work injury, maternity or loss of a breadwinner. (ILO 2022: 1)

Various scholars have also made attempts to define social security. Burgess and Stern (1991) viewed social security as the prevention, by social means, of low living standards resulting from chronic or temporary adversity. Pieters (2006) perceived social security as the body of arrangements intended to support people who face a lack of earnings or particular costs. According to the Communist Party of Vietnam and the Vietnamese government, social security is a system of policies and programs implemented by the State and other social forces to ensure that all Vietnamese citizens have income and have the opportunity to access basic and essential social services, such as education, health care, housing, clean water, information, etc. (Nguyen 2015). There are four main groups of policies in the social security system of Vietnam:

- Policies associated with employment, poverty reduction, and income generation;
- Social insurance policies intended to reduce people's risks regarding sickness, occupational accidents, etc.;
- Social assistance policies that include regular allowances and emergency relief;
- Policies that involve basic social services that help people access basic services such as education, health care, clean water, etc.

Besides economic development, ensuring social security is a priority of the Vietnamese government in terms of governing the country for the period 2021–2030, as clearly stated in the resolution of the 13th National Congress of Vietnam's Communist Party: “Well-implement social policies: ensure social security, social welfare and human security; promote significant changes in social development management, progress and social justice; improve quality of life and happiness of the people.” (Communist Party of Vietnam 2021: 47)

Over the last decade, in the period 2010–2020, Vietnam's social security system has achieved some remarkable achievements, such as an increase in the number of people participating in social insurance from 9.5 million to 16.1 million; the number of people participating in unemployment insurance from 7.2 million to 13.3 million; and increasing the health insurance coverage rate from 60.9 to 91%. Therefore, the number of people entitled to social security benefits has increased significantly (Nguyen 2021). However, Vietnam's social security system has not yet been able to cover the informal economic sector.

METHODOLOGY

The article reviewed a wide range of highly credible documents, including research articles, reports, laws and legislation, and government newspapers relating to support policies for informal workers during COVID-19. Most documents were identified using the Google and Google Scholar search engines with keywords including ‘informal workers in Vietnam,’ ‘social security policies in Vietnam,’ ‘COVID-19,’ ‘*Resolution No. 42/NQ-CP*,’ and ‘*Resolution No. 68/NQ-CP*.’ On the other hand, text documents were also identified from the author's archive. The collected documents were classified based on criteria such as date, purposes, main findings, etc. Through analysis and mapping of data criteria, the researcher can detect patterns of information and propose a proper analytical framework to address the respective issue.

THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON INFORMAL WORKERS IN VIETNAM

The COVID-19 pandemic broke out in Vietnam in early 2020. Since then, there have been four waves of COVID-19. The first was from January 23, 2020 to April 16, 2020 with 100 community cases infected with the coronavirus from

Wuhan (China). The second wave occurred from July 25, 2020 to December 1, 2020 with 554 community cases (D614G variant). The third wave, from January 28 to March 25, 2021 witnessed the spread of the Alpha variant with 910 community cases (Le et al. 2021). The fourth wave started on April 27, 2021. This wave was the longest, most complicated, and severe outbreak of COVID-19 in Vietnam. At the peak of this wave, 424,727 cases were confirmed in one day (March 19, 2022). The strains of coronavirus in this wave included delta and omicron; the CRF² by September 2021 was 2.5% (higher than the global average CRF of 2.06%) (ibid.). After reaching its peak in March 2022, the wave gradually declined. By July 15, 2022, Vietnam had 10,755,381 million community cases confirmed (Johns Hopkins University of Medicine, CRC 2022).

