

Part 2-CHAPTER 5

Sending More or Sending Better Care Workers Abroad? A Dilemma of Viet Nam's Labour Exporting Strategy

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June 2021

This chapter should be cited as:

Hong, K.T. (2021), 'Sending More or Sending Better Care Workers Abroad? A Dilemma of Viet Nam's Labour Exporting Strategy', in Komazawa, O. and Y. Saito (eds.), *Coping with Rapid Population Ageing in Asia*. Jakarta: ERIA, pp.102-125.

CHAPTER 5

Sending More or Sending Better Care Workers Abroad?

A Dilemma of Viet Nam's Labour Exporting Strategy

Khuat Thu Hong

Whilst international labour emigration from Viet Nam started a long time ago, it was only in the early 1990s that it became part of the government's socio-economic development strategy. After about 2 decades of efforts to increase the number of workers sent abroad, the government has recently shifted its focus to their quality. Sending professionally trained care workers or carefully selected candidates for care jobs to developed countries such as Japan or Germany is part of the new strategy. However, it turned out easier said than done. The programme faces numerous issues and challenges, regardless of strong government support.

Before describing how care workers are recruited, trained, and sent abroad, this chapter provides a brief chronology of international labour emigration in Viet Nam. The third section outlines key features of the governance of labour export and regulations on the care worker programme.

Brief History of International Labour Migration in Viet Nam

The first recorded international labour migration from Viet Nam took place at the end of the 19th century. On 12 March 1891, 791 Vietnamese, of whom 50 were women, landed in Nouméa (New Caledonia), sent by French colonists to work in mines and plantations.

Figure 5.1. Recounting the History of the Diaspora of Vietnamese Contract Workers



Note: 1938. Rally of Vietnamese hired workers on a plantation in the New Hebrides during the visit of the Inspector of Colonial Labor.

Source: Photo collected by J. Vanmai, 1991. http://jeanvanjeanchandang.blogspot.com/2018_10_03_archive.html



Note: Labour recruiting agency in Hai Phong 1920.

Source: Photo collected by J. Vanmai, 1991. http://jeanvanjeanchandang.blogspot.com/2018_10_03_archive.html

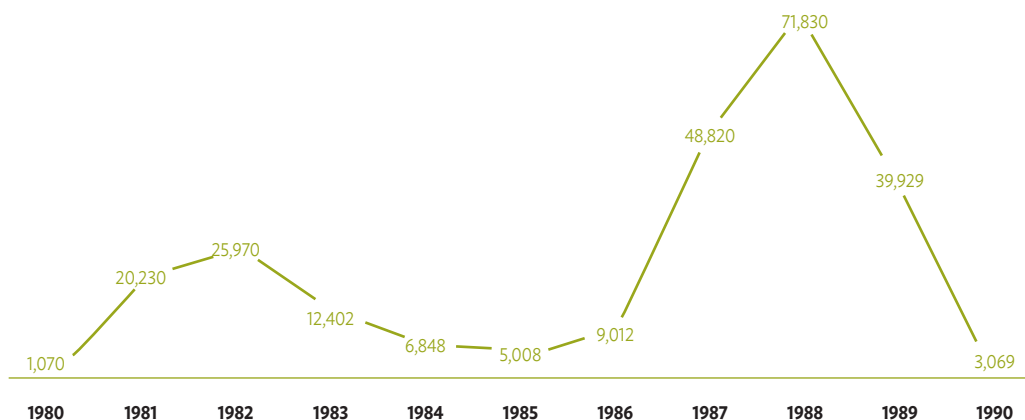
Except those who were exiled prisoners, 41 were contracted workers or *chân đăng* (literally, registered foot) on 5-year contracts. The men worked in the nickel or chrome mines and the women on plantations. The average monthly salary was equivalent to FRF12 for male workers and FRF9 for females, 30 times higher than the average salary in Viet Nam at that time (Vanmai, 1991; Brou, 1980). By 1940, about 20,000 Vietnamese had been sent to work in New Caledonia and Vanuatu.

The second wave of labour migration from Viet Nam occurred in the 1980s and 1990s, when labour export became official government policy (Anh, 2008). The primary objectives of the programme were to improve Vietnamese workers' skills for the country's future industrialisation and to increase the income of part of the labour force. Labour export was based on the cooperation between Viet Nam and the receiving countries through government and sector agreements. The state directly sent workers and experts to work abroad. In 1980–1990, a total of 277,183 workers were sent to work in the socialist bloc, including 112,338 to the Soviet Union, 72,786 to East Germany, 37,659 to Czechoslovakia, and 35,099 to Bulgaria (Schwenkel, 2014). The labour cooperation programme was implemented to pay Viet Nam's mounting debts to these countries and was ended when the socialist bloc disintegrated in the 1990s.

Viet Nam sent experts and workers to several countries in the Middle East and Africa. In 1983–1984, 5,301 experts were sent to Libya, Algeria, Angola, Mozambique, Congo, or Madagascar, and about 14,000 to Iraq (DOLAB, 2005).

The Gulf War and the collapse of the socialist bloc led to the nullification of the labour treaties. Most Vietnamese workers in the former Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Africa returned to Viet Nam before their contracts ended. On 13 March 1990, the government's Directive No. 73-CT put the labour export programme on hold (ASEAN, 2017).

