

DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION BETWEEN VIETNAM AND EUROPEAN UNION (1990 - PRESENT)

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Abstract. The article clarifies the modifications in the foundational principles of design, program scope, collaborative development initiatives, and mutual engagement, underscoring Vietnam's proactive and independent role in accommodating the European Union's (EU) development cooperation programs and projects. In doing so, the authors aim to contribute to ongoing discussions and assessments regarding the nature of contemporary development cooperation policies implemented in developing nations like Vietnam. The research demonstrates that the adaptations in the EU's development cooperation policies have been tailored to align with Vietnam's economic and social development strategic goals and to address its specific requirements. Furthermore, the donor-recipient relationship between Vietnam and the EU has demonstrated that the recipient government is increasingly active in the foreign aid allocation process.

Keywords: Development cooperation, aid, donor, the European Union, Vietnam.

1. Introduction

After the Cold War, the term of development cooperation has been increasingly prevalent in international relations. In this context, development cooperation carries a similar meaning to “development assistance”, and in its narrowest sense, it refers specifically to financial flows through ODA. However, in practice, development cooperation goes beyond ODA and does not solely encompass Financial Flows for Development (FFD), International Public Finance (IPF), or Total Official Support for Development (TOSD) [1]. Development cooperation sometimes includes financial streams such as remittances or foreign direct investment. It is challenging to fully quantify the scope of development cooperation, but it can be understood most broadly as external support aimed at assisting countries in achieving their economic and social development goals. Therefore, while development cooperation is not the sole determinant of economic and social success for each country, it is an essential source of funding for developing countries. After the end of the Cold War, amid global context changes, there have been significant transformations in development cooperation relationships [2]. With the consensus

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of its member states, the European Union (EU) has become a leading international donor for developing countries like Vietnam. Despite the coexistence of EU and member state development cooperation policies towards Vietnam, this article only focuses on the EU as the subject in the context of development cooperation with Vietnam.

Since the comprehensive economic reforms initiated in 1986, Vietnam has sought to expand diplomatic relations globally and leverage external resources to accelerate the realization of its socio-economic development goals. Simultaneously, the EU has deemed development assistance a linchpin of its foreign policy post-Cold War, with a commitment to alleviating extreme poverty and promoting sustainable development in developing countries like Vietnam. Consequently, the cooperative development partnership between Vietnam and the EU has made significant progress. This exploration and analysis of the true nature of development cooperation between the two entities unveil a multifaceted tableau, revealing the intricate interplay between donor and recipient nations. Furthermore, it contributes to enhancing development cooperation between Vietnam and the EU.

The year 1990 is seen as an opportune time to start building trust and cooperation between Vietnam and the EU. For Vietnam, the country's renewal efforts had begun to yield initial results, and it actively pursued an open and integration-oriented foreign policy. For the EU, the year 1990, following the fall of the Berlin Wall (November 9, 1989) and the reunification of Germany (October 3, 1990), marked the end of the European division that had persisted during the Cold War. This historical context became a catalyst for the establishment of official diplomatic relations between Vietnam and the European Union. Although the Vietnam-EU relationship has been studied from various perspectives, the development cooperation relationship between Vietnam and the EU is still a relatively new issue, both domestically and internationally, particularly in a historical approach. Moreover, a comprehensive examination of the full scope of the development cooperation has not yet been undertaken [3], [4]. Some studies only mention the legal framework of the Vietnam-EU development cooperation with a focus on analyzing the situation of Official Development Assistance (ODA) and the lingering issues in ODA disbursement delays [5]. In practice, ODA assistance policies often do not fully align with development cooperation policies, as ODA assistance typically only constitutes a portion of development support. Vietnam is regarded as the “aid darling of the EU” [6].

The paper provides a historical evolution of the development cooperation between Vietnam and the EU from 1990 to the present. The authors argue that Vietnam's economic and social development strategies, including its Social-Economic Development Plans and Socio-Economic Development Strategies, form the basis for the EU's adjustments in shaping the content of development cooperation and designing programs and projects. Through development cooperation, the EU has strived to disseminate its values to the country, but Vietnam has shown agency in receiving and conducting development aid programs from the EU. In doing so, Vietnam has been identified as a good aid recipient or as “a ‘best practice’ example of how a government can manage external aid and own its development” [7, p. 1]. Vietnam's approach highlights the changing position of recipient countries in the current global context.

