

Policy-in-practice case study: Vietnam

National Action Programme for the Elderly 2012–2020



Brayden Howie/HelpAge International

11.9% of Vietnam's population is currently aged 60 years or older.

20% of the population are expected to be 60 years or older by 2035.

56% of the older population self-assessed their health status as weak or very weak.

Vietnam is one of the fastest-ageing countries in the world. Currently, 11.9 per cent of its population is aged 60 years or older, and this proportion is set to rise to more than 20 per cent by 2035. As such, Vietnam is promoting healthy ageing through the country's National Action Programme for the Elderly.

Caring for older people has always been a government priority in Vietnam and is enshrined in the Law on the Elderly 2009. This is the highest-level piece of legislation in Vietnam relating to older people's issues. As well as guaranteeing the rights of older persons, the law also sets out the responsibilities of the state and other agencies, organisations, families and individuals. However, implementation of the law has faced many challenges. For example, while the law permits older people to receive discounts for public transport – to participate in cultural activities or access public places – in practice, only a few state-owned companies, provinces and cities, have reduced the price of travel (including travel for leisure). Furthermore, private sector enterprises have not introduced such discounts.

In addition to the law, there exist many policies which ensure the economic wellbeing, social life, health and healthcare of older people – such as the National Action Programme for the Elderly 2012–2020

The National Action Programme was established to promote the role of older people in society. It covers their participation in cultural, social, educational, economic and political activities; the implementation of their rights and obligations; enhancement of their physical and spiritual health; and improvements in their material quality of life. As such, it can be regarded as a rights-based policy intervention that adopts a life-cycle approach. One of the policy's main objectives is to ensure that people in Vietnam can live healthy, active and fulfilling lives at all ages.

However, it is important to highlight that some of the targets and indicators in the National Action Programme are not considered SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound) because of the inability to quantify expected outcomes. In other words, the programme's objectives lack measurable indicators.



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Overall, however, the National Action Programme has successfully driven action on ageing and contributed to a positive policy environment for scaling up activities that promote healthy and productive ageing.

It should be noted that the National Action Programme targets older people through the Vietnam Association of the Elderly at all levels, and other agencies and organisations working with older people and on ageing issues.

Reasons for policy intervention

Vietnam's falling fertility rates and rising life expectancy are happening at an earlier stage of economic development (and lower per capita income level) than that experienced by many other countries. Vietnam currently enjoys a demographic 'window of opportunity' – that is, the period during which a population experiences age structures that are highly favourable for development as a greater proportion of the population is young and working, which cuts state spending on dependents and so spurs opportunities for economic growth. But this window will end as soon as population ageing accelerates. According to the Vietnam National Aging Survey 2011, more than half of the older population (56 per cent) self-assessed their health status as either weak (49.4 per cent) or very weak (6.7 per cent). In addition to physical care, older people require emotional and psychosocial support. Furthermore, more than 39.2 per cent of older people do not have a health insurance card therefore they are not covered by state healthcare.

Moreover, population ageing in Vietnam is now having a significant impact on all sectors of the economy. In order to manage population ageing, the government has realised it is no longer appropriate to solely focus on meeting the expectations and needs of the older population – rather, a comprehensive approach that includes all age groups is required.



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Elements of the life-cycle approach integrated within the policy intervention

Promoting healthy ageing

The National Action Programme for the Elderly fosters greater awareness about ageing among younger people and encourages intergenerational activities. It encourages older people to live healthy lives and targets them for economic support. To this end, the Ministry of Health issued a circular in 2020 to introduce a project that prepares people for healthy ageing throughout the life-cycle.

Positive lifestyle promotion for children and youth

Intergenerational self-help clubs established across Vietnam prepare children and youth for adopting positive lifestyles, and facilitate activities on proactive preparation for old age – such as educating and encouraging people to obtain social insurance, life insurance and health insurance, and to save for older age. Family members are also encouraged to proactively engage with the psychology and aspirations of older people, and to develop skills in caring for older people with care and support needs. These activities cut across all ages. The overall goal of the National Action Programme includes preparing younger people to enter old age with confidence and a positive attitude to health, and a sound financial position.

