

# Social Protection Policy for Vietnamese Families

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**Abstract:** The study of social protection in the context of Vietnam's modernisation and international integration requires that attention be paid to social protection policies for Vietnamese families. However, there are currently few social protection policies targeting families specifically, in other words, policies that regard families as the beneficiary or subject of intervention. Meanwhile, various social protection policies exist for specific subjects and members of the family. This reflects the shortage of social protection policies for families today.

**Keywords:** Social protection, family, social protection policy, Vietnam.

**Subject classification:** Sociology

## 1. Introduction

The social protection system is based on the risk management model consisting of three strategies: risk prevention, risk mitigation, and risk remedy. The system is the full set of State policies aimed at helping individuals, families and social groups to manage risks, uncertainties, and supporting the poorest and most vulnerable in the society. A proper social protection system will contribute significantly to the development of a nation. Moreover, through social protection policies, the State can also redistribute income and services to vulnerable social groups and low-income families, helping eradicate poverty and narrow the gap of social inequality. Social

protection is an important component in a nation's social programmes – it helps generate social stability, bridge the poor-rich divide, regulate the social stratification process, and to create a general consensus between social segments and population groups in the process of development. Thus, social protection policies have deep economic, social and also humanity aspects.

There is broad consensus that a properly functioning social protection system is reflected in the capacity and measures that can safeguard individuals and social groups from risks and damage caused by natural disasters, or unfavourable socio-economic impacts, ensuring a minimum living standard and livelihood for the people involved. Social protection is a nation's

fundamental social policy meant to perform the functions of preventing, mitigating and remedying risks, ensuring income security and livelihood for the people. Vietnam's social protection strategy for the 2011-2020 period has specified: "Social protection is the assurance that the society provides to all members of society through the implementation of mechanisms, policies and measures addressing risks that can lead to a reduction in or loss of livelihood" [5]. This article will identify the research gaps in social protection for families, based on which it will propose policy measures that can help enhance family welfare and suggest a suitable approach to address this pressing research topic.

## **2. Ensuring social protection for families**

### *2.1. Social protection for families*

Many international sociology studies have pointed out the role of the family as a social safety net for its family members. Cherlin [7] studied the mutual support that is provided within the family, particularly between parents and children. Grown-up children will provide support to their parents even though, in general, children are also taken care of by their parents. According to the author, this reciprocal relationship illustrates the agreement of "hidden subsidisation" within the family, between parents and the children. However, Cherlin also noted that the powerful industrialisation process that took place in Western Europe late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century pulled family members, foremost the male and then female, away from their family.

Events such as illnesses, accidents, loss of employment or livelihood could lead households and members to hardships, and affect their lives in a negative manner. As early as in the 1950s, Parson and Bales [10] looked into the transition from the security and caring functions of the traditional family to more professional social institutions such as schools, hospitals, nursing homes, childcare centres, etc. The transition, if properly carried out, will help lessen the burden placed on families and enable this institution to handle other functions better. This functional approach continues to influence family studies in Vietnam today.

In oriental societies, family remains a traditional social institution which plays an important role in caring for and ensuring the lives of family members. The Vietnamese people rely on family ties and their relatives when seeking for help [3]. Not only bound by law, this is also a matter of responsibility, duty and obligation between the husband and the wife, between parents and their children, responsibility of the adult towards the children, of the healthy towards the weak and those with disabilities, of the young towards the elderly, of the labour-competent and bread-earners towards the labour-incompetent and those without income in the family [4].

When confronted with challenges and hardships of life, the primary source of support usually comes from one's family members, and extended further to relatives, friends, the community and local authority. The State provides social welfare through the distribution and re-distribution of resources, and executes such policies through subsidies and social services for the

vulnerable groups in the society. Therefore, in places where the family can properly support its members who are unable to care for themselves, the burden on social protection will be reduced. The relationship between the family, the State, and social protection is quite complex, as these are not only complementary to but also dependent on one another. Changes to the family as an institution will produce impacts on the security of the members and on social stability at large. The functioning of the social protection system also has direct influence on families, especially with respect to the distribution of labour, tending for the members, particularly the children and elderly. The elderly and the children also contribute a certain degree to the welfare of other family members. This mechanism is what helps the social protection of the family remain stable and be passed on from one generation to the next.

