

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT POLICY IN VIETNAM: ACHIEVEMENTS, CHALLENGES, AND IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract: This study provides a comprehensive assessment of human development policies in Viet Nam from the period of renovation in 1986 to the year 2025. Using the United Nations Development Programme's human development framework, the paper analyzes long-term trends in the Human Development Index and evaluates primary policy outcomes in education, healthcare, social welfare, and poverty reduction. Comparative findings indicate that Viet Nam has made remarkable progress in expanding basic education, improving public health, and reducing poverty, yet continues to face significant challenges related to regional inequality, limited quality of higher education, population aging, and the demands of digital transformation. The paper identifies structural constraints that may hinder sustainable progress and proposes strategic orientations for 2025–2030 to enhance the quality of human resources, strengthen institutional capacity, promote equitable development, and align human development with green growth and international integration.

Keywords: Human development; Human Development Index; Viet Nam; social policy; regional comparison

1. Introduction

Human development has long been regarded as central to sustainable development strategies and as a key indicator of the quality of growth in every nation. According to UNDP (n.d.), the Human Development Index (HDI), focusing on people and their abilities, should be the key criterion for assessing a country's development, not just its economic growth. Further, the Human Development Index (HDI) measures the average achievements in "*a long healthy life, being knowledgeable and a decent standard of living*". The Long and healthy life dimensions are measured by life expectancy at birth, knowledge and education are measured by the average years of schooling for adults aged above 25 and the expected schooling years for children of school-going age, and the standard of living is assessed by the gross national income per capita (UNDP, n.d.).

Conceição (2024) notes that the Global Human Development Index, which had been on a steady rise until 2019, experienced declines in 2020 and 2021. The notable global decline in the HDI is primarily attributable to COVID-19. This is echoed in UNDP (2025), which noted in its annual report that global human development growth is slowing, with the most vulnerable and weak populations most affected. The report also notes that the human development gap between social classes is widening.

According to TheGlobalEconomy.com (n.d.), the average ASEAN score for 11 ASEAN countries was 0.739 points in 2023. The analysed data spanned from 1980 to 2023. The indicators for the countries were: Singapore 0.946, Brunei 0.837, Malaysia 0.819, Thailand 0.798, Vietnam 0.766, Indonesia 0.728, the Philippines 0.72, Laos 0.609, Burma 0.609, and Cambodia 0.606. The data indicate that Singapore has the highest HDI, whereas Cambodia has the lowest. An analysis of ASEAN HDI data by Putri, Salim, and Lubis (2024) corroborated the above observation regarding the countries' HDI scores. Moreover, they posit that, on the one hand, Singapore and Brunei Darussalam have very high HDI values because of their high standards of living, life expectancy, and access to education. On the other hand, Laos and Myanmar have low HDI because they have widespread challenges in access to education and health.

Putri, Salim, and Lubis (2024) argue that discrepancies in HDI among ASEAN states can be attributed to differences in development policies, resource access, and development priorities. The situation can, however, be remedied if ASEAN countries worked together to improve everyone's access to healthcare, education, and living standards. The current situation shows differences in people's well-being across the region, indicating that ASEAN's goal of equitable welfare has not been achieved. The same

discrepancies could also point out differences in development policies and priorities across ASEAN (Putri, Salim, & Lubis, 2024).

Madris et al. (2025) note that economists emphasise a fully qualified human being for optimal productivity. They compare such a human resource to highly productive, expensive machinery. Human development is a crucial “*investment for the future well-being of humanity, enabling individuals to earn higher incomes, which can ultimately boost overall community income*” (Madris et al., 2025, p.1779). It is further argued that although HDI policies that are successful in one ASEAN country may not be a perfect fit for another, it remains good practice to learn from and compare with what has worked elsewhere. Moreover, regardless of the country under study, the cornerstone of a strong HDI appears to be robust economic development. Robust economic growth means that such countries have resources to invest in their education and health sectors. (Madris et al., 2025, p.1780). However, the scenario described above is not always the rule. For example, while research shows that in ASEAN, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Brunei Darussalam, and Singapore have successfully translated their economic growth into human development, this is not the case in Thailand and Cambodia (Madris et al., 2025, p. 1783).