To cope with the complicated occurrence of the pandemic, the Vietnamese government imposed strong health measures such as social distancing, quarantine, compulsory facemask wearing, a surveillance strategy, etc. These health measures proved to be effective in controlling the pandemic in Vietnam's context. However, prolonged periods of social distancing exerted enormous pressure on Vietnamese people's lives as well as the national economy. During the pandemic, national GDP growth decreased dramatically. The GDP of Vietnam in the third quarter of 2021 decreased by 6.17% over the same period the previous year, being the largest GDP decline in Vietnam in two decades (GSOV 2021b). Domestic and international supply chains were disrupted due to successive rounds of social distancing. In contrast, congestion in the global value chain caused the price of raw materials to increase, which pushed many businesses and enterprises, especially those in the service industry, to withdraw from the market. Within the first nine months of 2021, revenue from tourism and travel services decreased by 64%, catering and accommodation by 22.1%, and passenger transport by 23.8% (GSOV 2021a). The economic regression also had a negative impact on the country's employment structure. The number of informal workers in 2020 was 20.3 million, up 119.1 thousand people in the previous year (GSOV 2021). Such an increase in informal employment in 2020 contrasted with the decreasing trend in recent years because many companies and enterprises had to cut labor or recruit temporary workers to maintain their operations during the economic recession. In 2021, the situation worsened when the COVID-19 pandemic affected the informal sector, making it hard for workers to find even informal jobs. The rate of workers with informal employment in the third quarter of 2021 was 54.5%, which was 2.3 percentage points lower than the same period

2 CRF stands for Case Report Form, which is an instrument for gathering information about post-COVID-19 conditions through the WHO Clinical Data Platform (WHO 2021).

the previous year (GSOV 2021c). This actually meant that many people were driven into unemployment. In the first quarter of 2022, the number of informal workers was 33.4 million. Compared to the previous quarter, the growth rate of informal workers (except in agriculture, forestry, and fishery) was nearly five percentage points higher than that of formal workers, indicating the labor market's unsustainable recovery (GSOV 2022).

Since informal jobs were often unstable, risky, and lacked professional training, informal workers were more disadvantaged in several respects than formal workers. Despite the fact that informal workers worked two more hours per week, the average monthly salary of informal workers was only two-thirds that of formal workers across all categories of employment status (GSOV–ILO 2018). They also had poorer working conditions than formal workers and were not protected by labor contracts, a social security system, or income smoothing in most cases. This vulnerability became even more profound during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to social distancing requirements during the COVID-19 pandemic, many informal workers who were working as builders, street vendors, lottery ticket sellers, barbers, etc., had to stop working for a period of time. The number of informal workers who lost their jobs due to COVID-19 from the second quarter of 2020 to 2021 was more than 1.4 million (Anh 2021). Then, loss or significant reduction of income made the financial burden on these workers even heavier, especially when food prices rose, and additional costs were incurred due to COVID-19, such as expenses for COVID-19 testing, skyrocketing electricity and internet bills because children had to study online, fees for renting accommodation for family members who were stuck in an area closed due to quarantine regulations and unable to return home, etc. The lives of informal workers in big cities during the period of social distancing were especially difficult because they could not return to their hometowns and had to pay rent and other expenses associated with the higher living standards of urban areas. The average monthly income of female workers in the informal sector in Hanoi decreased from 4,556,677 Vietnam Dong (VND) to 1,686,306 VND (Le 2020), which was a 'starvation salary' in a big city like Hanoi, not to mention that the latter had to support their families in their hometowns. For those reasons, the ILO identified informal workers as one of the most vulnerable groups during COVID-19.

POLICY RESPONSES OF THE VIETNAMESE GOVERNMENT AIMED AT SUPPORTING INFORMAL WORKERS DURING THE COVID-19 OUTBREAK

Being a lower middle-income country, Vietnam was also among the countries with the largest proportion of informal workers in total employment who were significantly impacted by COVID-19 (up to 80% of informal workers in Vietnam were impacted by COVID-19, as estimated by ILO 2020a). The pandemic surely created further challenges for informal workers in the country and those already struggling to make a living before the pandemic. In order to extend social protection to this group of workers during the COVID-19 crisis, the government of Vietnam deployed immediate policy responses. The main legal documents in terms of supporting informal workers during the COVID-19 pandemic were *Resolution No. 42/NQ-CP*, dated April 9, 2020, and *Resolution No. 68/NQ-CP*, dated July 1, 2021.