2. Content

2.1. Promoting humanitarian issues in the period of 1990-1995

The first five years following the establishment of official diplomatic relations is considered as an 'exploratory' phase in the relationship between Vietnam and the EU. The initial focus of cooperation between the two parties was on the humanitarian aspect, specifically the repatriation assistance program for Vietnamese refugees. The European Commission stated that the international issue of reintegration for boat people in Vietnam was both a humanitarian and developmental concern. The European Community International Programme (ECIP), in collaboration with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, provided support for the repatriation and reintegration of Vietnamese individuals. This effort closely coordinated with Vietnam's Ministry of Home Affairs and the Ministry of Labor, War Invalids, and Social Affairs. As part of this program, the EU funded a repatriation and reintegration program for Vietnamese refugees, amounting to a total of up to 45 million euros [8, p.86]. The program was implemented in 18 provinces and cities across Vietnam, covering various aspects such as repatriation, employment support, community integration, and contributing to poverty reduction in localities throughout Vietnam. By October 1992, an estimated 30,000 Vietnamese refugees had voluntarily returned home [8, p.86].

Apart from the humanitarian assistance program directed at Vietnamese refugees and boat people from 1990 to 1995, Vietnam and the EU had not yet established a legal framework or defined the specific objectives and areas of their collaborative development efforts. According to the EU's report, the EU provided 110 million euros in non-repayable aid to Vietnam for humanitarian purposes between 1989 and 1996 [9, p.9]. The outcomes of the repatriation program targeting Vietnamese refugees constituted the initial foundation for the development of cooperation between the two sides, fostering the establishment of trust and mutual understanding. Subsequently, the EU's development assistance programs for Vietnam were strategically aligned with Vietnam's top socio-economic development priorities.

2.2. Promoting Millennium Development Goals of hunger eradication and poverty reduction, international economic integration in the period of 1995-2010

The year 1995 marked a significant milestone in Vietnam's diplomatic relations as the country officially lifted its constraints and embargoes. This provided greater opportunities for attracting investment and development assistance to the country. Vietnam formulated both the Socio-Economic Development Plan (1996-2000) and the Socio-Economic Development Strategy (2001-2010). Vietnam's development objectives focused on strategies for eradicating hunger and reducing poverty, achieving the Millennium Development Goals, and promoting international integration. Specifically, the Socio-Economic Development Strategy (2001-2010) outlined an overarching goal to elevate the nation from underdevelopment, significantly improve living standards, and establish the groundwork for Vietnam to become a modern, industrialized nation by 2020. This involved strengthening human resources, scientific and technological capacity, infrastructure, economic potential, national defense, and security. It also aimed to

establish a socialist-oriented market economy and elevate Vietnam's international standing [10].

The socio-economic development objectives of Vietnam served as the foundation for the adjustment of the EU's development cooperation policies. The scope of development cooperation between the two parties was also enshrined as a provision (Article 9) within the Framework Agreement on Cooperation concluded in 1995 between Vietnam and the EU. Within this context, the EU affirmed its recognition of Vietnam's needs for development assistance and its willingness to strengthen cooperative relations by providing development assistance through targeted programs and projects that align with the objectives stipulated in the regulations of Council Regulation EEC No. 443/92 to contribute to Vietnam's endeavors and strategies in achieving sustainable economic development and progressive social advancements for its population. The programs and projects are designed to address impoverished communities, including areas with repatriated citizens, as well as to foster the development of economic and social infrastructure. Particular attention was paid to ensuring a balanced agricultural sector with the involvement of identified demographic groups. Cooperation in this area was expected to include not only the generation of employment opportunities in towns but also the empowerment of women in the realm of development, with due consideration given to their educational pursuits and familial well-being. Additionally, a specific focus was placed on activities that facilitate economic integration between different regions within Vietnam. The development cooperation efforts prioritized agreed-upon areas and strived to attain enduring effectiveness in programs and projects [11]. Consequently, these commitments extended beyond the realm of humanitarian aid, aligning with Vietnam's strategic development objectives.