In Vietnam, since national reunification in 1975, and especially following the renovation reforms in 1986, policies related to human development have undergone significant transformations, helping the country overcome poverty and achieve deeper integration into the regional and global community. However, in the context of globalization, digital transformation, and climate change, this process now faces new challenges, necessitating comprehensive, timely studies to assess policy effectiveness and inform future adjustment directions.

Although numerous studies have examined education, healthcare, poverty reduction, and HDI indicators in Vietnam, research that combines the theoretical perspective of human development with comparative analysis of HDI and human development policy effectiveness remains limited. This paper seeks to fill that gap by providing a more comprehensive view of Vietnam’s human development policies and proposing policy orientations for the next stage.

Within the scope of this study, the theoretical framework of human development provides the basis for analyzing Vietnam’s policy trajectory since the Renovation (1986). The three fundamental pillars of HDI—life expectancy, education, and income—are applied in ways that align with Vietnam’s specific context: life expectancy is examined through health and healthcare policies; education through universalization, quality of training, and accessibility; and income through poverty reduction and social security policies. This approach ensures consistency with UNDP’s measurement framework while highlighting Vietnam’s distinct features, where poverty alleviation and social welfare programs play a key role in improving living standards and quality of life.

2. Research Methods

The study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods to evaluate and compare the effectiveness of Vietnam’s human development policies across East and Southeast Asia.

(1) *The quantitative method* is used to analyze human development indicators and their main components: (i) average life expectancy, (ii) educational attainment, and (iii) standard of living. Data were sourced from highly reliable international organizations, including UNDP, the World Bank, UNESCO, UNICEF, and WHO, as well as from domestic sources from the General Statistics Office of Vietnam, the Ministry of Education and Training, and the Ministry of Planning and Investment.

Quantitative analysis focuses on tracking Vietnam’s HDI fluctuations from 1986 to the present and on comparing its regional standing with that of representative countries in East and Southeast Asia, such as Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea, China, and Indonesia. Descriptive statistics and correlation analyses are used to identify trends, assess Vietnam’s relative position, and measure long-term improvements in policy effectiveness for human development.

(2) *The qualitative method* is applied to assess the effectiveness and characteristics of Vietnam’s human development policies and to compare them with international experiences. The study conducts a general content analysis of key policy areas—education, healthcare, and social security—that constitute the main components of human development within UNDP’s theoretical framework. The study synthesizes

Vietnam's primary policy documents and action programs, combined with regional comparisons to clarify achievements, gaps, and factors affecting implementation effectiveness.

This approach not only describes changes in human development indicators but also analyzes policy performance within the goal–instrument–outcome framework, thereby identifying elements that require adjustment to enhance the quality and sustainability of future policies.

(3) *The analytical framework* is grounded in UNDP's human development theory, which regards human beings as both the means and the end of development. The integration of quantitative and qualitative approaches enables the study not only to identify trends in human development but also to empirically evaluate the effectiveness of Vietnam's human development policies relative to those of other countries in the region.

3. Results and Analysis

3.1. Theoretical and Practical Approaches to Human Development

In 1990, the *United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)* published the first *Human Development Report (HDR)*, initiated by Mahbub ul Haq¹ and featuring significant theoretical contributions from Amartya Sen, which marked a turning point by establishing human development as a formal research and policymaking framework. It asserted that human development is the process of expanding individuals' capabilities and choices, enabling them to lead long, healthy lives, gain access to education, and enjoy essential social conditions. *"Human development focuses on improving people's lives rather than assuming that economic growth will automatically lead to greater happiness for all. Income growth is seen as a means to development, not an end in itself"* (UNDP 1990a). Based on this principle, UNDP developed the *Human Development Index (HDI)* as a composite tool to measure a nation's development across three dimensions—health, knowledge, and income—thus providing a more comprehensive and sustainable picture of social progress.