Nevertheless, as time goes by, the traditional family has been affected and weakened by the industrialisation and urbanisation process. This is illustrated via the following facts: 1) an increasing number of youngsters are leaving rural areas for urban cities to study and seek employment opportunities, and the majority of them tend to not go back; 2) the farming area is increasingly diminished, driving more and more persons out of work; 3) industrialisation has fostered migration flows within the country and abroad, which raised the share of incomplete families and reduced the size of families; 4) the rising popularity of nuclear families has led to the common situation of parents working far from home and leaving their children

behind with the grandparents. As a result, the family, which is the traditional social safety net, is put at risk under the impacts of socio-economic and demographic changes [6], [10].

The above-mentioned factors are now a challenge to the family's social protection and requires for thorough research. The traditional family-oriented social protection system is having its functions and role put at risk, while modern social protection institutions are not yet established, synchronised or meeting the demand of society. Reinforcing the role of the family in ensuring social protection for the members is necessary, while reorientation is also much needed [1]. One of the possible measures is to channel social protection investments from individuals to households, and to give due consideration to the role of the community, particularly when it comes to individuals who are unable to improve their situation or living conditions. It has been observed in practice that in places where the family and community can handle social protection activities properly, the burden on social welfare is relieved.

Recently, policy discussions have been focused on how families can ensure its own social protection through risk prevention, risk adaptation and remedy. This showcases the important role of the family in social protection. However, it should also be noted of the limitations of the "self-security" approach due to the overburden of time and resources on families in the modern life. Female members are required to handle housework, to go to work and also to take care of other family members. The economic function and the duty to meet the emotional

demands are emphasised in modern families, however, welfare and love is not equally shared. There is a constant risk of broken families, of divorce resulting from the profound cause of gender inequality, generation conflicts, economic disputes and other conflicts in daily marriage life. The State intervention through regulations and policies is necessary as families cannot ensure self-security and handle such circumstances themselves.

## *2.2. Social protection policies for families*

Social protection studies in the context of modernisation and international integration requires that due attention be paid to social issues as well as social protection realities at the family level. However, at present, there are just a few social protection policies targeting families specifically (i.e. covering the entire family, regarding the family as the beneficiary or subject of intervention). Apart from a few policies targeting families who rendered the service to the revolution, poor households, ethnic minority households, households in especially difficult conditions, such as policies of poverty alleviation, providing loans, creating jobs, policies of healthcare, enhancing livelihoods for selected groups, the majority of existing social protection policies are targeting individual members. Examples include policies assisting the elderly, free-of-charge medical examination for children under six years old, policies assisting people with disabilities, those living with HIV-AIDS, single mothers, etc. The implementation of policies assisting selected groups of

individuals has helped address the overall hardships of families, however, if carried out at the household level, they would be more suitable and could better ensure social cohesion and inclusion.

The majority of social protection policies in Vietnam are not based on a family-oriented approach. Social protection pillars such as insurance and employment are mainly related to individual members. Meanwhile, various areas of social assistance such as caring for the elderly, children, the addicted, the disabled, etc. can be approached effectively from a family angle. Multi-dimensional criteria for poverty currently implemented nationwide such as education, access to information, healthcare, housing, clean water, sanitation, etc. are determined very unreasonably and probably inefficiently on an individual basis. Fragmenting the already scarce resource will further diminish the effectiveness of assistance. This presents the need to conduct further research and adjust social protection policy intervention for families, with family as the target group.

Social protection policies for families are necessary. However, they should be reviewed and assessed in relation to the State as the issuing authority of social policies and mechanisms. When the demand for social protection goes beyond the capacity of families, the intervention and assistance from the State are most needed. However, the question is to what extent the State intervention should be, which social protection policies should be prioritised, and which family, member or component they should focus on. And, which intervention policies should the State

enact to promote the role of the family in ensuring social protection for the members? These questions can hardly be answered through the existing research base, and even more difficult to answer correctly in the absence of scientific research designed with suitable approaches and methodologies.