Lifelong choice on education and work

It is well recognised that women and men should have more flexible lifelong choices in terms of education and work to facilitate their wellbeing. The National Action Programme provides important strategies in this respect: it encourages employers to provide contributory pension schemes for workers to support their financial security in old age; it helps the working-age population to realise the importance of registering for pensions and savings schemes so that they can enjoy an income in older age; and it encourages the population to seek and follow advice on maintaining a healthy lifestyle and how to adapt their routines as they age.

This is reflected within the key principles upon which a social protection floor is based: universality (all citizens have rights and obligations to participate in the social protection system); sharing (based on income distribution mechanisms among population groups within one generation and between generations); equitability; and sustainability (promoting the responsibility of individuals, and concentrating efforts on the poorest and most vulnerable groups to ensure a minimum living standard).



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Drivers in the enabling environment motivating policy implementation

Macro-level strategies complementing population ageing policy

The needs and rights of older people have been addressed in several of the national strategies, such as the Population and Reproductive Health Strategy, Health Policy, and other sectoral policies and strategies. The ageing policy should complement these strategies and policies.

Key factors motivating policy implementation

Vietnam's traditional and cultural values (namely to respect and value older people) underpin the implementation of the National Action Programme for the Elderly, as it commits to considering key aspects of older people's needs and rights, including those related to culture, equality, diversity, gender and positivity (that is, viewing older people positively). Older people are regarded as equal to other citizens with equal rights, as conferred by law and international commitments. Older people are also viewed as a diverse group in terms of their choices, needs and requirements, so policies and plans must take that diversity into account, based on evidence. And in relation to gender aspects of the policy, Vietnam is committed to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

Furthermore, it appears that older people's contributions to the family, community and nation are recognised. Since population ageing is known to be affecting society, all government policies, plans and programmes need to take account of this trend. The policy is also expected to help Vietnam uphold its national, regional and international commitments in relation to ageing.

Key areas addressed

The National Action Programme sets targets for 2015 and 2020 in relation to: older people's social participation and economic activities; the establishment of older people's centres; the establishment of provincial funds for supporting older people and ensuring social protection; the dissemination of information through radio and television; and the participation of older people in intergenerational clubs in communes, wards and towns. This shows that the National Action Programme for the Elderly incorporates life-cycle aspects in all its activities.

Another important aspect is the recognition that the life-cycle approach applies even after the age of 60 or 65 years and can thus be adopted after the age of retirement because people may still live for another 20 or 30 years after retirement. Most importantly, older people are not viewed as a homogenous group, but a diverse one. One important perspective arising from the adoption of the life-cycle approach within the National Action Programme is the re-deployment of older people back into the labour force after the age of 60 if they want to continue working – thereby removing ageist assumptions about older people's ability and availability for work.

Key elements of the life-cycle approach used in this policy intervention are as follows:

- At least 50 per cent of communes, wards and towns have intergenerational self-help clubs or other models to support and promote the role of older people, which attract the participation of at least 70 per cent of older people in the area.
- Activities on proactive preparation for old age:
 - a. Educating and encouraging people to obtain social insurance, life insurance and health insurance; and to save for old age. This can be viewed as older people's right to social protection where the government is obliged to provide such services.
 - b. Encouraging family members to proactively engage with and understand the diverse psychology and aspirations of older people; as well as developing skills in caring for older people with support needs.
 - c. Employing appropriate mechanisms and policies to subsidise nursing, primary health care and health insurance. This can again be viewed within the framework of social protection that seeks to guarantee legal rights to healthcare for everyone.

Implementation strategy of the policy intervention

Vietnam recognises that programme implementation involves sensitivity to the needs of specific population groups. Therefore, the policy follows a life-cycle and rights-based approach to ensure that the rights of all people are upheld as they age. Implementation therefore considers the following key aspects:

Culture

Vietnam's deep-rooted culture and traditional practices instil respect for older people and ensure that they are valued. All generations should be encouraged to view ageing and older people positively.

Family

While responsibility for care and support for older people also rests with the family, and 'ageing in place' is identified as the ideal that needs to be encouraged, support from community and government is also required in certain cases. The state is the primary duty-bearer – not the family – when it comes to responsibility for older people's rights to care. Although Vietnam's government takes responsibility for care of older people through its National Action Programme for the Elderly, it also promotes social support, and any other assistance that supports older people's needs, to be provided through the family.

Equality

Older people are citizens with equal rights, as conferred by law and international commitments.

Diversity

Older people are diverse, therefore policies and plans should respect that diversity (for example, differences in age, gender, economic status and location) and ensure that policy and practice meet the needs of different groups of older people, based on evidence.