Although the concept has evolved over decades, its core principle remains unchanged: people are a nation's true wealth, and human development—encompassing freedom, capability, and choice—is the ultimate goal of progress (UNDP 1990b). Therefore, the level of development is not solely reflected in GDP growth or per capita income but, more importantly, in whether everyone has the opportunity to improve their health, education, welfare, and living standards, as well as to exercise their capabilities, make life choices, and participate in decisions that affect their lives (UNDP 2012). However, if human development is understood as the expansion of opportunities and options, it has no absolute limit. The HDI, therefore, can only be considered a minimal measure—one that reflects people's ability to live long, healthy lives, learn, communicate, and engage in their communities, while ensuring basic conditions for a good life. For countries with high HDI scores, research and policy attention should extend to broader dimensions that profoundly affect the quality of human development.

In Vietnam, the view that *"human beings are the center of development"* has been consistently affirmed in national-level research programs since the 1990s (Pham, 2006, p.91). Vietnamese scholars emphasize that human development not only aims to meet basic needs but is also closely associated with freedom, choice, and individuals' ability to participate in the development process (Dang, 2023, p.11). As Pham (2006, p.93) noted, *"the true goal of development is to create an environment that allows people to enjoy a long, healthy, and creative life."*

Many recent studies also emphasize that human development should not be limited to satisfying basic material needs, but must also include expanding freedoms, choices, and individuals' capacity to participate in social development. In this perspective, human development is the process of enhancing human agency and autonomy in determining one's own life (Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics, 2021, p.67). Hence, according to Dang (2014, p. 35), a country's level of development cannot be measured solely by GDP growth or national income, but rather by the degree to which all citizens can realize their potential, make meaningful choices, and participate in decisions that affect their lives. This perspective is also shared in international assessments. Ms. Ramla Al Khalidi, Resident Representative of the UNDP in Vietnam, affirmed that the Vietnamese government has demonstrated a strong commitment to placing people at the center of its development strategy, aligning with the UN's

¹ Mahbub ul Haq (1934 -1998) was a Pakistani economist, former Minister of Finance of Pakistan, and the chief architect of the UNDP's Human Development Report (HDR).

orientation. According to her, “*This is at the core of the Sustainable Development Goals, based on the principle of leaving no one behind*”(UNDP, 2022)

The international community has recognized Vietnam’s remarkable achievements in expanding educational opportunities, improving the quality of healthcare, and reducing poverty. The World Bank has described Vietnam as one of the “*typical success stories in poverty reduction*”(World Bank, 2018). Likewise, UNESCO (2016) and UNICEF (2022, p. 7) reported significant progress in expanding access to and completion of universal education, especially at the primary level, where the completion rate has reached 98%, approaching complete universalization.

The proportion of investment in healthcare and education in Vietnam, as a share of GDP, is generally comparable to that of other countries in the region. In fact, Vietnam’s private spending on education and healthcare is even higher than that of neighboring countries. (UNDP, 2012, p.3)

However, alongside its achievements, the UNDP (2012) also warned that Vietnam’s human resources have not yet met the requirements of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, regional inequality remains significant, and Vietnam risks falling into the middle-income trap if it cannot sustainably improve educational outcomes and skill levels. “*Within the Asian region, Vietnam is rated fairly well in terms of overall progress toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, but maintaining that level of progress remains challenging*”(Ministry of Planning and Investment, 2023, p.23). In addition, the study *The Challenges of Population Aging for Vietnam* (2021) emphasized that the aging process in Vietnam is occurring rapidly and unevenly across population groups, while the health of the elderly has not improved proportionally. The majority still live in poverty, particularly in rural areas (Nguyen et al., 2021, p. 67). Furthermore, the study *Toward the Goal of Becoming a Developing Country with Modern Industry and Upper-Middle Income by 2030*, comparing Vietnam with other Southeast Asian nations, pointed out that:

Vietnam’s HDI, although high (above 0.7) and with life expectancy nearly reaching the 75-year target, remains unstable and unsustainable. Vietnam is still among the countries with the lowest HDI scores within the high-HDI group. In 2021, Vietnam ranked 115th out of 191 countries and territories, an improvement of only five places since 2015 (Tran et al., 2024, p. 67).

