

Policy Brief



Social and environmental impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in Vietnamese provinces bordering China and Laos following border closure

This brief presents the key findings and messages from a joint research project conducted by Vietnam National University, Vietnam National University of Agriculture and the University of Glasgow (United Kingdom) that has sought to understand the social, economic, and environmental impacts of border closures in selected provinces of northern Vietnam due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The rationale for the project was that mobility was seriously reduced globally during the pandemic and this affected mostly people who cross borders to work.

Research was conducted in three provinces in northern Vietnam bordering China and Laos – Lao Cai, Lang Son and Dien Bien. Data was collected through interviews with experts, policymakers and other stakeholders and through focus groups, participatory mapping exercises with different social groups at the commune level, remote sensing to track changes in land use, and systems dynamic modelling.

The main research results are presented through narratives, which show the shifts in livelihoods of vulnerable communities, land use change, and social, economic, and environmental impacts of COVID-19 as well as the interlinkages and causality of these factors within the social-ecological system of this region. Overall, those stories are not just about the challenges that the communities we worked with were facing, but also the stories of adaptation and resilience during the pandemic.



Key research findings

- ❖ Vietnam is recognised as having had one of the most effective early responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. One element of this was the flexibility of the Government and Provincial People's Committees in dealing with the evolving situations related to the pandemic in the border areas with China and Laos. In the three provinces that we studied, many people travelled across the border with China and Laos to work before the pandemic. The border closures therefore meant that a significant source of income for households in border communities was disrupted.
- ❖ Both national and provincial governments provided economic support to households – including payments to those quarantined with COVID-19, close contacts, and people who lost their employment due to restrictions.
- ❖ Loss of informal employment or work in another country was not recognised by official Vietnamese social protection mechanisms.
- ❖ Affected households adopted a range of strategies to secure alternative sources of income. This included turning to agriculture or forestry. This was helped by the additional labour from non-migrating workers, combined with the investment of pre-Covid savings. Other alternative income sources included working in construction or as free labourers in other sectors, or travelling elsewhere in Vietnam to work particularly for younger family members.
- ❖ Impacts of the pandemic reduced the demand and price for many agricultural products but increased the costs of fertiliser and other agricultural inputs.
- ❖ Border closures, due to the increase in the number of COVID-19 cases, not only increased the return of migrant workers to their homes and unemployment but could also lead to land use changes. Two crops of rice, instead of one, were transplanted, more vegetables were grown, and Star Anise, cinnamon, and pine trees were planted in forested areas.
- ❖ Solidarity was strengthened during the time of the COVID-19 in the sense that local people found ways to support each other, especially the poor and the vulnerable people.



Key policy messages

The policy messages are direct results of our research. They were discussed and agreed upon with a group of 36 stakeholders representing various communities and organizations in Sa Pa (Vietnam) in March 2023.

- ❖ The pandemic has illustrated the vulnerability of cross-border migrant work.
- ❖ However, responses to the pandemic demonstrated the strong resilience and adaptability of border communities.
- ❖ Many returned migrant workers expressed a desire to work in Vietnam rather than return to crossing the border after the pandemic.
- ❖ Local communities suggested that future policies focus on increased agricultural production, especially for ethnic minority women in the border provinces - maybe through financial support or low-interest loans to promote investment and market access.
- ❖ Many returned migrant workers proposed that local governments of border provinces enact policies to strengthen agricultural vocational training for rural workers and to provide more support to the local communities in terms of labor immigration procedures to ensure compliance with regulations.
- ❖ More generally, interventions to support economic development and biodiversity conservation within the border regions could reduce the reliance on cross-border working for households in these regions.
- ❖ Future policies need to consider a holistic approach from a system perspective capturing the systemic, interactive nature of the social, economic, and environmental impacts of the COVID-19.



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