Resolution No. 42/NQ-CP was an unprecedented policy response by the government of Vietnam intended to support people who had lost income or jobs or were living under the minimum living standard due to the COVID-19 pandemic and some other social protection beneficiary groups. The total budget allocated by this Resolution was 62 thousand billion VND from both state and local budgets, in which provinces and cities self-financed over 50% the amount derived from the state budget. Since it was unprecedented, the policy had many limitations, such as unclear criteria for identifying beneficiaries, time-consuming and complicated procedures, etc. By the end of July 2020, only 12% of the support package's budget had been disbursed, and only 0.02% of informal workers nationwide were being supported by this package (E-newspaper of Communist Party of Vietnam 2020).

After the unsuccessful 62 trillion VND package, the Vietnamese government released *Resolution No. 68/NQ-CP* to launch another support package. *Resolution No. 68/NQ-CP* included 12 policies intended to support employees and employers facing difficulties due to COVID-19 with a total budget of 26 trillion VND (about 0.3% of national GDP in 2021), in which 91% was allocated for social and medical insurance, vocational training and wage loans support. Only 9% of the package budget was financial support for disadvantaged groups (people infected with COVID-19, workers, tour guides, artists who had lost their jobs due to COVID-19, etc.).

We have employed Gilbert and Terrell's social welfare policy analysis framework (2014) to compare these two social assistance policies. Their dimensions of choice and competing values are as follows (Table 1).

Table 1. *Dimensions of choice and competing value perspectives*

Conservative perspective	Dimensions of choice	Progressive perspective
Cost-effectiveness	Allocation	Social effectiveness
Freedom of choice	Provision	Social control
Freedom of dissent	Delivery	Efficiency
Local autonomy	Finance	Centralization

Source: Gilbert–Terrell (2014: 84).

In terms of dimensions of choice, the design of the two support packages was quite similar. Compared to the first package, the second support package had few new features. First, financial support was mobilized by the localities themselves instead of using a budget from the central government. Second, while with the first support package under *Resolution No. 42/NQ-CP*, the central government set up rigid eligibility criteria and benefit delivery procedures applicable to all provinces and cities in the country, with the second package (according to *Resolution No. 68/NQ-CP*), localities were given the right to decide eligibility criteria for beneficiaries as well as had some flexibility with the procedure. Third, there was a decrease in terms of the amount of support for informal workers from 1 million VND/person/month (not exceeding three months) in the first package to (not over) 1.5 million VND/person/times (or 50 thousand VND/person/day) in the second package.

The competing values of the policies were analyzed to examine “the ways and extents to which expressions of individual interests are given free rein or are harnessed in the service of the common good” (Gilbert–Terrell 2014: 84). Both packages were cost-effective, meaning they were designed to allocate benefits to the most in need during the pandemic – informal workers. Recipients were given cash instead of in-kind support, giving them more consumer sovereignty. With the given social objectives of providing support to informal workers, the organizing principles of the two packages were both bureaucratic – policy beneficiaries had no say in their design and implementation process. In relation to the final competing value, there was a slight difference between the two packages as the financing and administration scheme of the first package embraced a combination of local autonomy and centralization; meanwhile, the second package, after learning from the first one, employed local autonomy by which local governments were in charge of mobilizing financial resources, selecting recipients and delivering benefits. In general, the first package tended to balance a conservative perspective with a progressive perspective. In contrast, the second one was designed to be more of a conservative perspective, as defined by Gilbert and Terrell (2014). With few changes compared to the previous one, the second package was not successful either. After two months

Table 2. *Comparison of the two social assistance policies for informal workers during COVID-19 in Vietnam using Gilbert and Terrell's (2014) social welfare policy analysis framework*