From both theoretical and practical perspectives, it is evident that human development serves as both the goal and the means of sustainable growth. For Vietnam, drawing on international perspectives and domestic experience provides a crucial scientific foundation for comparison, policy adjustment, and improvement in the new context.

3.2. Trends in Human Development in Vietnam: Analysis of HDI over Time and by Region

In Vietnam, the HDI has steadily improved since the beginning of the Doi Moi reforms in 1986. During 1990–2000, the index rose rapidly from 0.407 to 0.505; from 2000–2010, it increased more slowly, reaching 0.572; and by 2012, it attained 0.617—officially moving Vietnam out of the group of countries with low HDI (Ngo, 2012; UNDP, 2013).

This change is illustrated more clearly through comparative data between Vietnam and several East Asian and Southeast Asian countries from 1990 to 2012 (*Table 1*).

Table 1: HDI of Vietnam and Selected Countries in the Region, 1990–2012

	1990	2000	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Vietnam	0,407	0,505	0,54	0,547	0,554	0,56	0,566	0,572	0,593	0,617
Indonesia	0,458	0,500	0,561	0,568	0,580	0,588	0,593	0,600	0,671	0,629
Thailand	0,546	0,600	0,631	0,637	0,642	0,646	0,648	0,654	0,682	0,690
China	0,46	0,567	0,616	0,627	0,639	0,648	0,655	0,663	0,697	0,699

Source: Ngo Thang Loi (2012), UNDP (2011), and UNDP (2013)

The data show that Vietnam's HDI has improved steadily over the years. However, compared with other East and Southeast Asian countries, including China, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines, Vietnam's HDI remains lower. This reflects the challenge of enhancing growth quality and achieving sustainable human development.

During the 2016–2020 period, Vietnam's HDI increased from 0.682 to 0.706, enabling the country to transition from the medium to the high HDI group. *"Vietnam's ranking among countries and territories worldwide increased from 118th in 2018 to 117th in 2019"* (General Statistics Office 2021, p.25). The positive results achieved during 2016–2020 laid a solid foundation for Vietnam to continue improving its HDI in subsequent years.

Despite the difficulties caused by the two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2022, Vietnam rose two ranks in HDI (from 117th to 115th) and remained among the countries with high HDI, along with China, South Africa, Indonesia, and Brazil (Dang, 2023, p.17).

In 2023, Vietnam's HDI reached 0.766—placing it among countries with high human development—ranking 93rd out of 193 countries and territories (UNDP, 2025).

A regional comparison shows that in 2023, Vietnam's HDI (0.766) was higher than that of Cambodia (0.581), Laos (0.629), and Myanmar (0.585), but still lower than those of Thailand (0.800) and Malaysia (0.823). This gap reflects differences in the quality of higher education, access to advanced healthcare services, and income levels. Therefore, *"to continue raising HDI, Vietnam needs to address challenges related to inequality and to improve the quality of education and healthcare"* (General Statistics Office, 2023, p.35). Moreover, when adjusted for inequality, Vietnam's HDI (1990-2023) declines to 0.641, corresponding to a 16.3% loss—equal to the East Asian regional average—indicating that inequality in education, healthcare, and income remains a significant challenge (UNDP, 2025).

Vietnam's improvements in its HDI stem primarily from policies on universal basic education, investment in public health care, and the practical implementation of poverty-reduction programs. As a result, literacy rates, average life expectancy, and minimum living standards have all improved significantly. However, alongside these positive results, Vietnam's human development process still faces several notable limitations, including the relatively low quality of human resources to meet the demands of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, a slowing rate of HDI growth, and uneven regional development. These issues suggest that maintaining HDI growth must be accompanied by improvements in the quality of human development, rather than focusing solely on numerical increases in the index.