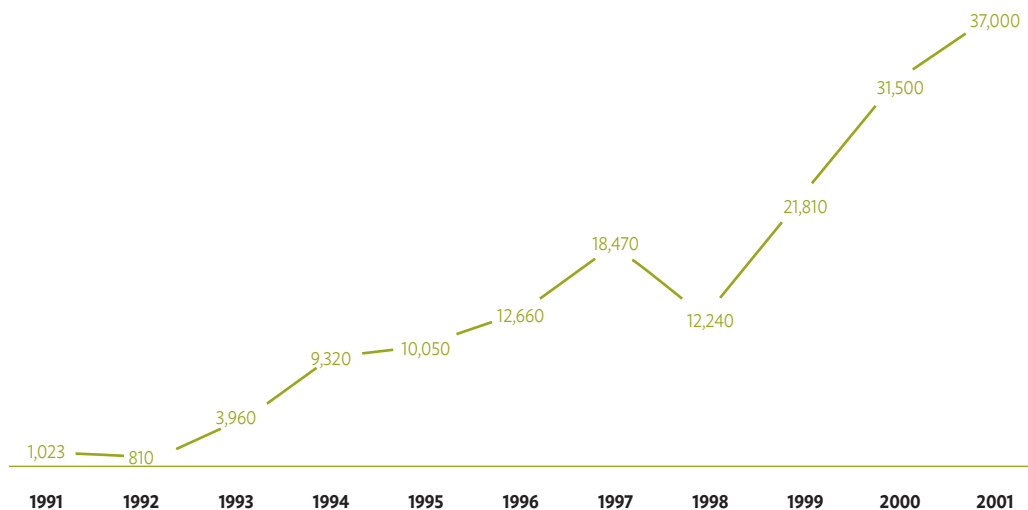
Figure 5.2. Number of Vietnamese Workers in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, 1980–1990



Source: DOLAB (2005).

Figure 5.3. Vietnamese Workers in East Germany, 1985*Vietnamese workers in East Germany, 1985. (Photo: Friedrich Hibeck, 1985.)*

The third wave of international labour migration from Viet Nam started at the beginning of the 1990s. Labour export was an important socio-economic development in the Doi Moi era¹. The major destinations were developed countries in Asia such as Taiwan, the Republic of Korea, Japan, and Malaysia, and in the Middle East, including Iraq, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia (Anh, 2008). At the beginning of the 1990s, Viet Nam sent only about 1,000 workers abroad per year. The number had increased by 20 times, to 21,800 workers in 2000.

Figure 5.4. Number of Vietnamese Workers Overseas, 1992–2001

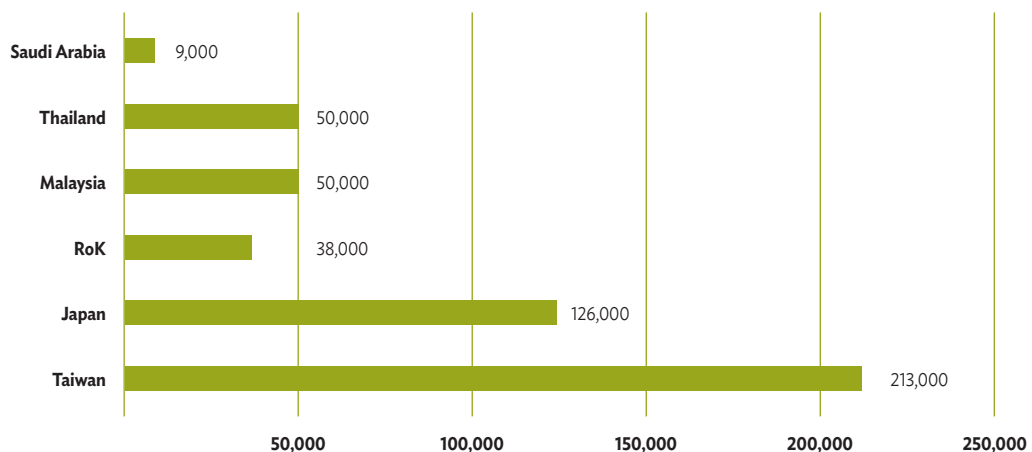
Source: DOLAB (2005).

¹ *Doi Moi* (Renovation) refers to the economic reforms initiated in Viet Nam in 1986 to transition it from a command economy to a socialist-oriented market economy.

Since 2010, the number of Vietnamese workers sent abroad has steadily increased. On average, in the first half of the 2000s, it reached 80,000 per year and, in 2014–2019, exceeded 100,000 per year (Hong, 2018).

The diversity of destinations is remarkable. Besides the traditional destinations such as Taiwan, the Republic of Korea, Japan, and Malaysia, significant flows of Vietnamese workers go to Thailand, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Europe, the Middle East, and others. There are more than 560,000 Vietnamese workers in 43 countries and territories worldwide, in manufacturing, construction, fishing, agriculture, domestic work, and services. The Department of Overseas Labour (DOLAB) estimated that, by March 2019, there were 170,000 Vietnamese workers in Taiwan, 148,000 in Japan, 50,000 in the Republic of Korea, 50,000 in Malaysia, and 50,000 in Thailand (ILO, 2020).

Figure 5.5. Estimated Total Number of Vietnamese Workers in Major Destination Countries by June 2018



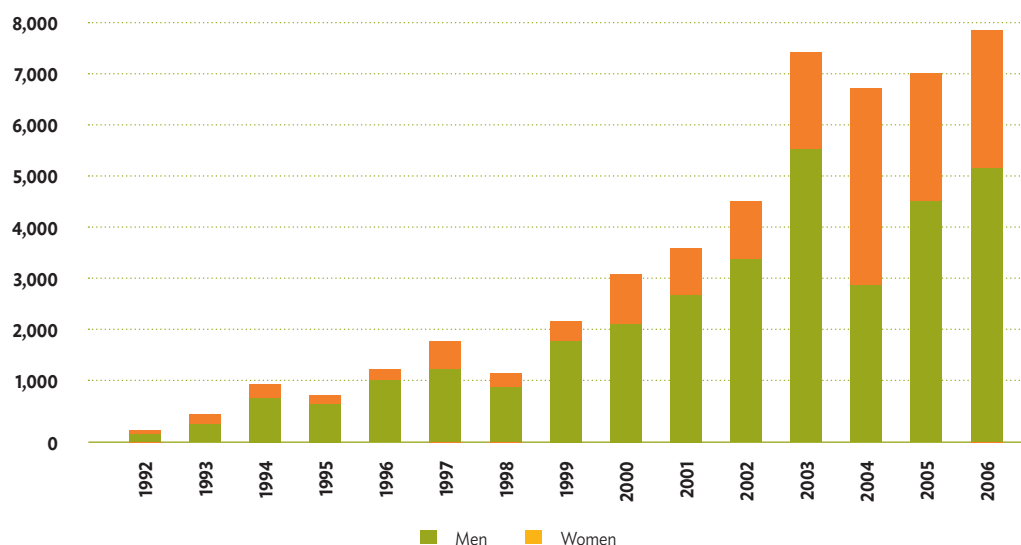
RoK = Republic of Korea.