Dimensions of choice and the competing values		First support package	Second support package
Dimensions of choice	Allocation (WHO?)	Recipients of the support are informal workers limited by some eligibility criteria in terms of types of job, residence, earnings, and time of losing a job. Other beneficiaries selected by local authorities based on actual situation.	Recipients of the support are informal workers identified by eligibility criteria according to province and city based upon actual situation.
	Provision (WHAT?)	Support amount of 1,000,000 VND/person/month on a monthly basis depending on the actual situation of the pandemic occurrence but not exceeding 3 months.	Amount of support is not lower than 1,500,000 VND/person/time or 50,000 VND/person/day based on the actual number of days of suspension, as requested by the locality.
	Delivery (HOW?)	Local authorities at different levels shall decide who can receive support based on their application. Time for review at each level is as follows: 5 working days at the commune-level People's Committee, 2 working days at the district-level People's Committee, and 3 working days at the province-level People's Committee.	Local authorities at different levels shall decide who can receive support based on their application. Time for review at each level shall be decided by each locality.
	Finance (HOW?)	Mainly from the Central government's budget (except for localities with the percentage of revenues distributed to the state budget over 50%)	Local budget and other legally mobilized sources
Competing values	Cost- or social effectiveness	Cost-effectiveness: selection of recipients based on rigid eligibility criteria decided by the central government	Cost-effectiveness: selection of recipients based on rigid eligibility criteria established by local government
	Freedom of choice or social control	Freedom of choice: cash (3 months of payment)	Freedom of choice: cash (one-off payment)
	Freedom of dissent or efficiency	Efficiency: bureaucratic delivery system	Efficiency: bureaucratic delivery system
	Centralization or local autonomy	(Mixed) Centralization and local autonomy: budget from both state and local government, the central government designs procedures, and the local government selects recipients and delivers benefits.	Local autonomy: local government mobilizes financial resources, selects recipients, and delivers benefits.

Source: Compiled by the author based on Resolution No. 42/NQ-CP and Resolution No. 68/NQ-CP by the Government of Vietnam.

of implementation (by August 31, 2021), the proportion of the coverage of informal workers by the second support package was only 22% (UNDP 2021). We will discuss the social justice values of this policy in the next section while explaining why these policies were unsuccessful.

REASONS FOR THE FAILURES OF SOCIAL ASSISTANCE POLICIES FOR INFORMAL WORKERS IN VIETNAM DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

In the context of Vietnam being a developing country with a large informal economic sector that required a tremendous amount of financial support during the pandemic, the implementation of these two support packages demonstrates the endeavors of the Vietnamese government to support this vulnerable, thus “long-neglected” group of workers. However, neither of the policies was successful. We propose that the failure was due to the policy context of the country and the lack of social justice in the policies’ design and implementation.

The policy context of the country could not sustain large-scale policy support for informal workers

The design and implementation of the two policies were affected by the policy context of Vietnam. First, despite some efforts by the Vietnamese government to spread support to the group of informal workers, such as the 2014 revised Law on Social Insurance, which perfected the voluntary insurance regime to facilitate the informal participation of labor or the 2014 revised health insurance law, which stipulated that informal workers were also responsible for participating in health insurance, the proportion of informal workers covered by the national social security system was still very small: 97.9% of informal workers did not have social insurance (GSOV–ILO 2016); most of the 10% of Vietnamese individuals not participating in health insurance were informal workers (Thuy 2020). There was a lack of a database of informal workers, which was an issue shared by other countries such as Indonesia (Octavia 2020) and India (Bordoli et al. 2020). There was also no electronic portal for informal workers to submit their applications online. Therefore, the process of identifying eligible recipients was conducted manually by authorities at the grassroots level, such as officials of communes and wards. In order to make lists of eligible informal workers, these officials were required to “go checking every house, every lane, every

person” to verify information (Thu 2020). However, because informal workers move frequently due to their unstable jobs, it was hard even to meet them, not to mention verify their information. In some cases, the head of a sub-quarter had to make eight or nine visits before being able to meet the informal worker to verify their information (Hong 2022). This manual process was not only ineffective and time-consuming but also exerted huge pressure on local officials. In addition, without an informal workers’ database, it was hard to verify (1) whether the informal workers who did the jobs were listed as beneficiaries; (2) whether their earnings were below the near-poverty line as specified in *Prime Minister’s Decision No. 59/2015/QĐ-TTg* dated November 19, 2015, and (3) whether they had lost their jobs or their earnings had been affected since the time appointed in the policies. Hence, to prevent people from taking advantage of the policies, the government proposed quite a lot of criteria for beneficiaries in terms of the type of jobs, earnings, and time of losing job/earnings, which, to some extent, limited the coverage of the support of the informal worker population.