In summary, from a comparative perspective, Vietnam's progress in improving its HDI not only reflects significant achievements in expanding educational opportunities, healthcare, and poverty reduction but also highlights existing gaps relative to countries with higher levels of human development in the region. This calls for a reassessment of the effectiveness of current human development policies and the identification of necessary adjustments for the next phase. These findings also lay the groundwork for a deeper analysis of the effectiveness of Vietnam's human development policies in the following sections.

3.3. Human Development Policy in Vietnam: Evolution, Achievements, and Regional Comparison

Vietnam's human development policies have undergone profound changes over time, closely linked with its political, economic, and international integration contexts. They can be divided into two main periods: *Renovation and Opening* (1986-2000) and *Integration and Sustainable Development* (2000-2025).

Period 1986–2000: Renovation and Opening

In 1986, Vietnam initiated a comprehensive renovation process, transitioning from a centrally planned economy to a socialist-oriented market economy. This turning point created a new environment and development opportunities, in which human development policies were placed at the center of national reform efforts. Through poverty eradication programs, universal primary education policies, the expansion of grassroots healthcare, and the mobilization of socialized resources, living conditions for the population improved markedly.

Research results indicate that Vietnam's food-poverty rate declined substantially from 55.0% in 1990 to 11.3% in 2000 (General Statistics Office, 2020). In education, Vietnam also recorded significant

progress: the education index in 1999 ranked 92nd out of 174 countries, contributing to an improvement in the Human Development Index ranking—from 122nd out of 174 countries in 1995 to 110th in 1999—surpassing many countries in the region, such as India, Pakistan, Myanmar, and Bangladesh (General Statistics Office, 2020). By 2000, approximately 90% of 14-year-olds had completed primary school, and Vietnam officially achieved the goal of universal literacy and primary education nationwide. In the health sector, the number of doctors per 10,000 inhabitants increased from 3.6 in 1990 to 4.9 in 1999, reflecting efforts to expand access to basic healthcare services (General Statistics Office, 2020).

It can be concluded that during the 1986–2000 period, Vietnam made significant progress in human development policies, particularly in poverty reduction, universal education, and the expansion of primary healthcare. These achievements helped Vietnam rise to the group of countries with medium to reasonably high levels of human development in the region (UNDP, 1999). Compared with Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia, Vietnam still lags in per capita income and public service quality; however, it stands out for its rapid poverty reduction and universal basic education. Compared to more advanced East Asian economies, such as South Korea and Taiwan, significant gaps in education quality, healthcare, and living standards persisted. This demonstrates that, while Vietnam had established a solid foundation for integration, it still needed to continue improving the quality of its human resources and to narrow the gap with more developed countries in the region.

Period 2000–2025: Integration and Sustainable Development

Since 2000, amid globalization and deep international integration, Vietnam's human development policies have shifted toward a multidimensional approach, emphasizing social welfare, gender equality, higher education, and access to specialized healthcare services. The country's development goals during this period have been aligned with global initiatives, including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

In education, the average years of schooling among Vietnamese citizens have steadily increased, reaching 8.2 in 2018. However, regional comparisons indicate that Vietnam still lags behind several more developed countries. Specifically, in 2018, the average years of schooling in Malaysia was 10.2 years, the Philippines 9.4 years, Singapore 11.5 years, and South Korea 12.2 years (UNDP, 2019, pp.301-303).

Vietnam has also made significant progress in narrowing gender inequality in education: in 2019, the average years of schooling for women reached 8.6 years, nearly equal to that of men (9.4 years) (General Statistics Office, 2021). Alongside this, the government has implemented several specific policies to expand educational opportunities, such as tuition fee exemptions for lower secondary students in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas, beginning in the 2022–2023 school year, and extending this policy to five-year-old preschool children in the 2024–2025 school year. These measures demonstrate Vietnam's commitment to developing an inclusive education system that prioritizes equal opportunities for all.