Source: Author, based on DOLAB (2018).

On average, a Vietnamese worker in Taiwan earns US\$650 a month, in Japan US\$1400, in Republic of Korea US\$1,000, in Malaysia US\$300, and in Saudi Arabia US\$320 (IOM, 2016).

Viet Nam first sent workers to Japan in 1992. By 2010, the total number was 52,000, mainly under the Japanese Industrial Training Program and the Technical Internship Program. They were employed mainly in manufacturing, construction, agriculture, and fishery (Ishizuka, 2013). Viet Nam has so far sent more than 200,000 workers to Japan, surpassing China in number of workers sent abroad annually and surpassing 15 countries in number of trainees in Japan (MOLISA, 2019)

A clear tendency of feminisation has been observed in international labour migration from Viet Nam. Figure 5.6 and the Table 5.1 show that the proportion of female workers increased to almost 40% from the early 1990s to 2018.

Figure 5.6. Vietnamese Workers Overseas, by Sex, 1992–2006

Source: DOLAB (2006).

Table 5.1. Vietnamese Workers Overseas, by Sex, 2006–2018

Year	Number of Workers		Year	Number of Workers	
	Total	Female		Total	Female
2006	53,855	27,023	2013	88,155	31,769
2007	85,020	28,278	2014	106,840	40,063
2008	86,990	28,598	2015	115,980	38,640
2009	73,028	22,020	2016	126,296	46,029
2010	85,546	28,573	2017	134,751	53,340
2011	88,298	31,990	2018	142,860	50,293
2012	80,320	27,784	2019	152,530	54,700

Source: VAMAS (2018)

International labour migrants contribute significantly to Viet Nam's economic development through remittances. According to National Assembly's monitoring report on labour export, Vietnamese workers abroad send home about US\$2 billion–US\$2.5 billion a year, with an average increase of 6%–7% per year in 2010–2017 (MOLISA, 2019).

Viet Nam is a major source of unskilled labour for high-income countries in East Asia (Ishizuka, 2013). There is concern that the government's promotion of international labour migration to reduce poverty, which targets poor people, including ethnic minorities with limited education, encourages the most vulnerable to migrate (ILO, 2019). The policy deviates from the Communist Party's and government's initial intention of developing a skilled workforce to industrialise and modernise Viet Nam. The government is trying to pursue the original goal by increasing the proportion of skilled labour amongst workers overseas.

On 8 March 2017, in Ha Noi, the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA) held a conference on improving the quality of overseas Vietnamese contract labourers. Various high-ranking leaders of the Communist Party, the government, and the National Assembly attended, as did representatives of more than 200 enterprises that dispatch workers to work overseas. In his opening speech, the minister of MOLISA stressed that the policy of the Communist Party and the state was to boost labour export, not only to solve unemployment and reduce poverty but also to promote decent work and thereby mobilise resources for economic development. To improve the quality of labourers working overseas, MOLISA will reform labour export programme. Key tasks are expanding the proportion of labourers with technical and professional qualifications to work abroad, and improving the quality of labourers' vocational training, foreign languages, and awareness through the pre-departure course. Sending qualified care workers to high-income countries such as Japan, Germany, and Taiwan is seen as an important measure to implement the tasks (MOLISA, 2017).

Figure 5.7. Popular Poster in Rural Area



Note: Text in poster stated: 'To escape poverty, join international labour export'.
Source: Photo by Pham Quang Hoa.

Care Worker Programme

As defined by the International Labour Organization (ILO), care workers tend to the most basic human needs and sustain the well-being of those who are in a dependent position (ILO, 2018).

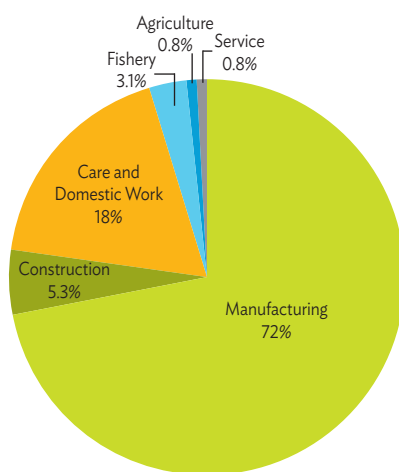
In this chapter, 'care workers' include domestic workers and/or housekeepers and workers who care for people who are ill, disabled, or have special needs. A care worker might have no professional training in care work or be professionally trained as a nurse or assistant nurse.

Recruitment System, Fees, Training, and Placement

Family and Hospital Vietnamese Care Workers in Taiwan

Taiwan is the first destination of care workers (housekeeper or domestic workers and care workers for people with special needs) from Viet Nam. The programme started in 2000, was suspended in 2005, and resumed in 2015 (ASEAN, 2015). Vietnamese workers are home and hospital care workers. Neither group has professional training for care jobs, but both have basic caring skills learned during pre-departure training.

Figure 5.8. Types of Jobs Vietnamese Workers Hold in Japan, the Republic of Korea, Malaysia, and Taiwan



Source: MOLISA (2012).

By 2012, Vietnamese domestic workers and care workers accounted for 18% of total workers sent abroad, with most working in Taiwan (Figure 5.8).