After the ratification and enforcement of the FCA, the EU's development cooperation programs and projects for Vietnam witnessed a notable upsurge. Before 2002, the EU's development cooperation strategies focused on rural and mountainous areas and sectors affected by the transition towards a market economy. Subsequently, in the Country Strategy Paper (CSP) (2002-2006), the EU pursued an approach of development support in specific sectors. Under the ambit of the Country Strategy Paper (2007-2013), the overarching objective of the EU's support policy towards Vietnam was sustainable poverty reduction, with particular emphasis placed on facilitating the realization of Vietnam's Socio-Economic Development Plan (2006-2010). The development cooperation agreement within the FCA provided the basis for the implementation of seven major bilateral development cooperation projects and two smaller projects in the subsequent phase (see Table 1).

Table 1. EU's development cooperation projects in Vietnam (1996 – 2001)

Sectors/Project's Title	DURATION		COMMITMENTS	
	Starting	Ending	TOTAL	C.E.
			(Euro)	(Euro)
Social Forest Conservation in Nghe An	5/1997	12/2004	18.700.000	17.500.000
Strengthening of Veterinary Services in Vietnam	3/1998	3/2004	9.500.000	9.000.000

Health System Development Programme	10/1998	3/2005	30.095.195	23.095.195
Cao Bang/Bac Can Rural Development project	2/1999	12/2004	21.250.000	19.350.000
Support to the Ministry of Education and Training	1/2000	4/2004	7.943.000	7.600.000
MUTRAP – Multilateral Trade Policy Assistance	8/2000	3/2004	3.100.000	3.100.000
Son La, Lai Chau Rural Development project	11/2000	11/2005	21.450.000	19.940.000
EC – Vietnam Cooperation in the Audio-Visual Sector	10/2001	10/2004	1.500.000	950.000
European Studies Programme-ESP	11/2001	11/2004	1.078.000	998.000

[Source: 9, p. 10].

To support the impoverished, who were the most affected by the economic transition, the EU initiated the Healthcare Assistance Project for the Poor in the Northern Mountainous and Central Highlands provinces (HEMA project). This initiative aimed to provide medical examination, treatment, disease prevention, and health improvement services for the poor and ethnic minority communities in Dien Bien, Lai Chau, Son La, Gia Lai, and Kon Tum. The total investment for the project amounted to 19.4 million euros, with a corresponding contribution of 1.4 million euros from Vietnam and a non-refundable grant of 18 million euros from the European Commission (including 11.8 million euros as entrusted funds channeled through the World Bank) [12].

In addition to bilateral development programs, the EU also participated in multilateral mechanisms within its development policies for Vietnam. The EU became a co-sponsor of the Poverty Reduction Support Credit (PRSC) Program for Vietnam, implemented by the World Bank. Commencing with PRSC 3 in 2004, the EU, along with six other sponsors, supported projects aimed at helping impoverished communities in Vietnam. The EU provided the following financial contributions to PRSC: USD 19.9 million (PRSC 3), USD 20.3 million (PRSC 4), USD 12.4 million (PRSC 5), USD 28.9 million (PRSC 6), and approximately USD 23.9 million (PRSC 7 [9, p.12], The PRSC was designed to support key sectors of Vietnam's reform program, in line with the objectives outlined in the Socio-Economic Development Strategy (SEDS) for the 2001-2010 period and the Socio-Economic Development Plan (SEDP) for the 2006-2010 period. The EU actively engaged in PRSC discussions, focusing on areas closely related to its core programs, including global economic integration, education, healthcare, legal development, public administration reform, and anti-corruption measures. These programs consistently prioritized poverty alleviation as the EU seeks to make a significant impact on poverty in developing nations, aiming to maximize its contributions to sustainable development and long-term poverty eradication. Indeed, the EU and donor community have been successful in the drafting process of the Comparative Poverty Reduction Strategy led by the Vietnamese government.