Regional comparisons highlight Vietnam's strengths in universal basic education and in reducing the gender gap. In contrast, countries such as Singapore and Malaysia place greater emphasis on higher education and the development of a highly skilled workforce. Each nation's priorities align with its development context: Vietnam has focused on establishing a solid foundation for universal education and social welfare, thereby laying the groundwork for progressively improving the quality of higher education and scientific research in subsequent stages of development.

In the healthcare sector, universal health coverage has undergone significant strengthening over the past two decades. By 2020, the proportion of the population covered by health insurance had reached 90.7%, surpassing the regional average for Southeast Asia (Nguyen, 2022). In 2022, the state budget allocated

approximately VND 23 trillion to implement comprehensive social support policies, including health insurance subsidies, tuition waivers and reductions, learning cost support, electricity bill assistance, legal aid, vocational training and job placement programs, as well as housing, clean water, sanitation, and information access for poverty reduction (Ministry of Planning and Investment, 2023, p.26)

Population and housing census data indicate that the average life expectancy of Vietnamese citizens rose steadily from 73.4 years in 2016 to 73.7 years (2020) (General Statistics Office, 2021). These

statistics reflect notable progress in public health care, particularly at the grassroots level, and demonstrate that Vietnam has made significant advances in expanding health insurance coverage and strengthening its primary health care network. A distinctive feature of Vietnam's health policy is not only its high coverage rate but also its commitment to building an equitable and accessible healthcare system that ensures access to services for all citizens, including vulnerable groups in remote and disadvantaged areas. Nevertheless, Vietnam still faces considerable challenges in service quality, professional capacity, and infrastructure relative to more developed countries in the region. Despite these limitations, the emphasis on universal healthcare has laid a strong foundation for social security and paved the way for future improvements.

Alongside progress in education and healthcare, the consistent and effective implementation of poverty reduction policies in Vietnam has yielded remarkable results, contributing to the narrowing of social inequality and an improvement in the overall quality of life. According to Dang (2023, p. 16), poverty in Vietnam has shifted from being widespread to localized, mainly concentrated in mountainous and particularly disadvantaged areas. Vietnam is among the first countries in the region to have achieved the Millennium Development Goal of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, with poverty reduction levels considered both "*strong and impressive*" by national and international standards. Recent data from the General Statistics Office (2021–2023) indicate that the multidimensional poverty rate decreased from 4.2% in 2022 to 3.4% in 2023, a decline of 0.8 percentage points in just one year (General Statistics Office 2023, p.36). Notably, this downward trend occurred consistently across urban, rural, and key economic regions, reflecting the inclusiveness and effectiveness of current poverty reduction policies. Vietnam's poverty reduction strategy has achieved significant progress in both speed and coverage, making the country one of the region's success stories in implementing the Millennium Development Goals. Compared to many Southeast Asian nations, Vietnam stands out for its inclusive approach and integration of poverty reduction with human development. This achievement demonstrates that Vietnam's poverty reduction policy not only ensures social welfare but also promotes equality and human development amid growing regional integration.

Despite these significant achievements, Vietnam's human development policy still faces several limitations that must be addressed to achieve the average level of East and Southeast Asia. Disparities in the quality of public services, regional inequality, and challenges arising from population aging are becoming pressing issues for the next stage of development. According to the General Statistics Office, poverty reduction rates across regions remain uneven and unsustainable; the income gap between population groups remains wide, especially in the Northern Midlands and the Central Highlands (General Statistics Office, 2023, p. 27). According to the Ministry of Planning and Investment (2023, p. 27), some region-specific policies are still not well aligned with the socioeconomic characteristics of ethnic minority areas, leading to limited effectiveness, while investments in poverty reduction remain below actual needs.