Second, at the time of the policy, Vietnam was still managing citizens’ residences based on household registration books (or permanent residence registration books) and temporary residence registration books. This management mechanism was reflected in the policies, in that informal workers in a locality could apply for support only if they had registered for permanent/temporary residence there. However, informal workers, especially those in big cities, frequently changed their jobs and residences, and in many cases, they did not / could not register for temporary residence. Another regulation in the policies underpinned by the residence management context of the country was that if informal workers wished to apply for support in the locality where they were temporarily residing, they needed to submit a confirmation from their place of permanent residence that they had not received any support there and vice versa. Informal workers applying for support at their temporary residence locality were, therefore, required to travel back to their hometown to attain that confirmation, which was paradoxically impossible during the period of social distancing. Though these requirements were surely intended to firmly “filter” the policies’ beneficiaries to ensure support for the right ones (because the informal sector has always been loosely governed in the country), this requirement instead became a barrier to accessing the support packages for informal workers. However, following 2023, the household registration book was replaced by other forms of residence verification such as chip-based citizen identification, VNeID application (use of a personal identification code on chip-based citizen identification), proof of residence issued by residence registration office, or use of a personal identification number for accessing the National Population Database (eBH 2023). Such preliminary efforts by the Vietnamese

government to digitize national population data may be good for building a database of informal workers and implementing policies that support this group in the future.

Third, before the pandemic broke out, the emergency relief scheme in Vietnam provided one-off payments for people/households suffering from the consequences of natural disasters or other force majeure causes (Article 6, *Resolution 67/2007/ND-CP* about social protection policies). Funding sources for emergency relief came from the local budget and social sources (support from domestic and foreign organizations and individuals). If the above funding was not enough, local authorities made a report calling on the central government to consider mobilizing funding from the state budget. Beneficiaries of this policy were usually in severe conditions, facing death, serious injury, famine, or loss of accommodation. Before COVID-19, it was unprecedented that Vietnam's emergency social relief would cover such a huge segment of the population, including all the workers affected by the COVID-19 pandemic in general and informal workers affected by COVID-19 in particular. However, the Vietnamese government adopted this model of one-off payments based largely on local budgets and local autonomy when designing the second support packages to help cope with the large-scale COVID-19 crisis, in contrast to the principle that the state budget should play a central role in an emergency assistance program associated with a large-scale crisis (UNDP 2021). Such a model soon revealed its limitations. Only two months after the second package was implemented, most provinces and cities, especially the poor ones heavily affected by the fourth wave of COVID-19, had exhausted their budgets (*ibid.*). In particular, Quang Ngai province could not implement the policy of supporting informal workers due to its insufficient budget after spending on pandemic prevention and control (Tuong 2021).

It can be seen that the country's policy context at the time did not favorably condition the design and implementation of such large-scale support policies for informal workers who had always been absent from national social security coverage and were loosely managed by the national residence registration system.

Policies failed to further social justice

According to Gilbert and Terrell (2014), equity, equality, and adequacy are three core values to consider concerning social justice in social policy. These values help examine to what extent a social policy ensures the fair distribution of social resources.

The first value, ‘equity,’ concerns the deservedness of support recipients based on their contribution to society. The question is whether it was socially fair if informal workers were given support. As mentioned above, Vietnam was among the countries with the largest proportion of informal workers. The informal worker population in the country had reached 33.4 million by the first quarter of 2022, accounting for one-third of the national population (GSOV 2022). Not only occupying a large population segment, they also contributed significantly to the national economy – approximately 30% of Vietnam’s GDP (Vu 2021). And because informal workers were one of the most disadvantaged groups during COVID-19, it was definitely fair and impartial that they were granted support to mitigate their burdens during such a tough period. The principle of *equity* was, therefore, fully supported by the policies. However, the two other values that would have ensured the policies’ social justice, equality, and adequacy were not accomplished.

One notable problem regarding the support packages, especially the second one, was a lack of consistency in the design and implementation of the social assistance policies among localities. For example, the table below compares the implementation of *Resolution No. 68/NQ-CP* in three provinces, Kon Tum, An Giang, and Tay Ninh, using the social policy analysis model developed by Gilbert and Terrell (2014).

