

Vocational Training for Rural Labor in Ensuring Social Security in Vietnam: Theoretical and Practical Issues



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ABSTRACT: The increasing importance of vocational training for rural workers reflects the ongoing transformation of Vietnam's agriculture from small-scale, subsistence farming reliant on natural conditions to a modern, large-scale production system incorporating advanced science and technology within a market-oriented, globally integrated economy. In recent years, this work has consistently received attention and has achieved some successes; however, to achieve depth, effectiveness, and sustainability, it is necessary to continue focusing on implementing key tasks and solutions in the near future.

KEYWORDS: rural labor, vocational training, rural labor restructuring, ensuring social security, sustainable rural development.

INTRODUCTION

Human resources play a pivotal role in the sustainable socio-economic development of all nations. Amidst the increasing scarcity of natural resources, the quality of human capital, particularly skilled and specialized labor, has become a decisive factor in national competitiveness. Consequently, investment in education and training, especially vocational training, is a pressing imperative. In Vietnam, an economy historically rooted in agriculture, the rural workforce constitutes a significant proportion of the labor force but faces substantial quality constraints. The low rate of vocational training completion, coupled with limited awareness and small-scale farming practices, has adversely affected labor productivity, the adoption of modern technologies, and overall economic competitiveness. Within the context of accelerated industrialization, modernization, and international integration, enhancing the quality of the rural workforce through vocational training has become a strategic priority for national economic restructuring, growth model transformation, social security provision, inequality reduction, and the pursuit of sustainable development.

I. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A. Rural Labor

Your Rural labor refers to the workforce residing in rural areas and engaged in agricultural economic activities (encompassing agriculture in the narrow sense, forestry, and fisheries). Additionally, a portion of the rural labor force participates in other economic sectors within rural areas, such as small-scale handicraft industries and petty trade. Under the influence of the market economy, rural labor is increasingly oriented towards agricultural diversification and the development of non-agricultural activities.

Rural labor constitutes a significant component of the national economy's labor structure, meeting the demand for food and other essential societal needs. Due to their livelihoods and production being closely linked to agriculture and rural life, Vietnamese rural laborers exhibit several key characteristics:

Firstly, the rural labor pool is quite diverse in terms of age, health status, production and business conditions, and living circumstances. Consequently, the needs and conditions for participating in vocational training vary among rural laborers, necessitating diverse and flexible training modalities.

Secondly, the educational and technical levels of the majority of rural laborers in Vietnam are relatively low, with a limited proportion having received specialized training. The rate of laborers with formal qualifications or certifications remains low, reaching only about 16% in 2021 (General Statistics Office of Vietnam [GSO], 2021), significantly lower than in urban areas. This indicates that a large segment of the rural workforce consists of unskilled labor, lacking specialized skills and industrial work habits. As a result, they face considerable challenges competing in the labor and commodity markets, which increasingly demand advanced skills and modern technologies. Notably, with the inevitable shift in modern economic structures, the agricultural labor force is steadily decreasing in size, requiring a portion to transition to other sectors. This presents both opportunities and challenges, demanding that rural laborers rapidly adapt to new skill and qualification requirements. Consequently, the need for vocational training for rural labor becomes even more pressing.

Thirdly, rural labor, being closely tied to the agricultural economy, exhibits high seasonality. This leads to the engagement of agricultural workers in various activities with different occupational characteristics, requiring vocational training content that

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integrates multiple activities and occupations. The seasonality of agricultural production also affects the stability of employment and income for rural laborers in Vietnam.

Fourthly, the production and living conditions of rural residents are more challenging compared to urban areas. Income and living standards of rural laborers are significantly lower than their urban counterparts, placing pressure on social security. Underemployment, precarious employment, and low incomes remain prevalent, particularly in remote, mountainous, and ethnic minority areas. According to the GSO, the underemployment rate in rural areas in 2021 was 2.96%, although lower than in urban areas (3.33%), it remains a significant concern, especially when compared to the pre-COVID-19 period, when this rate was typically higher in rural areas (GSO, 2021). The internal resources available to most rural laborers for vocational training are quite limited, especially for participation in formal higher education, requiring support from the state and other organizations and enterprises.

B. Vocational Training for Rural Labor in Vietnam

Vocational training for rural labor is a process combining vocational teaching and learning, whereby instructors disseminate theoretical knowledge and provide practical guidance to rural laborers, enabling them to acquire a certain level of proficiency, skills, expertise, and mastery in a particular occupation to meet the demands of the labor market and the socio-economic development needs of rural areas in general.