### 3. Research approach for social protection for families

Researching social protection and social protection policies for families requires for different methodologies and approaches, which can be used flexibly and properly with the subjects and topics of study. Studies on social protection for families are still limited, and lack of a systematic

approach. Below are some key research approaches that can be considered and referred to for future studies on the issue.

#### - Systematic approach

Many parties are involved in social protection assurance, with the family playing an important role, particularly in the relation with the State. These parties have an interactive relationship with one another, complementing one another, and each of them represents a necessary condition for ensuring the sustainable operation and development of the social protection system. The interdependent relationship among the involved parties is illustrated in Ochiai Emiko's "Care Diamonds" diagram (2009) on the four care entities in a complete system (Figure 1).

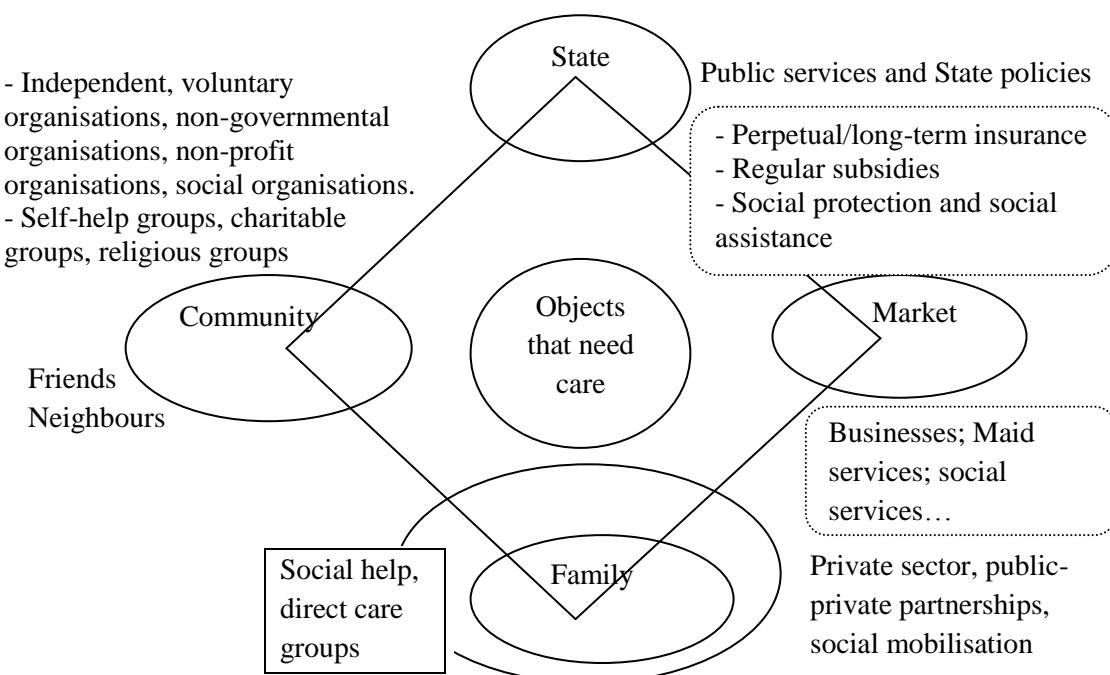


Figure 1. Care Diamonds [9]

With this approach, the relationship tackles families in interaction with the remaining entities, especially with the State and the market. Policies on family welfare in Vietnam remain so far unbalanced, lacking focus on the entities, while giving more emphasis on the role of the State. From a broader perspective of the social protection system for families, there are definitely gaps and limitations that need to be addressed.

According to this approach, the family and community are equally important entities in social welfare and care. Nevertheless, in recent years, there has been some progress in the participation of businesses and the market through charitable activities that support the less fortunate, though the incomplete legal framework for social charity has yet been improved [2].