It can be seen from the table above that there were many differences in the way local authorities implemented the Resolution in terms of identification of informal workers, eligibility criteria, amount of allowance, and time required for application approval at each level of grassroots management. This led to the fact that, at the same time, an informal worker might be eligible for support in one province and ineligible in another. For example, workers without contracts working in private educational institutions in Tay Ninh province could be considered for the allowance for informal workers affected by COVID-19. However, those in Kon Tum province and An Giang province would not be that lucky. Lottery sellers, domestic helpers, and houseware repairers in Kon Tum province and Tay Ninh province were eligible for the allowance, while those in An Giang provinces were not. The eligibility criteria in the province were also not the same and, therefore, did not guarantee equal access to the support package for informal workers all over the country. Therefore, one of the core social justice values of the policy, equality, was not accomplished.

Another social justice value associated with social policy, according to Gilbert and Terrell (2014), is ‘adequacy,’ which “refers to the desirability of providing a decent standard of material well-being, quite apart from concerns for whether benefit allocations are equal or differentiated according to merit” (ibid. 82). When assessed in relation to the most common standard for defining

Table 3. Comparison of the implementation of Resolution 68/NQ-CP to support informal workers among three provinces: Kon Tum, An Giang, and Tay Ninh (Vietnam)

Dimensions of choice		Provinces/Cities		
		Kon Tum	Tay Ninh	An Giang
Allocation (WHO?)	Identification of informal workers	a) Mobile lottery sellers; b) Scrap collectors; porters; customers/goods transporters using rudimentary vehicles; traditional <i>xe om</i> ¹ ; street vendors, retailers without fixed locations; c) Domestic helpers; temporary workers at business and service households (food and beverage, accommodation, health care, beauty, karaoke, gymnastics and sports halls, etc.) and production facilities; freelance workers in the field of construction, houseware repairs (including repairs of vehicles and other utensils).	a) Garbage and scrap collectors, porters, transporting goods by 2-wheeler, 3-wheeler, small truck of 2 tons or less at markets and ports; traditional and technical <i>xe om</i> ; b) Lottery sellers; c) Street vendors, houseware repairers, retailers without fixed locations; d) Domestic helpers, employees in private educational institutions, employees working in public educational institutions with temporary contracts and decisions on job termination; e) Self-employed workers or non-contract workers in the fields of food, accommodation, tourism, health care (massage, medical massage, acupuncture), beauty (hairdressers, nail makers, etc.); service sectors (karaoke, spa, internet, bars, discos, cinemas, tea rooms, gyms, sports facilities), freelance workers in the field of construction.	a) Street vendors and retailers without a fixed location; b) Garbage and scrap collectors without a fixed location; c) Porters and goods transporters (using two-wheeled motorbikes, rudimentary vehicles, tricycles); <i>xe om</i> , buggy drivers; d) Self-employed workers or non-contract workers in the fields of food and beverage, accommodation (waitress, chef, kitchen assistant, receptionist, housekeeper); beauty (hairdresser, nail makers); health care (menstrual massage, acupuncture, physical therapy); construction (carpenters, plumbers).
	Eligibility criteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legally reside in Kon Tum province; • Having an income equal to or less than 1,000,000 VND/person/month for rural areas and 1,300,000 VND/person/month for urban areas; • Not yet receiving support as prescribed in <i>Government Resolution No. 68/2021/NQ-CP</i> dated July 1, 2021. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Losing a job, having no income, or earning less than 1,000,000 VND/month for rural areas and 1,300,000 VND/month for urban areas (national poverty line in 2021); • Having to stop work due to medical quarantine or being in areas closed due to the quarantines or as requested by competent state agencies to prevent and control the COVID-19 pandemic for 15 days or more from May 1, 2021 to December 31, 2021. • Legally reside in Tay Ninh province. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having main incomes from 4 groups of jobs and fields as specified above; having income significantly reduced or having lost a job or been temporarily suspended due to the requirements of COVID-19 prevention and control by the local Steering Committee for Disease Prevention and Control; • Currently living, working, and legally residing in the province.
Provision (WHAT?)	Amount of allowance	One-off cash payment. For employees who have been unemployed for 30 days or more: 1,500,000 VND/person/time. For employees who temporarily stop working or lose their jobs for less than 30 days: 50,000 VND/person/day (calculated according to the actual number of days suspended at the locality's request).	One-off cash payment. 1,500,000 VND/person for employees who had to stop working or lost their jobs for 15 days or more (only one support-related transfer per person).	One-off cash payment. 1,500,000 VND/person/time when all the above conditions are met.
	How the allowance is given to the beneficiaries	Delivered to beneficiaries through the local grassroots government: commune's government approves within 2 days; district government approves within 3 days.	Delivered to beneficiaries through the local grassroots government: commune's government approves within 5 days; district government approves within 2 days; province's government approves within 3 days.	Delivered to beneficiaries through the local grassroots government: commune's government approves within 5 days; district's government approves within 2 days; province's government approves within 3 days.
Finance (HOW?)	Where does the funding come from	From local budget	From local budget	From local budget