By 31 August 2018, the total number of Vietnamese care workers in Taiwan was 13,600 person-times, an increase of 10 times from 500 person-times in 2015 to 5,200 person-times in 2016, which slightly increased in the following years (DOLAB, 2018).

There are no specific recruitment criteria for care work in Taiwan. Women under the age of 50 years are eligible for family care work. If the employer renews the contract, women older than 50 are eligible.

The recruitment fee for a hospital care worker in Taiwan is US\$3,300, and for a family care worker US\$2,036. These amounts are perceived as reasonable.

Figure 5.9. Pre-departure Training for Care Workers to Taiwan



Source: Photo by Cong Ty Thinh Long, 17 March 2018.

The selected candidates must undergo 390 hours of compulsory training:

- (i) 90 hours for technical training,
- (ii) 100 hours for local legal regulations and basic living skills, and
- (iii) 200 hours for language.

In principle, family and hospital care workers' first contract term is 3 years but can be renewed up to 14 years if the worker has a good reference from a previous employer.

As of 1 January 2018, the monthly salary for a hospital care worker was NT\$22,000 (US\$700) and for a family care worker NT\$17,000 (US\$500).

Annual leave regulations have recently been amended in favour of employees. Care workers who work consistently for one employer enjoy 3–30 days or more of annual leave. The timing of leave is the employees' choice. Employees are paid their full-time salary for annual leave. Employers reimburse employees for unused annual leave when the contract expires or the year ends.

Care Worker Programme for Japan

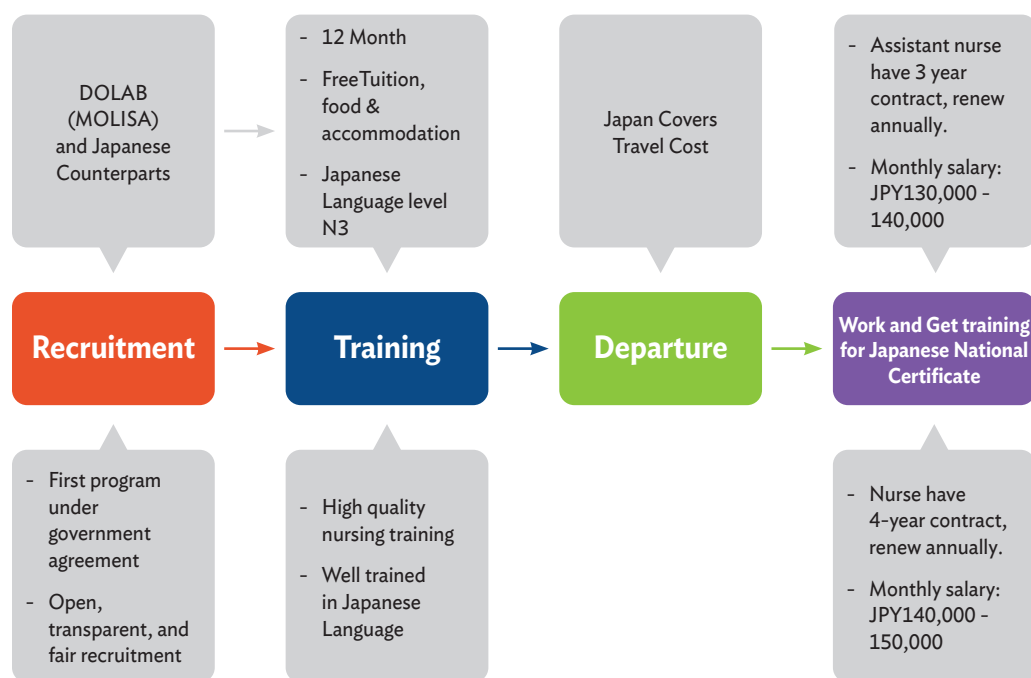
The first programme to send Vietnamese care workers to Japan was initiated under the Vietnam–Japan Economic Partnership Agreement (VJEPA), which was signed in 2012. To meet Japan’s strict requirements, MOLISA has assigned the Department of Labour Overseas (DOLAB) to collaborate with Japan’s Social Welfare and War Victims’ Relief Bureau, Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare on developing regulations on nursing interns from Viet Nam to ensure compliance with the laws of both countries.

In 2018, after the success of the first batches of care workers under the VJEPA, the second programme, for skill internship, was launched under the memorandum of cooperation (MOC) between the two countries, signed on 6 June 2017, which became effective on 1 November 2017.

1) Recruitment, Training, and Placement of Vietnamese Nurses and Assistant Nurses under the Vietnam–Japan Economic Partnership Agreement

The recruitment process and criteria for nurses (看護師) and assistant nurses (介護福祉士 or 介護士) to work in Japan are much more stringent than for care workers going to Taiwan. DOLAB exclusively manages the entire VJEPA nursing programme (Figure 5.10).

Figure 5.10. Recruitment, Training, and Placement of Nurses and Care Workers for Japan



DOLAB: Department of Labour Overseas, MOLISA: Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs.

Source: MOLISA (2015).

While recruitment and training are similar for nursing and assistant nurse candidates, the two categories differ slightly in qualification requirements, terms of contract, and salary.

The nursing candidate must be 35 years old or younger and have graduated from nursing college (3 years) or general nursing university (4 years). The candidate must submit a certificate of good health from a medical agency designated by the Ministry of Health and proof of having no criminal record. Important requirements include a medical practice licence in accordance with the Law on Medical Examination and Treatment and proof of at least 2 years of nursing experience. A nursing candidate is offered a monthly salary of JPY140,000–JPY150,000 in Japan. The term is 4 years and can be extended to 5 years or longer.

Like nursing candidates, assistant nurse candidates must meet age, health, and criminal record requirements but do not need to have a medical practice licence or 2 years of working experience. They are offered a 3-year contract, with a monthly salary of JPY130,000–JPY140,000.