Gender

Women form the majority of the older population. Older women are generally more disadvantaged because they are more likely to experience poverty, poor health and disability in later life, and face discrimination based on the intersection of age, gender and other characteristics that impact upon their enjoyment of their social, cultural, economic and political rights. Hence, they deserve special attention. The policy acknowledges Vietnam's commitment to CEDAW.

Positivity

With increased healthy life expectancy in an ageing population, older people are increasingly expected to be seen as a resource to the family, community and society that should be supported to contribute.

Mainstreaming

Vietnam's ageing population affects all aspects of government policy and society, not just older people. The policy is supposed to advocate for all government policies, plans and programmes to take account of the impact of population ageing.

Commitments

The policy should support Vietnam in upholding its national, regional and international commitments in relation to ageing.



The policy intervention addresses a life-cycle approach to ageing explicitly in the following areas:

Objective: To inculcate in younger people a positive attitude towards ageing and care for older people. This is crucial to tackling ageism within society and thereby also contributes to tackling age discrimination.

Strategies:

- Introducing courses in school curricula on the importance of respect and care for older people.
- Enhancing awareness about the positive role of older people by disseminating information through electronic and print media about their contributions to society.
- Encouraging and supporting families in caring for older parents and relatives so that subsequent generations learn to do the same and preserve Vietnamese traditions.
- Regularly organising interactive media forums to create a better understanding of the psychological differences between older people and the younger generation, and vice versa.
- Helping older people to understand that times have changed, and that they should lower their expectations of how much time and help to expect from younger people. (However, this last strategy cannot be seen as a positive example of a life-cycle approach being adopted because it reflects ageist stereotypes.)

Objective: To maintain and strengthen intergenerational linkages.

Strategies:

- Encouraging younger people to volunteer help for older people.
- Promoting activities in which persons of all ages can participate.
- Organising presentations followed by discussions on intergenerational complementarities for younger adults and older people.
- Supporting construction of reasonable housing, to enable children to live with their parents or nearby and close enough to facilitate regular visits to parents.
- Providing older people with discounts on communications technology (such as mobile phones) to keep in touch with their adult children and other younger relatives.
- Setting up intergenerational self-help clubs to generate income and financial security for older people and promote intergenerational connectivity.
- Establishing elderly care facilities or nursing homes to serve the needs of older people when it is difficult to live with their children, to limit conflict among family members.

To prepare younger generations for older age, the following objectives and strategies are being implemented under the National Action Programme for the Elderly:

Objective: To provide an environment in which younger people can better prepare for ageing.

Strategies:

- Encouraging employers to provide contributory pension schemes for workers to enable them to have financial security in old age.
- Providing counsellors/advisers in health facilities to offer advice on maintaining a healthy lifestyle to enjoy better health in old age.
- Adding provisions for continuing coverage after retirement under health insurance schemes provided by employers for workers.
- Conducting advocacy to increase awareness of changes to expect during old age and removing negative feelings and fear of old age.
- Encouraging younger people to engage in voluntary work to help older people and thereby gain an idea of what to expect during old age.

Objective: To make younger people aware of the inevitability of old age and the importance of remaining independent, healthy and active for as long as possible.

Strategies:

- Enhancing awareness among the population of increasing longevity and the greater likelihood of reaching old age than previous generations.
- Making the working-age population realise the importance of registering for pension and saving schemes to have an income in old age.
- Encouraging people to seek and follow advice on maintaining a healthy lifestyle and how to change their routines with age.
- Helping people nearing retirement to understand what changes they can expect and thereby reduce any negative psychological impact of retirement.

At the central government level, the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA) and the Ministry of Health are the key agencies concerned with implementing the policy. MOLISA is responsible for policy formulation and preparation of relevant legislation and monitoring of policy implementation in the field of ageing and care of older people. The Ministry of Health has jurisdiction over healthcare. Other relevant organisations and their tasks (as designated by the National Action Programme) are shown in Table 1 on the next page →.

Part of the enabling environment for strategy implementation is creating age-friendly environments for older people – this is one of three priority pillars of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing launched in 2002. An age-friendly enabling environment includes appropriately designed housing and infrastructure, as well as affordable housing and travel costs for older

people. Various government ministries (see Table 1 below), as well as several civil society organisations, have supported the development of infrastructure that meets the needs of older people – such as well-paved walkways, sufficient lighting on streets, and elevators instead of stairs. Public facilities like toilets have also been designed in accordance with older people’s needs.