Source: Compiled by the author based on Decision No. 1856 /QĐ-UBND by People's Committee of An Giang province; Decision No. 963/QĐ-UBND by People's Committee of Kon Tum province; Decision No. 15/2021/QĐ-UBND by People's Committee of Tay Ninh province.

1 *Xe om* is a Vietnamese motorbike taxi.

adequacy, which is the country's poverty line, the amount of 1,000,000 VND/person/month (not exceeding three months) of the first package was slightly above the income sum that defines the poverty line in an urban area in the period 2016–2020, which was 900,000 VND/person/month (according to *Decision No. 59/2015/QĐ-TTg* dated November 19, 2015 by the Prime Minister of Vietnam) while the amount of 1,500,000 VND/person/month (one-off payment) of the second package was equal to the income associated with the poverty line in a rural area in the period 2021–2025 (according to *Decree No. 07/2021/NĐ-CP* dated January 27, 2021 by the Government of Vietnam). In the context that the living standard among urban areas varies significantly, the amount of 1,000,000 VND/person/month, which was four times less than the average income of informal workers in 2016 (GSOV–ILO 2018), was not sufficient to adequately support informal workers, especially those in an urban area, to meet their basic needs – not to mention that there was a ‘step backward’ regarding the amount of cash support in the second package. In fact, many informal workers chose not to apply for this support from the government, not only because of the complicated requirements but also because they thought the amount was too low (Kim 2021). It can be said that the value of *adequacy* was not achieved by these support packages.

It can be seen that although the Vietnamese government's policies aimed at supporting informal workers involved a significant effort to provide impartial support for this vulnerable group, the design, and implementation of the policies did not guarantee equal access for all informal workers and did not provide sufficient support for them to meet their basic needs at a time when they had lost their incomes due to COVID-19. Therefore, the support packages failed to further social justice.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The social policy responses by the government of Vietnam during the COVID-19 pandemic illustrate the government's endeavor to support people who had difficulty due to the pandemic, regardless of their economic sector. Facing such an unprecedented large-scale health crisis as the COVID-19 pandemic, the design and implementation of these policies revealed many limitations and were not effective. However, the challenges Vietnam faced while implementing the support packages for informal workers have implications for Vietnam concerning building up a more comprehensive social security system in the future.

In the long run, to better support informal workers not only in a crisis context but also on a regular basis, there is a need to include this group in national social security coverage, starting by creating a national informal workers database and digitalizing the management of the social security system for the purpose of integrating schemes. The country's new policy of abandoning household registration books might serve as a good stepping stone towards this goal. The establishment of a national database of informal workers would not only help emergency social relief schemes to reach this group better but also help the government to manage this group better, which is the basis for building a legal framework to protect them. Although *Labor Code No. 45/2019/QH14* of the Vietnam National Assembly in 2019 extended the scope of coverage to employees without labor relations, it still did not include specific regulations about the latter's principles and basic rights. Therefore, this group of workers had not yet been protected by the law. The failure of the policies also served as a wake-up call for the national security system in terms of its preparedness for large-scale emergencies. Emergency preparedness should be integrated into social policies and legislation, while financial resources, contingency funding, trained human resources, and proper logistic mechanisms for emergency response should also be made available and accessible.

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