Selected candidates in both categories undergo a 12-month training course on Japanese language to obtain level N3. Tuition, food, and accommodation are covered by the Japanese side. Only trainees who achieve Japanese language level N3 are sent to Japan, where they continue to study for the Japanese national nurse or assistant nurse certificate and Japanese language level N3.

In 2012–2018, to ensure open, transparent, and fair recruitment, DOLAB, in cooperation with its Japanese counterparts, directly recruited candidates for the programme.

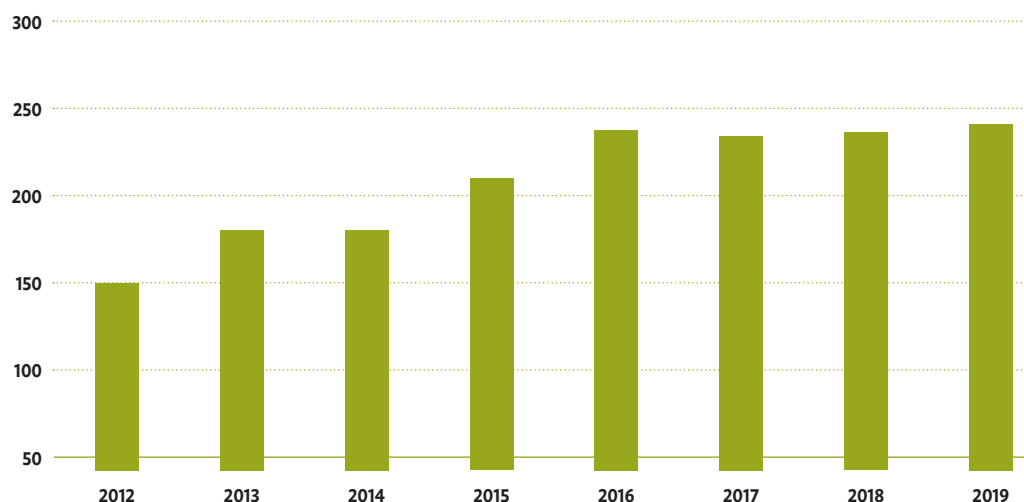
According to information from the mid-term workshop to evaluate the VJEPA nursing programme, organised by MOLISA on 12 November 2020 in Ha Noi, in 2012–2019 a total of 1,610 candidates, mainly females, were selected for eight Japanese language training courses. Of the candidates, 1,340 were sent to work in Japanese hospitals and healthcare facilities (Chau, 2020). Figure 5.11 shows the number of nurses and assistant nurses dispatched to Japan under the VJEPA.

2) Skill Internship Program for Care Workers under the Memorandum of Cooperation

On 6 June 2017, the minister of labour, invalids and social affairs of Viet Nam and the minister of health, labour and welfare of Japan signed the MOC on the Skill Internship Program, which became effective on 1 November 2017. Specific terms on care worker internship in Japan were agreed and signed by both sides on 3 August 2018, during the visit to Tokyo of the MOLISA deputy minister.

The skill internship programme requirements under the MOC are not as high as those under the VJEPA. Candidates must graduate from at least high school. Once selected, candidates study Japanese language in Viet Nam and basic nursing and care work skills for 4 or 5 months. Those who earn Japanese language level N4 before departure are offered a minimum 3-year contract, which can be extended to 5 years maximum (Japan.net.vn, 2020).

Figure 5.11. Number of Nurses and Care Workers Dispatched to Japan under the Vietnam–Japan Economic Partnership Agreement

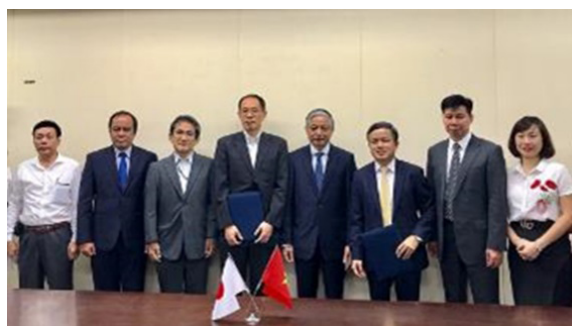


Source: Nguyen (2020).

Under the MOC, the Japanese supervisory unions cover tuition fees for language training up to level N4 before the interns depart. Once interns arrive in Japan, the Japanese supervisory unions and recipient agencies are responsible for language and occupational training needed by interns to pass the examination after the first year of the internship. Supervisory unions pay the management fees of dispatching agencies throughout the internship programme in Japan (DOLAB, 2018).

On 1 June 2018, a MOLISA decision allowed six labour export agencies to recruit care worker candidates to pilot the internship programme. In the same year, MOLISA granted licences to seven more labour export agencies in southern Viet Nam to join the MOC programme.

Figure 5.12. Representatives of Viet Nam and Japan at Signing Ceremony



Note: Representatives of Viet Nam and Japan at the memorandum of cooperation signing ceremony, 3 August 2018.

Source: Photo by Department of Overseas Labour.