Vocational training for rural labor in Vietnam has the following characteristics:

Firstly, regarding its nature: Vocational training activities in rural areas constitute a non-pure public service and a positive externality. Unlike private services, public services have two fundamental characteristics: non-rivalry and non-excludability in consumption. Vocational training activities in rural areas are non-rivalrous, not governed by market supply and demand, yet they can be exclusive to the direct beneficiaries of the training service—learners must meet certain conditions to directly benefit from the service.

The vocational education sector in general, and rural vocational training in particular, generates positive externalities. When rural laborers directly benefit from vocational education services, these services not only benefit the laborers themselves but also contribute to increased social benefits, such as increased labor productivity due to the rising number of trained individuals, and potential reductions in social ills. Studying this characteristic is crucial for determining the responsibilities of the public and private sectors in rural vocational training activities and enhancing social responsibility towards rural vocational training. As rural vocational training is a non-pure public service, the state does not need to fully subsidize it; learners should share a portion of the service provision costs in the form of tuition fees. As rural vocational training is a positive externality, the state should provide funding in the form of subsidies to training institutions that provide services to increase the volume of services provided to the economy.

Regarding the trainees: Rural laborers are diverse in age, social knowledge, educational level, and psychological characteristics. Environmental and social factors, as well as the development level of the community, significantly impact the socio-psychological characteristics of each trainee. Older learners are easily influenced by their own experiences, which can lead to conservatism in accepting new experiences and intergenerational conflicts among learners. This characteristic plays a crucial role and serves as a basis for state agencies to develop and plan rural vocational training in a way that is appropriate for each learner group.

Regarding training providers: Due to the diversity of vocational training trainees, the content of vocational training for rural labor includes many different activities, numerous different occupations with large training volumes and diverse training forms. In rural areas, in addition to the system of specialized training institutions, there is a system of economic organizations such as traditional handicraft households, cooperatives, and people's social organizations also participating in vocational training. Therefore, in addition to the special support of the state, the socialization of resources and diversification of vocational training forms are important solutions to enhance the capacity of vocational training providers for rural labor.

Regarding training methods: Rural vocational training includes formal and continuing training methods; long-term, in-depth training and short-term training, fostering, updating, and enhancing knowledge. With the specific characteristic of the trainees being laborers with relatively low educational levels, short-term training forms, with lower entry requirements and cheaper tuition fees compared to formal training methods, are quite common when implementing vocational training activities for labor in rural areas.

Regarding the content of vocational training for rural labor: With the trainees being laborers in rural areas, mainly originating from agriculture, the training content of rural vocational training activities includes: the agricultural labor group, the labor group in craft villages, and the group of farmers transitioning to industrial and service sectors.

C. The Relationship between Vocational Training for Rural Labor and Social Security Provision

Training in general, and vocational training in particular, is a continuous process of education, a driving force behind socio-economic development, equipping laborers with professional knowledge, occupational skills, a sense of discipline, industrial working styles, and good health to enable them to find employment that meets socio-economic development requirements. The relationship between vocational training for rural labor and social security provision is a dialectical one, involving mutual interaction and support. Vocational training plays a key role in consolidating and enhancing the level of social security for laborers in rural areas.

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Simultaneously, a robust social security system creates favorable conditions for the sustainable development of vocational training activities.

Specifically, vocational training provides rural laborers with professional knowledge, skills, and working styles, enabling them to adapt to changes in the labor market, especially within the context of agricultural industrialization and modernization, and international economic integration. With vocational skills, laborers are capable of securing stable employment with higher incomes, thereby improving their material and spiritual lives and mitigating economic risks associated with job loss or unstable income. This directly contributes to ensuring economic security for laborers, one of the crucial pillars of social security. Furthermore, vocational training assists rural laborers in transitioning to non-agricultural occupations, reducing their dependence on traditional agricultural production, which is highly susceptible to weather and market fluctuations. This occupational diversification helps distribute risks and generate more stable income streams, contributing to income security.

Beyond the economic dimension, vocational training also impacts other aspects of social security. Stable employment and income empower laborers with greater confidence and social standing within their families and communities, contributing to ensuring spiritual and social security. Moreover, vocational training enhances laborers' awareness and capabilities, enabling them to access and benefit from social services more effectively, thereby contributing to service security.