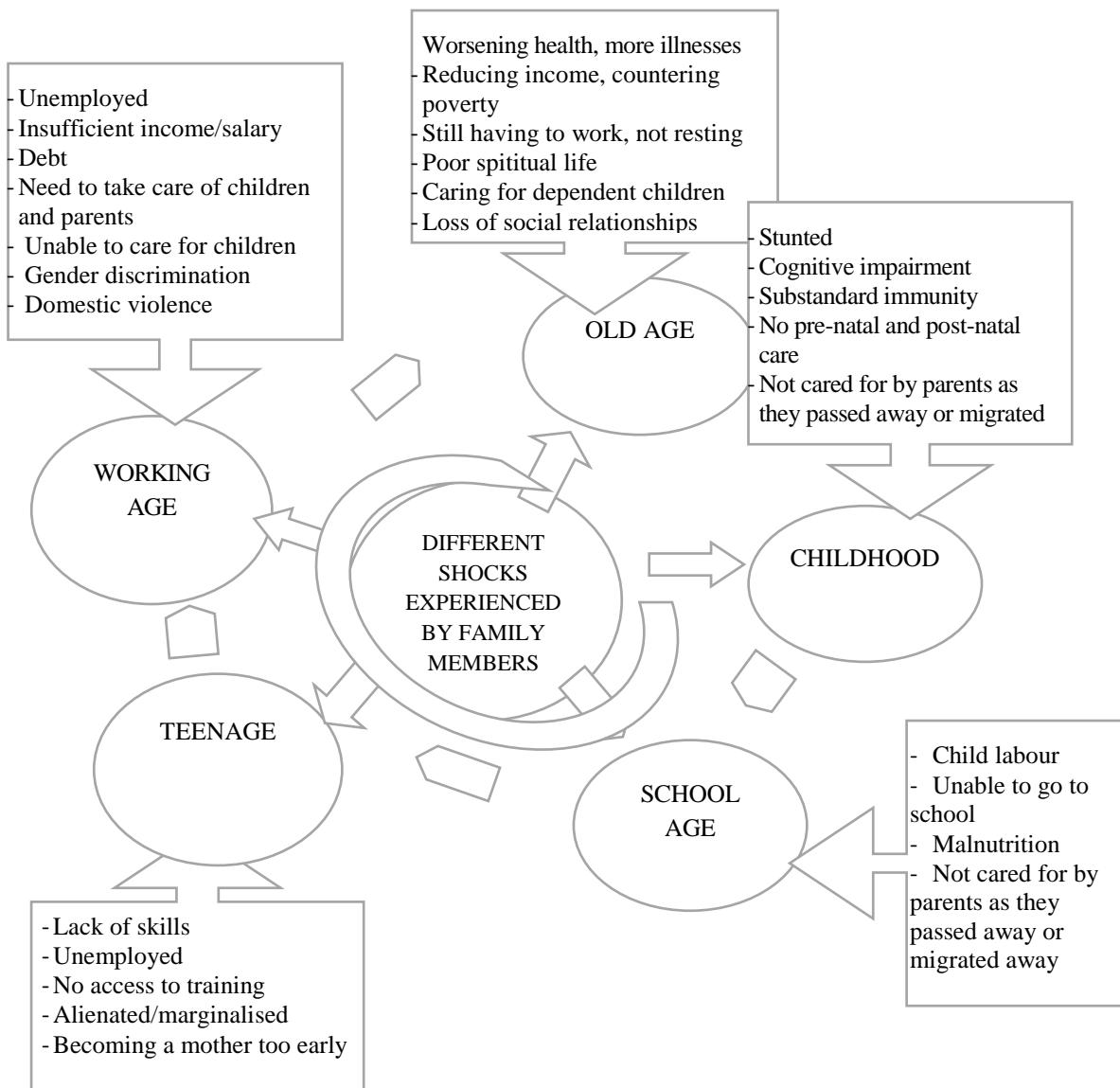


Figure 2: Social Protection Model that is Based on Family Life Cycle [1]

*- Family life cycle approach*

Besides the systematic approach mentioned above, research studies on social protection for families can use the family life cycle approach (Figure 2), which is linked to the risks faced by members during each stage in the family life cycle. The term “cycle” indicates the changing stages that families go through with time, which illustrates motion and continuity.

