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# COVID-19 AND VIETNAM-LAOS CROSS-BORDER LABOR MIGRATION: IMPACTS AND SOLUTIONS

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**Abstract.** *The COVID-19 pandemic has caused great harm and difficulties to workers, especially migrant laborers. The COVID-19 crisis has shown that migrants, particularly those employed through informal agencies, lost their jobs, and were not entitled to social protection policies, including labor migration from Vietnam across the Laos border to the DPR or other countries. The article is based on a survey of over 300 quantitative samples and in-depth interviews with 28 experts in order to focus on case studies of Vietnamese migrants crossing the Vietnam-Laos border in Nghe An, Ha Tinh. Thereby the study assesses the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on migrant workers across the Vietnam-Laos border in terms of employment, income, etc. From that, some solutions are proposed to restore livelihoods and stabilize the lives of migrant workers.*

**Keywords:** *migration; the COVID-19 pandemic; Vietnam; Laos; social protection.*

## Introduction

In 2021, with a 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 4<sup>th</sup> quarter of 2021 and the 1<sup>st</sup> 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 [1].

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, etc.)

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.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused great harm and difficulties to employees, especially migrant workers. The crisis 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

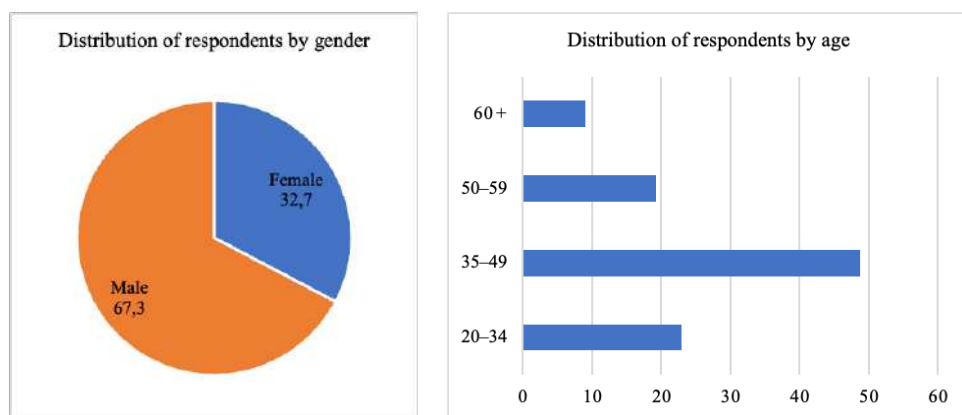
of the COVID-19 pandemic, inadequate. Therefore, the study of migration flows across the Vietnam-Laos border is indeed necessary.

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.

### Research methods

The article uses sociological investigation methods and in-depth interviews. In addition, secondary data analysis methods are also used, including: reports, research reports, statistics on migrants crossing the Vietnam-Laos border, documents and policies related to migration across the Vietnam-Laos border, etc.

The article studies 300 samples surveyed by questionnaires of migrants crossing the Vietnam-Laos border who have returned to Vietnam since March 2020 in Nghe An and Ha Tinh, aged from 20 to over 60, of which female accounted for 32.7%, and male for 67.3% (Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1. Gender and age distribution of migrants crossing the Vietnam-Laos border (%)**  
Source: compiled by the author

At the same time, 28 people were interviewed as representatives of agencies, departments, and returned migrants crossing Vietnam and Laos border (Table 1).