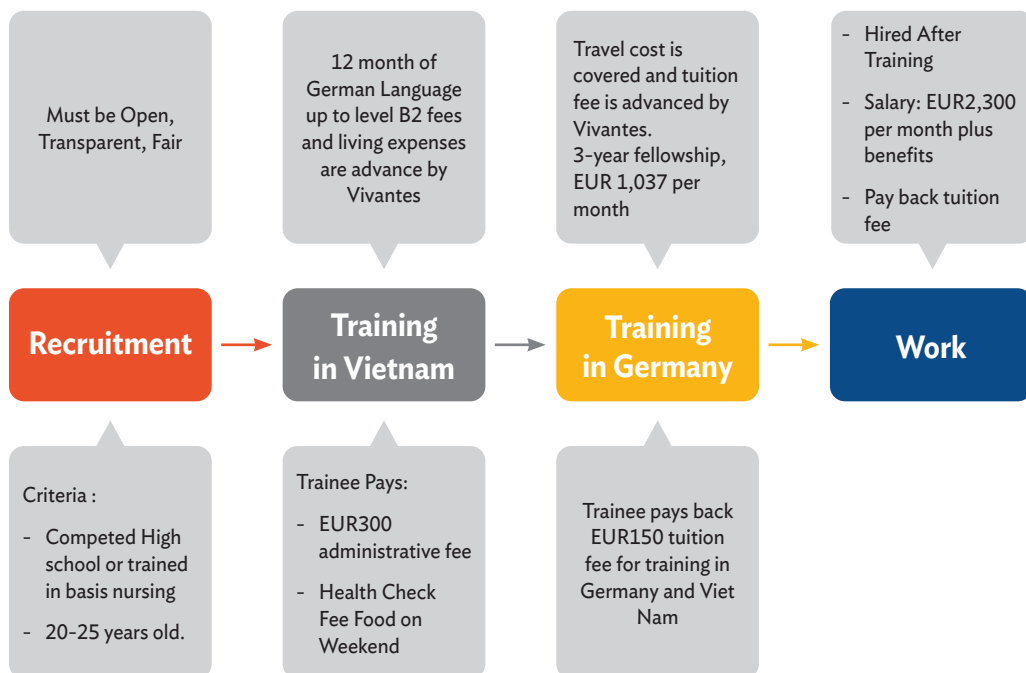
3) Care Worker Programme for Germany

This programme is based on the Letter of Intent signed between MOLISA and Germany's Ministry of Economics and Energy on 1 July 2015 (The representative offices of the Federal Republic of Germany in Vietnam, 2018). The parties agreed on basic principles of fair recruitment for training in the care of the elderly in Germany. MOLISA has assigned the Centre of Overseas Labour (COLAB) to collaborate with receiving agencies in Germany to recruit, train, and send Vietnamese care workers to study and work in Germany (MOLISA, 2015). Since 2017, Germany has received 100 trainees from Viet Nam every year.

COLAB and Vivantes, a German company, agreed to jointly recruit, train, and send Vietnamese students to Germany for a nursing training programme. Like the care worker programme for Japan, the German programme emphasises openness, transparency, and fairness. The first training course was launched on 21 July 2016 (MOLISA, 2016). The first piloting training programme was launched in 2013 (MOLISA, 2013).

The recruited candidates are provided free training in German language for 12–18 months at the COLAB training facility. Training courses start on 1 August annually, delivered by the Goethe Institute in Ha Noi. Students who pass the exam are granted a certificate of German degree B2.

Figure 5.13. Recruiting, Training, and Placement of Care Workers in Germany



Source: Based on the Letter of Intent signed on 2015 between MOLISA and Germany (The representative offices of the Federal Republic of Germany in Viet Nam, 2018).

After language training, students attend a nursing training programme in Germany for 3 years. They are granted a German national certificate and offered a working contract in elderly care centres. Figure 5.13 summarises recruitment, training, and placement of Vietnamese care workers.

Since the programme started in 2013 until the end of 2019, it has sent 600 trainees to Germany for study and work (MOLISA, 2019).

Challenges and Issues of Care Worker Programmes

Although the care worker programmes, particularly for Japan and Germany, are strongly supported by the governments of Viet Nam and the receiving countries, they are not necessarily the most attractive option for Vietnamese who intend to work abroad.

Traditionally, caring for the elderly or sick was not seen as an occupation in Viet Nam. In the past, only poor or low-status people accepted such work. It is still considered difficult and demeaning. However, as Viet Nam's ageing population grows, demand for care work is also increasing. A professionally trained nurse and assistant nurse can easily find a well-paying dignified job in Viet Nam. In 2019, in the big cities such as Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh City, depending on the severity of the patient's illness, an untrained care worker can earn VND2500,000–VND500,000 a day (Hoai, 2019). Therefore, not many see care work abroad as desirable:

Demand for care workers in Taiwan is very high. However, supply from Viet Nam is still insufficient. Many people are not willing to do such a hard job whilst being far from home. Domestic demand is also high. (Interview with Mr. Pham Lan, deputy director of Techsimex, a labour-recruiting company.)

Many people find the stringent recruitment criteria of Japan discouraging. The language barrier is significant. Expensive living costs are an important factor for consideration (Ngoc, 2014).

Limits on overtime work for nurses or assistant nurses are another reason that Japan is unattractive:

Overtime pay is quite high, usually JPY753 per hour (in rural areas), but a nurse or assistant nurse is allowed only 2 hours overtime work a day. It is difficult to improve one's income. (Interview with a Vietnamese nurse working in Japan.)

In addition to the high professional requirements, the Japanese care worker programme's age requirement makes it less attractive to many. Since care work is still largely considered women's work, the age criterion of 35 or younger might exclude many potential female candidates. The average marriage age is 23.1 (GSO, 2019) and most Vietnamese women marry from ages 20 to 25 and have children within the next 10 years. Since marriage and family are still a central value in Vietnamese society, especially for women, many women choose to stay in Viet Nam

to get married and have children instead of going to work abroad. Even if Japan loosens its immigration policies and increases work incentives, it will be difficult to keep trained care workers for a long time. The age requirement for care workers in Taiwan is not as strict. Many women can work abroad at age 40 or older because they have already had and brought up their children and can be away for a long time. Some nursing students at Ha Noi Medical University shared that they found the programme to work in Japan attractive but did not want to go for fear that they would be past marriageable age when they returned.

One important challenge to the programme is the widespread illegal labour brokering, which often involves deception in many areas across Viet Nam. Numerous newspaper articles report fake brokering. DOLAB has warned that agencies and individuals use various tricks to cheat those who want to work abroad, such as setting up fake websites to recruit care workers to Japan and Germany or pretending to be government officials from a recruiting agency (Hung, 2017).