Conversely, a well-functioning social security system with supporting policies on health insurance, social insurance, unemployment benefits, and vocational training support creates favorable conditions for laborers to participate in vocational training courses without excessive concerns about economic hardship during their studies. These support policies are particularly important for rural laborers, who often face economic difficulties and vulnerability. A robust social security network also mitigates risks for laborers during occupational transitions, encouraging them to confidently participate in vocational training courses to improve their skills and seek better employment opportunities.

II. VOCATIONAL TRAINING FOR RURAL LABOR IN VIETNAM PRACTICES

The processes of industrialization, modernization, and international integration have been generating profound impacts on rural labor in Vietnam, presenting both opportunities and challenges. These impacts manifest in various aspects, from labor quantity, structure, and quality to employment, income, and migration. According to the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA), between 2016 and 2020, the proportion of agricultural labor decreased from 40.3% to 34.4%, while the proportion of industrial and construction labor increased from 27.2% to 29.7% (MOLISA, 2021). This shift contributes to reducing employment pressure in rural areas, while simultaneously creating opportunities for rural laborers to access higher-income jobs and improved working conditions. Concurrently, I&M has promoted the application of science and technology in agricultural production, which has helped reduce manual labor, increase production efficiency, and generate higher value-added agricultural products. However, the labor shift to industrial and service sectors has also led to labor shortages in agriculture, particularly of skilled and experienced workers, and has posed numerous challenges related to migration, employment, and other social issues, affecting the socio-economic development of rural areas. Improving the quality of vocational training, creating sustainable employment, and increasing income for rural laborers are urgent tasks that make significant contributions to the country's sustainable socio-economic development.

Recognizing the crucial role of vocational training for rural labor, the Vietnamese State has promulgated numerous policies supporting vocational education in rural areas. Among these, the Prime Minister's Decision on "Vocational Training for Rural Laborers until 2020" (promulgated under Decision No. 1956/QĐ-TTg dated November 27, 2009, and Decision No. 971/QĐ-TTg in 2015) is particularly noteworthy, leading to positive changes. In practice, a series of new policies on vocational training for rural labor have been issued in a relatively synchronized manner, along with the involvement of the entire political system, organizations, and businesses in developing clear content, programs, and implementation plans. The system of vocational education institutions has been consolidated and invested in towards modernization and gradual standardization. Over more than 10 years of implementing the Project, localities across the country have actively and proactively developed annual vocational training plans and implemented vocational training programs for rural labor. According to a MOLISA report, nearly 10 million rural laborers have participated in vocational training at various levels as stipulated by the Project. Consequently, the proportion of trained labor in rural areas of Vietnam increased from 8.5% in 2010 to 16.3% in 2020 (GSO, 2021). The majority of laborers, after participating in these vocational training courses, have found new jobs or continued in their previous occupations but with higher productivity and income. From 2016 to 2020, the proportion of laborers finding employment after training increased by 9.3% compared to the period from 2009 to 2015, reaching 89.3% (Le, Quan, 2022). This demonstrates the initial effectiveness of vocational training in creating employment for rural labor.

However, in addition to the achieved results, vocational training for rural labor still faces limitations and weaknesses, which are reflected in the following aspects:

Low proportion of trained labor: Although the number of trained laborers has increased, the proportion of rural labor with qualifications and certificates remains very low compared to urban areas and the national average.

Low training quality: The quality of vocational training, especially in remote, mountainous, and ethnic minority areas, remains limited. The content of training programs does not closely align with the actual needs of the labor market and the requirements of

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enterprises. Facilities and teaching equipment are still inadequate and outdated. The teaching staff lacks practical experience and has not been updated with new knowledge and skills. Rural laborers are mainly trained at the elementary level and for less than 3 months, which is difficult to meet the increasing demands of the labor market, especially in remote, mountainous, and ethnic minority areas.

Weak linkage between training and employment: The link between training institutions, businesses, and laborers is still loose. There is a lack of close coordination between the parties in developing training programs, organizing internships, and recruiting after training. This leads to a situation where laborers after training cannot find suitable jobs or do not meet the requirements of enterprises.

Ineffective communication and career counseling: Communication and dissemination of vocational training policies and labor market information to rural people has not received due attention, especially in remote areas. This prevents laborers from fully understanding the importance of vocational training and proactively participating in training programs.