Table 1

### Characteristics of respondents

Respondents	Nghe An	Ha Tinh
Representative of provincial agencies, including	3	2
Public security	1	1
Job Center	1	-
Department of Labour, War Invalids and Social Affairs	1	1
Women's Union	-	1
Representatives of commune-level agencies, including	4	2
Commune Public Security	2	1
Commune leaders	2	1
Returned migrants crossing the Vietnam-Laos border	8	8

Source: compiled by the author

### Research areas

The survey was conducted in six communes in Dien Chau, Nghe An, and Can Loc districts, Ha Tinh province (Dien Hong, Dien Thap, Dien Xuan communes of Dien Chau district, Nghe An; My Loc, Xuan Loc, Son Loc communes of Can Loc district, Ha Tinh). This is an area close to the Vietnam-Laos border, particularly the distance from Dien Chau to Cau Treo – Ha Tinh international border gate – is 133 km to Bolikhamsai province of Laos. From Dien Chau to Cha lo – Quang Binh international border gate – is about 230 km to Khammuane province of Laos. From Dien Chau to Nam Can – Nghe An border gate is about 220 km to Xieng Khouang of Laos. The distance from Can Loc to Cau Treo – Ha Tinh international border gate is 83 km to Bolikhamsai province of Laos. From Can Loc to Cha lo – Quang Binh international border gate – is about 130 km to Khammuane province of Laos, continue about 170 km to Nakhon Phanom (Thailand).

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

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.

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 [2]. From 1990 to 2017, the largest number of migrants to Laos was from Vietnam, followed by China and Cambodia.

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 on 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 the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Vietnamese people come to Laos mainly for economic reasons, for trading as a most popular reason. 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 such industries as hydropower, construction, forest products, rubber, and coffee plantations, among others. The number of Vietnamese people going to Laos tends to increase. According to the statistics by 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 a year [3].

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 neighbor countries in the region such as Malaysia push people in the border areas of Vietnam to migrate in search of work

abroad, even if those are temporary jobs.

Migration flows from Vietnam to Thailand have continued 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.

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.

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 Department of Labor, 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 Department of Labor, War 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 [4, 5].

According to a representative of the department of labor of Nghe An province which is the agency responsible for state management of laborers working abroad, the management of migrant workers across the Vietnam-Laos border has not been implemented yet because "The Department of Labor, War Invalids and Social Affairs (DOLISA) only manage laborers to work abroad under contract. Labor crossing the Vietnam-Laos border who is not in the form of Vietnamese workers working abroad under contracts (according to section 5 of Law 69), because workers migrate freely to the border by passports. The management of this group of workers is also difficult because they migrate seasonally and travel frequently; The Vietnam-Laos border is long and spread out". Agreeing with the Nghe An DOLISA officers, a representative of Ha Tinh DOLISA also said that "The basic motivation of cross-border migrants is to do business and earn income, so they find ways to go. Uncontrolled. They move from one place to another. Some people from other places sneaked out across the border. They went without reporting or asking for local permission. They did not report even when returning, causing difficulties in the management of free migrant workers".

In the field of population management, a representative of the public security in Ha Tinh – the agency responsible for population management – also said that the management of migrant workers across the Vietnam-Laos border has not been fully implemented: "It is estimated that in 2019, Ha Tinh province has 170,000 turns of people to Laos; in 2020 the number of turns is 83,000; and in 2021, there are more than 60,000 turns of people, mainly drivers to freight transport. Currently, there are few citizens going to Laos due to the COVID-19 epidemic. It is unable to manage seasonal workers in Laos and China, because it is easy to travel between provinces of the two countries, they only need ID cards, certificates of district/commune authorities, etc., so it is difficult to unify accurate list".