Nhan Dan, an online newspaper, reported on 4 July 2007 that, in 2006–2007, Ha Noi police discovered and cracked down on 71 fraud cases related to labour export. As many as 2,118 people were deceived and cheated of nearly VND50 billion, including VND14.5 billion and US\$2,354,300.

Tin Tuc, another online newspaper, warned that some brokering agencies and individuals had approached nursing colleges and vocational schools to deceive students with dubious advertisements and counselling about recruitment of care workers to Japan and had collected money from the students (Xuan, 2015).

High brokerage fees due to poor management and control of recruitment is another challenge. Although DOLAB directly recruits care workers for Japan and Germany, some individuals and companies openly recruit and collect money from many who have just graduated from universities and medical colleges (Phong, 2014). Stories of people cheated by brokers discourage many from considering work abroad. For example, the fraudulent recruiting agency allows the recruit to pay the fee in small amounts over time, creating the illusion that the fee is not as high as it is. The programme does not require a deposit, but many recruiting agencies still take money from workers, as much as VND100 million or even more.

Some recruiting agencies even encourage run-away workers to persuade other workers to run away, too, so that the agencies can confiscate their deposit money. Some fake brokers tell unsuccessful applicants that they were selected, then take their money. Applicants pay the full fee, then they are told that the receiving company has not accepted them because their records are problematic (JVNET, 2017).

Numerous newspapers and research papers report that the multi-layered brokerage network has led to high pre-departure costs. A female worker going to Japan shared that she paid a large amount of money to an agency, which she now suspects is cheating her by creating a multi-layered selection and recruitment process to take more money from candidates: 'To go to Japan, I had to spend few hundred million dong for training fees, health check, visa, and other expenses' (interview).

Governance of International Labour Emigration

Overview of Labour Export Legislation and Policies

Since Doi Moi, labour export has been an increasingly important socio-economic development strategy of the Communist Party and the government. Over the last 3 decades, various policies and regulations have been passed to regulate labour export and to improve legislation.

The first of the policies was Decree 370-HDBT, 9 November 1991. It set mechanisms for licenced economic enterprises to secure contracts with foreign companies to recruit, train, and dispatch Vietnamese workers to work abroad for a fixed period.

In 1995, the decree was replaced by Decree 07-CP, which has detailed provisions based on the Labour Code on sending workers to work abroad for a fixed period.

In 1998, the Politburo passed Directive 41-CT/TW on labour export, emphasising that 'labour export is an important and long-term strategy, contributing to building a workforce for the construction of the country during the period of industrialisation and modernisation and is part of international cooperation, contributing to strengthening friendship and long-term cooperation with other countries' (Communist Party of Viet Nam, 1998). The directive says that 'exporting labour and specialists must be expanded and diversified'. Besides improving enterprises specialising in labour export, the directive encourages expanding the areas of state-owned enterprises eligible for direct labour export in the form of bidding for contracts, sending workers to work in foreign enterprises, encouraging enterprises and individuals working abroad to seek jobs, and attracting more workers from home.

The directive allows non-state enterprises, particularly those of mass organisations such as the Viet Nam General Confederation of Labour, Communist Youth Union, and Vietnamese Women Union, to export labour under the close management of the mass organisations and the state.

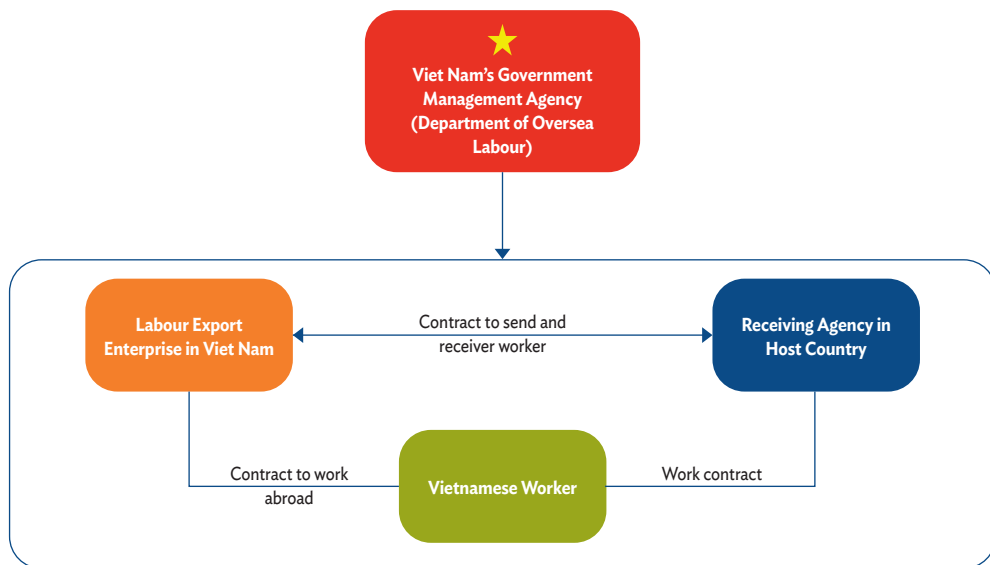
To implement the Communist Party's directive, on 20 September 1999, the government issued Decree No. 152/1999/ND-CP, allowing enterprises of all mass organisations to export labour. This has led to the booming of various types of enterprises involved in labour export and the rapid increase in the number of workers overseas, thus indirectly causing chaos in recruiting and dispatching workers (Government Viet Nam, 1999).

The Law on Contract-Based Overseas Workers, adopted by the Eleventh National Assembly on 29 November 2006, provides the overarching framework governing international labour

migration. Nevertheless, many undocumented migrant workers are employed irregularly outside the bilateral agreement and memorandum of agreement on labour migration in China, Thailand, Russia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, and a few other countries. A rising number of Vietnamese workers are overstaying their visas and work illegally in the Republic of Korea and Taiwan. Irregular migration is punishable by fines and other sanctions in Viet Nam and the destination countries (ILO, 2018).