Table 1: Relevant organisations for older people’s policies

Relevant organisations	Tasks
MOLISA	Preparation of relevant policy and legislations and formulation of programs and action plans in collaboration with the relevant ministries, VAE, and the People’s Committees of provinces and cities, monitoring of those implementation, supervising of relevant facilities, conduct of survey and data collection.
Ministry of Health	Preparation of technical standard of the elderly care, supervising of hospitals providing geriatrics, necessary human resource development, as well as disease prevention and health promotion for the elderly.
Ministry of Planning and Investment	Coordination of the official development assistance (ODA) for the implementation of the National Action Program on the Vietnam Elderly, and integration with the socio-economic development plan.
Ministry of Finance	Guidance inspections and supervision of the use of funds for the implementation of the National Action Program on the Vietnam Elderly.
Ministry of Home Affairs	Guidance to local authorities to support the establishment and operation of the funds for the care and promotion of the roles of the elderly.
Ministry of Construction	Construction of social housing for the elderly who are single, lonely, and/or helpless, and provision of support to the elderly by construction of housing or repair of dilapidated housing.
Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development	Direction and creation of conditions for the elderly who are healthy enough to participate in activities of the agricultural and rural development fields.
Ministry of Culture, Sports and Travel	Guidance to activities on culture, art, and fitness, instruction and establishment of training classes, education for sports staff in health clubs for the elderly, guidance and organization of workshops for the elderly, inspection, supervision and strict management of cultural relics, histories, museums, famous temples, and fitness with ticketing.
Ministry of Information and Communications	Direct the press agencies about the contents of activities related to the elderly, and organize forums for the elderly.
Ministry of Transport	Inspection and supervision of units engaged in public transport and free services for the elderly.

Source: Japan International Cooperation Agency, *Data collection survey on social security sector in Viet Nam, 2014*

Progress of intervention

Despite the acute national financial situation, priority has been given to securing the budget for policies on older people, and a considerable financial allocation has been made for the National Action Programme (see Table 2 below).

Table 2: Outline of the National Action Programme for the Elderly 2012–2020

Indicators	Targets	
	2015	2020
Proportion of the elderly involved in economic and productive activities with necessary support.	15%	50%
Proportion of communes, towns and wards which established a fund to promote care and role of the elderly.	>25%	>80%
Proportion of the elderly who receive medical treatment and care by family or community.	100%	100%
Proportion of special hospitals (excluding pediatrics and rehabilitation hospitals) and traditional medicine hospitals.	25%	90%
Proportion of provincial hospitals having a geriatric department.	25%	100%
Proportion of central and local radio and television agencies having forum on the elderly.	80%	100%
Number of the elderly been entitled of monthly pension and use of a care facility.	>1.5 million	>2 million
Proportion of the elderly receiving community care among the one without the entitlement as care facility users.	>20%	>80%
Proportion of the elderly living in permanent houses.	100%	100%
Proportion of commune, town and wards established Intergenerational self-help club (ISHC, see Section 3.5.4).	15%	50%
Proportion of the elderly participating Intergenerational Self-help Club (ISHC) in the commune, town and wards.	70%	70%

Source: Japan International Cooperation Agency, *Data collection survey on social security sector in Viet Nam, 2014*

MOLISA, with technical support from UNFPA in Vietnam, has evaluated the programme's implementation and found that targets for four indicators have been achieved, while those for other indicators have not been successful, having been hampered by financial and human resource constraints. It also appears that the targets set were very optimistic, hampering the collection of information on their success. This is mainly because many of the targets were not SMART and thus it is very difficult to quantify achievement. However, this can be a lesson learned for developing another National Action Programme for the next 10-year period.

Vietnam still struggles to eliminate discrimination against women. Although a higher percentage of women benefit from social insurance schemes than men, women still receive significantly less benefit because of their lower wage rates. Also, the retirement age for women is lower than that for men, although their life expectancy is higher. However, within the context of the National Action Programme, Vietnam is trying to eliminate this discrimination by narrowing the retirement age gap. Ageism is also prevalent in every aspect of life because societal perceptions of older people have always been negative.