### ***Impacts of the COVID pandemic on the livelihood of migrant workers across the Vietnam-Laos border***

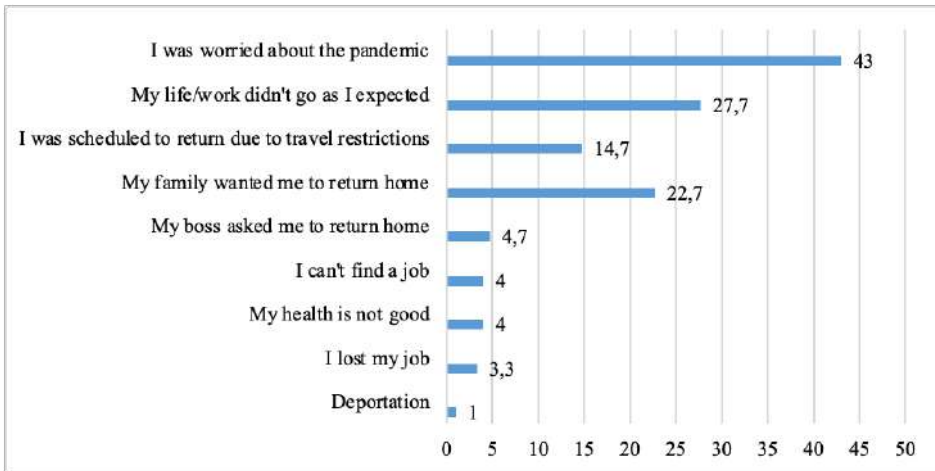
On January 23, 2020, Vietnam recorded its first case of COVID-19. From March 22, 2020, Vietnam has temporarily suspended entry of foreigners, and at the same time required the returning Vietnamese to be quarantined for 14 days. From April 1, 2020, Vietnam also implemented social distancing for 15 days.

During the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, 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, schools (except for international schools), limiting mass gatherings. Measures to combat COVID-19 in countries during this period had a significant influence on migration flows across the Vietnam-Laos border.

*Impact in 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 pandemic, of which 27.7% said their work was not as they expected – lost jobs, reduced incomes; 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 pandemic (Fig. 2). Before the pandemic (April 2020), there were about 40,000–50,000 Vietnamese freelance workers in Thailand. 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 the COVID-19 infection. Many people got stuck due to exceedingly difficult circumstances<sup>1</sup>.



**Fig. 2. Reasons to return to Vietnam (%)**

Source: compiled by the author

While being abroad, migrants' incomes have been reduced or absent due to the impact of the pandemic. When returning home, migrants continue to fall into being unemployed

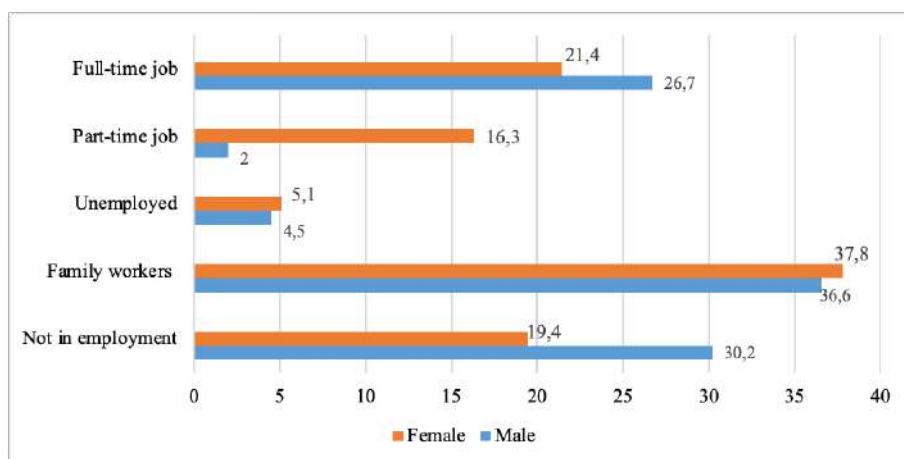
<sup>1</sup> Vietnamese workers in Thailand: vaccination is still low because... unemployment [Lao động Việt ở Thái Lan: tiêm vắc xin rồi vẫn thấp thòm vì... thất nghiệp] // Tuổi Trẻ Online : [site]. URL: <https://tuoitre.vn/lao-dong-viet-o-thai-lan-tiem-vac-xin-roi-van-thap-thom-vi-that-nghiep-20210816224337136.htm> (accessed on 01.11. 2022).

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 status is underemployment (37%) or unemployed (4.7%). Only 26.7% of those who returned home are currently in full employment (Fig. 3).

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 significantly higher than that of male workers (16.3% versus 2%) (Fig. 3).