The EU supported projects aimed at better integrating Vietnam into the world economy, which was driven by Vietnam's commitment to enhancing international

integration after a period of isolation and embargoes. A prominent example was the Multilateral Trade Assistance Project (MUTRAP). It commenced in 1998 and spanned three phases: 1998-2003, 2004-2008, and 2008-2012. MUTRAP is the longest-running and continuous project in Vietnam, assisting in formulating Vietnam's strategy for WTO accession and post-WTO action plans [6, p.308].

It is evident that the EU's development cooperation policies towards Vietnam aligned with the strategic objectives of the EU's global development policy. Article 77 of the Amsterdam Treaty emphasizes the goal of "combating poverty in developing countries", and the European Consensus on Development (2005) reaffirms the primary objective of EU development cooperation: eradicating poverty within the framework of sustainable development, including the pursuit of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The primary legal framework for development cooperation with Vietnam was the EU's Regulation 92/432, known as the "Asia-Latin America" Regulation. This regulation emphasized the objective of targeting the poorest population groups and the poorest countries in development cooperation strategies. These perspectives align well with Vietnam's development strategies, including the 10-year SEDS and the 5-year SEDP.

The EU's development support programs significantly contributed to Vietnam's development goals from 1995 to 2010, even in areas without a direct correlation. These programs played an important role in Vietnam's remarkable achievements in eradicating hunger, reducing poverty, and attaining the MDG 1 [6]. A Vietnamese-led mid-term review, released in 2009, of progress towards development outcomes and results of the 2006-2010 SEDP and PRSC confirmed the EU's comparative advantages in its few intervention areas.

2.2. Promoting sustainable development goals in the period of 2011-present

Vietnam's transition to a lower middle-income country (LMIC) in 2009 and the formulation of a new socio-economic development strategy for the 2011-2020 period prompted the EU to adjust its development cooperation policies. In 2011, Vietnam issued the 10-year SEDP (2011-2020) with the overall objective of "Striving for Vietnam to essentially become a modern and industrialized country by 2020; politically and socially stable, democratic, disciplined, and harmonious; significantly improving the material and spiritual lives of the people; maintaining independence, sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity; elevating Vietnam's position in the international arena; and creating a solid foundation for further development in subsequent phases" [13]. Regarding development philosophy, the Strategy emphasizes the close linkage between rapid and sustainable development, with sustainability as a continuous requirement throughout the Strategy. In the current 10-year SEDP (2021 - 2030), Vietnam has introduced new adjustments to achieve the goal of becoming a rapidly developing, modern industrialized country based on a foundation of science and technology [14].

Changes in Vietnam's goals, development philosophy, and attainment of middle-income status have led to shifts in cooperation between Vietnam and the EU. Specifically, the Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Partnership and Cooperation between Vietnam and the EU has identified that "the central focus of development cooperation is to achieve the MDGs, poverty eradication, sustainable development, and integration into the global economy. Development cooperation objectives are to be aligned with Vietnam's economic and social development strategies and programs. Both parties

acknowledge that development cooperation is the key to addressing Vietnam's development challenges" [15, p.18-19]. The strategic objectives of the development cooperation between Vietnam and the EU include but are not limited to, the following: achieving sustainable economic growth; promoting human and social development, advancing reforms and institutional development; ensuring environmental sustainability, including resource conservation and best practices, addressing and mitigating the consequences of climate change; and supporting policies and mechanisms for deeper integration into the global economy and international trade. These priorities reflected the adjustments in the EU's development cooperation agenda for Vietnam, with a primary focus on sustainable development encompassing both human and natural elements. This alignment was entirely consistent with the underlying principles of Vietnam's SEDS for the periods of 2011-2020 and 2021 - 2030.

According to the EU's assessment, Vietnam needs to transition from a low-cost labor-based growth model to one based on innovation and productivity. This requires a shift from a low-cost labor-based growth model to an innovation-driven and productivity-based approach. This necessitates substantial structural changes and ongoing investments in infrastructure and human resources. Managerial capacity and the role of civil society need to be enhanced, and innovative social policies are necessary for the promotion of addressing the increasing inequality and poverty among ethnic minority groups. The EU's main objective in its development cooperation with Vietnam during 2014-2020 was to focus on two key areas including sustainable energy and good governance and, the rule of law [10]. Sustainable development projects implemented throughout Vietnam have been a prominent aspect of Vietnam-EU development cooperation since 2011.