To help migrant workers better adapt to their work and life in the hosting countries and prevent the workers from running away or overstaying, MOLISA issued Decree No. 18/2007/QĐ-BLĐTBXH on 18 July 2007, instructing recruitment agencies, including private enterprises, to provide a compulsory 72-hour pre-departure training programme for workers. Decree 144/2007/ND-CP stipulates regulations on sanctioning administrative violations in sending Vietnamese workers abroad.

Figure 5.14. Labour Export Process



Source: MOLISA, 2008.

As it has adopted labour migration as an important poverty reduction strategy, in 2008 the government approved a project for 2009–2020 to help the poorest districts facilitate working overseas. The Prime Minister's Decision 71, 2009, approved continuing the project. The project's objective was to send 120,000 poverty-stricken workers abroad from 2009 to 2020. As result, the residents of poor districts in 20 provinces, who have contracts for work overseas, are eligible to apply for subsidies to facilitate working overseas. The incentives include loans and financial assistance for language training, vocational skills training, health checks, and other services (Government of Viet Nam, 2009).

To regulate the management, operation, and use of the database on workers sent abroad under contract, MOLISA promulgated Circular 35/2017/TT-BLDTBXH, which came into effect in February 2018 and includes provisions for licensing recruiting agencies, information on recruitment agencies, and reporting mechanisms for Vietnamese overseas workers. To improve the process of sending workers abroad, MOLISA adopted more stringent regulations and conditions to ensure that only enterprises that meet the law's requirements can dispatch labourers to work abroad. A list with the names and contact information of enterprises is on the DOLAB website. By the end of 2020, 487 enterprises were licenced to recruit and send workers abroad. The website lists the enterprises sanctioned for administrative violations, with financial punishment or suspension of activities (DOLAB, 2021).

Regulations and Policies on the Care Worker Programme

There are no separate regulations on recruiting and dispatching home or hospital care workers to Taiwan. They are recruited in the same way as other workers, except that they might receive short basic training on caring skills before departure. Although they will care for the elderly or the sick, they are not required to submit proof that they are professionally trained as a nurse or assistant nurse to be eligible for recruitment. The language requirement is basic. The workers are recruited and dispatched to Taiwan through state-owned or private companies. Many even go to Taiwan through personal connections, introduced by relatives or friends there.

Regulations for care workers for Japan are different. Recruitment under the VJEPA nursing programme is exclusively coordinated and managed by DOLAB. Recruitment takes place once a year and is announced on the MOLISA website and in most popular mass media (Phuong, 2015).

Requirements for nursing candidates under the VJEPA are stringent. Candidates must have already been trained in a nursing college or university. After selection, they must study Japanese language for 12 months to achieve level N4 before going to Japan. Nursing candidates must have at least 2 years of experience in nursing work and have a medical practice licence.

The MOC on the skill internship programme opened opportunities for labour exporting agencies. Key provisions include extending the skill training period in Japanese from 3 to 5 years, increasing the number of trainees admitted to Japan, granting licences to Japanese supervisory unions to receive interns, establishing Organization for Technical Intern Training (OTIT) – an agency to administer the skill internship programme, approving the skill internship plan, and setting up criteria for sending organisations. The MOC requires companies that send trainees to Japan to not withhold trainees' deposits, publicize the fees that trainees must pay to avoid overcharging and violating regulations of Viet Nam, and reduce some Japanese administrative paperwork for workers. The MOC stipulates the responsibilities of Vietnamese and Japanese agencies: the Vietnamese side examines and introduces Vietnamese enterprises that meet requirements of the internship programme, and the Japanese side licences the Japanese management organizations and approves the plan to receive Vietnamese interns according to the MOC provisions specified. To implement the MOC, MOLISA has permission from the Prime Minister to select 30–50 qualified companies to take part in the care worker internship programme. In 2018, MOLISA granted licences to 13 companies (DOLAB, 2018).

In 2019, the Centre of Overseas Labour was assigned to cooperate directly with the Osaka Medical Care Association (Japan) in sending care workers for internship to Japan (COLAB, 2019).

Conclusion

After decades of implementing a massive labour export programme with a large number of low-skilled workers, Viet Nam has realized that it must improve the quality of its workforce to increase incomes and improve the national brand. The growing demand for caregivers in developed countries is an opportunity for Viet Nam to do so. However, the way forward is not easy.

The success of the care worker programme is not dependent on the strong political will of Vietnamese leaders or efforts to win elections by leaders in the host countries. The deciding factors are individual worker considerations and cultural barriers, psychological stresses, and professional requirements. Even though care has gone beyond the family and even national borders to become a global issue, it is still largely considered women's work. The programme is designed to ignore social expectations of women's role in the family and community. It is difficult and perhaps unfair to expect women to leave their caring role in their own families to take that role elsewhere while social institutions and perceptions remain unchanged.

Viet Nam, however, is starting to age rapidly. In the next 20 years, people aged 65 and over are forecast to account for 20% of the population (GSO, 2020). The need to care for the elderly in Viet Nam will increase. It is not ready to meet its own care needs. The current ratio of nurses per doctor is 1.5; the World Health Organisation (WHO) standard is 4.0 nurses per doctor. There are only 140,000 nurses nationwide and it is forecast that, by 2023, Viet Nam will face a shortage of as many as 50,000 nurses (Nhan Dan, 2020). Policymakers are concerned about balancing domestic and international demand. Mr. Pham Do Nhat Tan, former director of DOLAB and currently vice-chair of Vietnam Association of Manpower Supply (VAMAS), expressed his concerns in an interview:

For example, due to the large number of its workers abroad, the Philippines country is facing a serious shortage of labour for the domestic market. As about 80% of nurses and assistant nurses are working abroad. The country has to increase salaries and improve other benefits to limit the outflow of nurses. Our programme of sending care workers abroad should follow a reasonable trajectory to balance domestic demand and the potential of the international market.

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