**Fig. 3. Current employment status of returning migrants crossing the Vietnam-Laos border, by gender (%)**

Source: compiled by the author

As for the group employed, the majority of them work in the informal sector (self-employed – 58.1% or 26.7% of wage earners). 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.

#### *Impact in 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 three people aged 50 and over reported having difficulty in accessing health care (two men and one woman). Only one 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-19, of which 79% have received two 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% of migrants to Laos and 4.5% to Thai); 5.1% of migrants receive legal assistance on their return.

In Vietnam, when migrants return, according to information from representatives of local authorities, the communes prepare before-hand medical care services and isolation areas to receive returning migrants. Support for returning migrants includes the following measures: “returning migrants can enter the isolation area with 100% free accommodation and food expenses; migrants are tested and vaccinated with adequate doses of disease prevention; supported according to provincial policy for people affected by the COVID-19 pandemic” (according to an in-depth interview with representative of commune local government in Dien Chau, Nghe An).

Logistic and the 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.

“From September 2020, returning workers will have to pay for testing fees and fees at the isolation area, the test fee is 700 000 VND per person, the food and 15 days stay expenses in the concentrated isolation area are also quite a lot” (according to a Thailand emigrant in Ha Tinh). This may depend on different local support and vary from time to time.

### **Solutions and conclusions**

Along with the guidelines and policies for socio-economic recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic, Vietnamese Party and State have policies towards migrant workers. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused great effects and difficulties for workers, especially migrant workers who make 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, governmental bodies should run 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 is crucial to promote labor cooperation between Vietnam and countries in the region, proposing to expand occupations for Vietnamese workers in Laos and Thailand, especially in the services sector in order to expand legal employment opportunities of migrants.

*Secondly*, to ensure the lives of returning migrants and support them to maximize the benefits derived from migration there is a need for solutions to connect jobs, and assist returnees to develop economy in their locality, as well as employment-oriented programs and start-up projects effectively using the money obtained during migration. And all this 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 of Vietnam. In the context of unstable labor and employment after the pandemic when 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 charters, and laws.

Cross-border migration is the most complex and diverse type of migration in terms of employment, residence period, number of trips per year, and migration purpose. For many years, Laos was a transit country for people looking for work in Thailand or other countries in the region. Migrants moving across the Vietnam-Laos border can be faced with dangerous, unsafe situations, and not protected by law. Vietnam has great opportunities for expanding ASEAN job market. However, in order to protect the rights and wellbeing of employees, the authorities need to further develop labor management measures and the workers themselves need to enhance their legal knowledge and implement the regulations and laws of both their origin and destination countries.

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## COVID-19 И ТРАНСГРАНИЧНАЯ ТРУДОВАЯ МИГРАЦИЯ МЕЖДУ ВЬЕТНАМОМ И ЛАОСОМ: ПОСЛЕДСТВИЯ И РЕШЕНИЯ

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**Аннотация.** Пандемия COVID-19 причинила огромный ущерб и создала многочисленные затруднения для работников, прежде всего для работников-мигрантов. Кризис, вызванный пандемией COVID-19, показал, что многие мигранты – особенно те из них, кто был трудоустроен через неофициальные агентства, – потеряли работу и не подпадали под действие мер социальной защиты. Это коснулось и трудовых мигрантов из Вьетнама, направляющихся через границу с Лаосом в эту республику или третьи страны. Статья основана на анализе результатов социологического опроса по выборке, составившей более 300 респондентов, а также 28 глубинных интервью с экспертами, что позволило сосредоточиться на изучении конкретных случаев вьетнамских рабочих, пересекавших границу с Лаосом в Нгэане, провинции Хатинь. Таким образом оценивалось влияние пандемии COVID-19 на трудовых мигрантов, переправлявшихся через вьетнамско-лаосскую границу, с точки зрения их занятости, дохода и т. д. Исходя из этого, в статье предложены некоторые рекомендации для восстановления источников средств к существованию и стабилизации уровня жизни трудящихся-мигрантов.

**Ключевые слова:** миграция; пандемия COVID-19; Вьетнам; Лаос; социальная защита.

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