Also, as noted by the General Statistics Office (2023, p.39) in education and human resource development—the cornerstone of human development—Vietnam still lags behind many Southeast Asian countries in terms of quality and competitiveness. Education, science, and technology have yet to become key drivers of growth. Data from the Ministry of Planning and Investment (2023, p.46) shows as of 2023, only 27.2% of workers aged 15 and older held degrees or certificates, representing a slight increase from 2021 but still a relatively low proportion. Workforce training programs remain inadequate to meet the demands of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, and vocational training in rural areas has not yet achieved uniform effectiveness.

At the same time, demographic and social security challenges are intensifying.

Population aging has led to increased and more complex healthcare needs among older adults, along with rising medical costs. Gender imbalance at birth remains high, with the sex ratio at birth reaching 111.8 boys per 100 girls in 2023, up from 111.6 in 2022 (General Statistics Office, 2023, p.40).

This reality underscores that Vietnam faces new structural challenges in human development, necessitating a comparative analysis and reference to regional experiences to understand its current position and development gaps better. Comparing key indicators in education, healthcare, and poverty

reduction between Vietnam and selected East and Southeast Asian countries, such as Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea, and China, helps clarify this point (*Table 2*).

Table 2. Comparison of Basic Human Development Indicators between Vietnam and Selected East & Southeast Asian Countries (2021–2023)

Field	Vietnam	Thailand	Malaysia	Singapore	South Korea	China
Education (Expected Years of Schooling, 2023) ¹	15,5 years	15,4 years	12,7 years	16,7 years	16,6 years	15,5 years
Education (PISA Math Score, 2018) ²	496	419	440	569 (world top)	526 (above OECD avg.)	591 (Asia top)
Health (Life Expectancy, 2021 - WHO) ³	73,8 years	75,3 years	72,8 years	83,9 years	83,8 years	77,6 years
Poverty Rate (2020 - ADB) ⁴	2.75%	8.00%	0.40%	~ 0% ²	~ 0% ³	0.60%
Key Strengths	Rapid poverty reduction, universal basic education, and broad health insurance coverage	Developed healthcare services and medical tourism	Higher education and a flexible labor market	World-class education and healthcare, high-quality human capital	Strong R&D and innovation, comprehensive human development	Large population, impressive poverty reduction, high PISA performance
Main Limitations	Limited higher education and advanced healthcare quality; regional inequality	Rapid aging, income inequality	Urban–rural and ethnic disparities	High living costs, income inequality	Aging pressure, social inequality	Significant regional gaps, population pressure

Source: *Our World in Data* (2025)¹, UNDP (2023), OECD (2018)², WHO (2021)³, ADB (2020)⁴.

This comparative analysis reveals that Vietnam stands out for its rapid poverty reduction, universal basic education, and extensive health insurance coverage, thereby establishing a stable social foundation. However, compared with countries such as Singapore, South Korea, and Malaysia, Vietnam still lags in higher education development, human resource competitiveness, and investment in specialized healthcare. This suggests that Vietnam's human development policy exhibits significant

² Highly developed country, multidimensional poverty rate close to 0%.

³ Not applicable, rate close to 0%

strengths in inclusiveness and social equity, but requires greater depth to meet regional and international standards.

Overall, Vietnam has successfully ensured broad access to education, healthcare, and social welfare services. Yet, to enhance the quality of human development, future policies should place greater emphasis on improving higher education, developing high-quality human resources, strengthening specialized healthcare systems, and further narrowing regional disparities. These differences highlight the need for a new policy orientation that ensures comprehensive, sustainable, and internationally comparable human development.

4. Discussion: Achievements, Limitations, and Emerging Issues in Human Development in Vietnam

The research findings show that Vietnam has achieved remarkable progress in human development since 1986, particularly in basic education, public health, and poverty reduction. The Human Development Index (HDI) has maintained a steady upward trend, and according to the UNDP, Vietnam is *"among the leading low-income developing countries committed to rapid and sustainable poverty reduction"* (UNDP, 2023). This success reflects the effectiveness of the strategy that considers human beings both the goal and the driving force of development. Compared with other East and Southeast Asian countries, Vietnam has outperformed many nations with similar starting points, thereby confirming the inclusive and equity-oriented nature of its human development policies.