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One good example is the difficulty older people face in obtaining bank loans because banks believe it will be difficult to recover such loans. This evidence suggests that Vietnam is slow to promote rights-based interventions in order to prevent ageism and address gender disparity.

However, by accommodating UNFPA's emphasis on the feminisation of ageing, Vietnam's government has developed several reports and various infographics on the gender aspect of old age, and has identified the importance of addressing gender equality among older people.

The setting up of intergenerational self-help clubs throughout the country can be seen as one initiative that originated under the National Action Programme that adopts a life-cycle approach.

Outcomes of the intervention

According to a survey carried out on the adaptive social health insurance strategy and ageing policy in Vietnam (2020), the percentage of older people rating their health as 'good' or 'very good' was twice as high as in a similar survey in 2011. Similarly, the proportion of older people rating their health as 'poor' or 'very poor' was much lower than in the 2011 survey. Furthermore, the percentage of older people currently living in poor households was much lower than in 2011.

The project to establish intergenerational self-help clubs nationwide – developed by the Vietnam Association of the Elderly – is a very positive initiative under the National Action Programme. It not only involves older people but also young people to support them. Furthermore, the communication action plans for disseminating information to older people are much

improved. Also, the government is now looking at the country's second 'demographic dividend'¹ to reap its benefits for economic development. The re-employment of older people will also be taken into this programme in future, with strong support from the government.

Some of the specific project-level interventions originating from the National Action Programme for the Elderly are as follows:

- Promoting awareness programmes on ageing.
- Advocacy efforts by mainstreaming ageing at state sector programme level.
- Incorporating the relationship between the demographic dividend and population ageing into the national planning process.
- Promoting employment and generating job opportunities for older people.

The review report of the National Action Programme 2012–2020 shows that the objectives of the basic programme have been achieved, including: promoting older people's participation in political, cultural and socioeconomic activities (40 per cent to 50 per cent of older people are still engaged in economic activity; more than 10 per cent participate in social activities); older people's healthcare is significantly improved; the living standard for most older people is improved; cultural life and morale are also improved; and life expectancy is increased. Furthermore, it highlights that the implementation of the programme is synchronous across most localities, and self-assessment has been strong, especially in developing documents and guidelines for implementing policies for older people and improving inter-agency coordination, promotion of education, and resource mobilisation.

Conclusion

Vietnam's National Action Programme for the Elderly 2012–2020 offers potential good practice as a national ageing policy intervention because it explicitly adopts a life-cycle approach to ageing, by instilling in younger people a positive attitude towards ageing and care for older people.

It also maintains and strengthens intergenerational linkages, providing an environment in which younger people can better prepare for ageing, and making younger persons aware of their own ageing and the importance of promoting independence, and healthy and active ageing. The policy recognises that all generations should be encouraged to view ageing and older people more positively. It also adopts a rights-based approach by accommodating an equality

principle, indicating that older people are equal to other citizens and have rights, as conferred by law and international commitments. The policy also considers Vietnam's commitment to CEDAW to eliminate gender inequality. The implementation strategies used for tackling issues around caring for older people can also be replicated elsewhere, especially in the Asia-Pacific region, where cultural contexts are similar. Although all these key areas are addressed by the policy intervention (albeit with some challenges around financial and human resource constraints), overall, the policy meets key criteria for potential 'good practice' in that it protects the entire population; it targets older people and ageing; it promotes healthy ageing; it promotes gender equality; it adopts a life-cycle approach and key elements of a rights-based approach.





Le Minh Duc/HelpAge International

Endnotes

1. That is, the economic growth potential that can result from shifts in a population's age structure, mainly when the share of the working-age population is larger than the non-working-age share of the population.

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Key informants

Nguyen Ngoc Quynh, PhD,
Programme Officer, Inclusive Growth and Social Protection

United Nations Population Fund in Vietnam
Green One UN House, 304 Kim Ma, Ba Dinh, Ha Noi, Vietnam
Tel +(84- 24) 3850 0343 Fax +(84-24) 3726 5520 Cell +(84) (0) 98 276 2498
<http://vietnam.unfpa.org>

HelpAge International is a global network of organisations promoting the right of all older people to lead dignified, healthy and secure lives.

HelpAge International

PO Box 70156, London WC1A 9GB, UK

4th Floor, 35–41 Lower Marsh,
London, SE1 7RL, UK

Tel +44 (0)20 7278 7778

info@helpage.org

www.helpage.org

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