Usually, the development stages of a family are marked by key life events of members such as getting married, giving birth, becoming an adult, going to school, getting a job which marks a child’s separation from the family. The number of members in the family changes and together they go through risks, life events and support one another to overcome the obstacles and challenges that life has to offer. The social protection needs of the family not only change with the changing life stages of the members, but also depend on fluctuations in the number of family members and the ties among them.

*- Cultural approach*

As the diversity of Vietnamese families is associated with the rich national cultural identity, customs, area-specific lifestyles, social life, research studies need to take into account the cultural aspect when assessing the status and arguing for the objectives, orientation, solutions and policy recommendations. The cultural approach takes into consideration the cultural diversity of the family and community, as well as the vast differences in the level of socio-economic development among regions today. Furthermore, the rising number of multicultural families in the country nowadays also calls for the

adoption of the cultural approach in research, now more than ever.

*- Inter-sectoral, cross-sectoral approach*

Social protection components have both interactive relationships with one another, and relations with other external aspects such as economic and social ones, and those of population, health, psychology, etc. The development (or weakening) of each area (factor) will affect other factors (as a cause-effect relationship or a parallel evolution). Although the sociological approach is common and highly effective in family studies and studies on social protection for families, the anthropological and ethnographic approaches help study the traditional social protection practices of Vietnamese people. Meanwhile, economics helps estimate and explain quantitative statistical models on the impacts of social protection policies on families as well as determine the factors exerting impacts on family welfare. Population and health studies allow us to assess and classify the family’s life cycle associated with social protection in each stage of life. Recently, transdisciplinarity has eliminated all the borderlines among specialties, with the participation of parties outside the science community in each research stage in order to formulate coherent and feasible policy measures for practical social protection issues.

*- Comparative approach*

The comparison of change and policy orientation among different development stages and periods in Vietnam helps provide more in-depth, objective and clearer analysis, assessment and recommendations for policy solutions. Social protection policies (on insurance, public service, wage,

subsidies, etc.) for families need to be identified, assessed and analysed with their limitations and the causes leading to such limitations. Furthermore, comparative studies can be conducted on different family types or residential areas, based on which suitable policies are to be formulated and proposed. Social protection policies for families cannot be “one-size-fits-all” that can be applied to any family in any residential area.

#### 4. Conclusion

Although Vietnam's social protection system has gradually broadened its scope, beneficiaries and benefit levels, the system has not yet developed coherently, nor has it succeeded to meet the demands of the society. Various studies revealed that the actual coverage of the social protection network is still low, and access to it by groups of residents in selected programmes and projects remains limited. Despite the large number of policies promulgated, they seem to lack coherence, consistency and linkage, and have failed to use the resources available in an efficient manner, or to ensure sustainability. One of the causes leading to this is the fact that existing social protection policies are more focused on individuals, not on the family, as a key institution in social protection for the members.

Under the impact of industrialisation, modernisation and international integration, as well as amid the context of rapidly falling birth rates, rising migration – urbanisation, Vietnamese families are not only shrinking in size, but the relationship among generations and family members is

also loosening. The declining conventional function of the family in caring for and protecting the members are pointing to policy challenges on how to ensure social protection for the family today. The pressure is on social service and assistance, on how to maintain a minimum income level for families, to take care of the elderly who now represent the fastest growing demographic group in Vietnam.

Moving forward to the 2017-2020 period, the need to complete social protection policies has become more pressing than ever, as part of the goal to achieve rapid and sustainable development. Research studies need to identify and understand thoroughly the issues related to social protection for families, propose suitable policy measures that can help foster the effectiveness, coverage and completeness of social protection policies for Vietnamese families, and, at the same time, enhance the sustainability of this important social institution. The aim of social protection policies for families should be to serve directly the development needs of the family and its members, and thus to help with socio-political stability. With that in mind, this article shares some initial thoughts and lessons, puts forward some suitable research approach, and helps open up a new perspective on social protection policies for families in the context of industrialisation, modernisation and international integration in Vietnam.

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