However, it is worth noting that quantitative indicators, such as the HDI, do not fully capture the quality of human development. For example, while literacy rates and basic education coverage are high, the quality of higher education and vocational training remains limited. It does not yet meet the demands of a knowledge-based economy. Similarly, although the public healthcare network has expanded, upper-tier hospitals remain overloaded, and significant disparities persist between the quality of healthcare in urban and rural areas. This calls for fairer resource allocation and the promotion of digital health to bridge the gaps.

Another noteworthy point is that Vietnam's human development policies have often been reactive rather than grounded in long-term forecasting and planning. Challenges such as population aging, climate change, and the need to enhance workforce quality in the Fourth Industrial Revolution have exposed this limitation. Many studies warn that without breakthrough policies, Vietnam could fall into the *"middle-income trap"* (World Bank 2020, UNDP 2023). Therefore, one of the key contributions of this study is to emphasize the urgency of a proactive approach that links human development with digital transformation, green growth, and global integration as crucial conditions for sustainability and competitiveness.

The study also acknowledges certain limitations. First, the data sources primarily rely on macro-level indicators and international reports, which do not fully capture micro-level differences across population groups. Second, the international comparison is confined mainly to ASEAN and East Asia, excluding other developing regions such as Africa and Latin America, thereby limiting the generalizability of the findings. These limitations suggest future research directions, including the incorporation of micro-level empirical data and an expansion of the comparative scope to enhance policy applicability.

In summary, the discussion reveals that while Vietnam has made significant strides in human development, it still faces major challenges in improving the quality of its human resources, achieving social equity, and aligning its long-term policies. These findings provide an essential foundation for proposing future directions and policy recommendations.

5. Conclusion and Policy Directions for Human Development in Vietnam (2025–2030)

Over nearly four decades, Vietnam has achieved significant progress in human development, as reflected in the continuous improvement of its HDI, expanded access to education and healthcare, and enhanced quality of human capital. Policies on poverty reduction, regional development, and social equity have improved citizens' welfare, particularly for vulnerable groups, forming a solid foundation for the next stage of development.

However, significant challenges remain: regional development gaps persist; disparities in the quality of education and training persist; digital skills and creativity among workers remain limited; and climate

change, population aging, and the demand for sustainable development exert increasing pressure on human development policies.

In the 2025–2030 period, Vietnam's human development policy should be guided by the following pillars:

First, enhancing human resource quality through science, technology, and innovation. Policies should prioritize the development of digital skills, creativity, and adaptability to strengthen competitiveness amid the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

Second, reforming education and healthcare systems toward modernity, equity, and efficiency. In addition to maintaining universal basic education, more attention should be given to higher education, vocational training, and the development of a high-quality workforce. In healthcare, expanding specialized medical services, improving the quality of lower-tier hospitals, and promoting digital health will enhance overall social welfare.

Third, promoting social equity and narrowing regional disparities. Policies should prioritize vulnerable groups, ethnic minorities, and disadvantaged regions by comprehensively implementing national target programs for multidimensional poverty reduction, rural development, and mountainous areas.

Fourth, linking human development with green growth and climate resilience. This ensures a healthy living environment for current and future generations, thereby laying the foundation for sustainable socioeconomic development.

Fifth, strengthening institutional capacity and administrative reform. Enhancing state governance, simplifying administrative procedures, and increasing transparency are crucial to ensuring the effective and synchronized implementation of human development policies.

The outlook for human development in Vietnam during 2025–2030 remains positive, with opportunities to further improve the HDI, expand equitable access to social opportunities, and establish a strong foundation for sustainable socioeconomic growth approaching that of developed countries in the region. In an era of rapid global change, human development is not only an intrinsic goal but also a strategic foundation for stability and international integration. With its unique achievements and challenges, Vietnam can offer valuable lessons for other developing nations while reaffirming that human beings must remain at the center of every development strategy.

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