III. CONTINUING TO ENHANCE VOCATIONAL TRAINING FOR RURAL LABOR IN VIETNAM

To improve the quality of rural labor and ensure social security in contemporary Vietnam, vocational training for rural workers must align with the objectives of agricultural restructuring and new rural development for the period 2021–2030, with sustainable poverty reduction and the implementation of social security and social equity as key priorities. We propose several directions to enhance vocational training for rural labor as follows:

Firstly, the State needs to update and supplement the list of vocational training occupations for rural labor. Rural Vietnam is undergoing rapid changes associated with the country's development trends in the era of industrialization, modernization, and international integration. Consequently, rural occupations today have also undergone significant changes compared to the past; the needs and preferences of rural laborers are increasingly shifting, converging with urban lifestyles. The review and updating of the occupation list must be based on an analysis and assessment of the vocational training needs of rural laborers in different regions and localities, as well as forecasts of labor recruitment demands of each enterprise and production facility. Based on this, each locality and vocational training institution can provide specific career guidance for trainees.

Secondly, the content of vocational training programs for rural labor needs to be updated towards efficiency, modernity, and close alignment with the practical needs of businesses, localities, and society. The development of training program content should be flexible, diversified, and interconnected; supplementing and updating new content to meet the requirements of industrialization, modernization, and international integration. In the process of promoting industrialization and modernization, rural laborers not only need to be equipped with basic knowledge and skills in professional occupations but also need training in market economy knowledge, access to advanced scientific and technical achievements; modern production standards; knowledge of international integration; and enhanced essential skills for workers in the Industry 4.0 era.

Thirdly, it is necessary to diversify training forms and methods towards openness, integration, inter-connectivity, and modernity to meet the increasingly high, complex, and diverse vocational learning needs, creating learning opportunities for laborers. In addition to traditional training forms in vocational training institutions, the rural vocational training system needs to develop and combine new training forms associated with digital transformation, such as online training, blended learning; besides long-term training courses, short-term training courses focusing on continuous updates of science, technology, and new production methods should be strengthened. Training methods should be innovated based on the principle of linking theory with practice; training at vocational training institutions should be combined with practical training at production facilities and enterprises.

Fourthly, investment in the development of learning materials, strengthening of physical and technical facilities, and equipment for vocational training at rural vocational training institutions is necessary to meet the increasing demands of the labor market and the trainees themselves. All training materials and textbooks used for vocational training should emphasize entrepreneurship, creativity, and focus on building new rural areas and modernizing agriculture and rural areas in Vietnam. In addition, new technologies should be rapidly adopted and digital transformation implemented, building digitized and open educational resources. For management staff and vocational training teachers, continuous training to improve their qualifications, skills, and training quality needs to be carried out regularly to ensure the quality of organization, management, and training in vocational training institutions.

Fifthly, social mobilization should be promoted to attract more diverse resources into vocational training for rural labor. In addition to funding from the state budget, localities need to proactively integrate and effectively mobilize programs and projects, as well as promote the role of socio-political organizations, businesses, and individuals in vocational training for rural laborers. To this end, the State and local authorities need to have mechanisms to encourage individuals, organizations, and businesses to invest in establishing non-public vocational training institutions for rural labor to increase access to education for rural laborers. The mobilization of participation from non-state individuals, organizations, and businesses is not only about financial participation but also in the stages of developing training programs, training content, or participating in joint teaching, coordinating in linking teaching and practical practice at enterprises and production facilities, and receiving trainees for employment after vocational training.

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Sixthly, vocational training funding support policies for rural labor should be strengthened, especially for farmers whose land is revoked, students from poor households, policy beneficiaries, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, and female laborers. Support measures should be combined with businesses and vocational training institutions in the form of scholarships for disadvantaged laborers to ensure continuous and complete vocational training.

CONCLUSIONS

In the context of Vietnam's profound economic transformation from an agriculture-centric model to a focus on industry and services, the role of vocational training for rural laborers has become critically important for ensuring social security. This shift entails numerous consequences, notably the emergence of surplus traditional agricultural labor lacking the skills and knowledge to adapt to the rapidly changing labor market. Without appropriate vocational skills, this workforce faces the risks of unemployment, precarious income, and hardship, thereby exacerbating social instability and placing pressure on the social security system. Furthermore, international economic integration and the Fourth Industrial Revolution impose increasingly stringent demands on human capital quality, requiring workers to possess specialized skills, adaptability, and innovative thinking. Therefore, vocational training is not merely a solution for rural laborers to secure employment and augment income; it is also a key enabler for accessing development opportunities, improving quality of life, mitigating risks, and contributing to the nation's sustainable development. Investing in vocational training for rural laborers is, in essence, an investment in social security, establishing a solid foundation for national stability and prosperity in the future.

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