Table 2. Programs and projects supporting sustainable development of the EU in Vietnam

Program title/Project title	Time duration	Financial budget	Location
The Urban Environmental Planning Programme (UEPP-VN)	2005 – 2009	2.9 millions EUR	An Giang, Can Tho, Ca Mau, Dong Thap, Hau Giang, Tien Giang, Long An, Soc Trang, Tra Vinh, Vinh Long.
Environmentally and Socially Responsible Tourism Capacity Development Programme (ESRT)	2011 – 2016	11 million EUR	Vietnam
Multi-annual Indicative Programme for Vietnam (MIP)	2014 – 2020	346,000,00 Euros	Vietnam
World Cities project in Vietnam	2017 – 2018	700.000 EUR	Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City
Development of Solar Energy in Da Nang	2017 – 2021	393,000 EUR	Da Nang
Energy Sector Policy Support Programme to Enhance Access to	2017 – 2021	100.000.00 EUR	Vietnam

Sustainable Energy in Rural Areas of Vietnam (ESPSP) Sector Reform Contract (Budget Support)			
Energy Sector Policy Support Programme to Enhance Access to Sustainable Energy in Rural Areas of Vietnam (ESPSP) EU Vietnam Energy Facility	2018 – 2021	7,500,000 EUR	Rural Areas of Vietnam
The civil society meets RE&EE - training, seminars, and communication skills to boost RE&EE as a key tool for sustainable development and green growth strategy in Vietnam (E-Enhance)	2017 – 2021	554669,3 EUR	Vietnam
Rethinking Plastics – Circular Economy Solutions to Marine Litter	2020 – 2022	511.000 EUR	Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Phu Yen.
Promoting sustainable partnerships between CSOs and enterprises for sustainable forest management in the context of climate change (PROSPER project)	2020 – 2023	800,000 Euro	Quang Tri
Biomass Gasification Technology – Sustainable Energy Solution for Agri-Food Processing and Waste Management in Rural Areas of Vietnam	2020 – 2024		Thai Nguyen, Tuyen Quang, Lao Cai, Yen Bai
EU - Viet Nam Sustainable Energy Transition Programme	2020 – 2025	142,000,00 EUR	Vietnam
Multi-annual Indicative Programme (MIP)	2021 – 2027	Total budget for the initial period 2021-2024: 210.000.00 EUR	Vietnam

(Source: authors' compilation)

The above data shows a clear shift in the EU's perspective and policy adjustments regarding its support for Vietnam's development objectives. Since 2011, the EU has implemented numerous projects aimed at promoting sustainable development in Vietnam. This adjustment is aligned with the goals and principles of Vietnam's socio-economic development strategy. The EU has incorporated the objectives of hunger eradication and

poverty reduction into sustainable development goals by improving living conditions, the environment, and access to energy for the poor. This aligned with Vietnam's national target program on sustainable poverty reduction, which aims to reduce poverty sustainably, prevent recidivism, promote economic growth, ensure social welfare, raise living standards, and increase income. It particularly focused on impoverished areas, making fundamental social services like healthcare, education, housing, clean water, sanitation, and information accessible to underprivileged individuals and households. This program contributed to achieving the poverty reduction target set by the National Assembly's Resolution for the period 2016-2020 [15].

As part of its commitment to sustainable development objectives, the European Union provided much support to Vietnam in the fields of integration and governance under the rule of law. During the period spanning from 2008 to 2012, the third phase of the MUTRAP was implemented, with a substantial funding amount of 10,670,000 euros [16]. This initiative, executed across various stages of MUTRAP, effectively elevated Vietnam's capacity for integration and policy formulation, while concurrently fostering increased participation of enterprises in labor-related activities and the labor environment. After the culmination of the MUTRAP project, the EU extended its support through the implementation of the EU-Multilateral Trade Assistance Project (EU-MUTRAP). Building upon the pivotal accomplishments of its predecessor MUTRAP, the EU-MUTRAP has gradually transitioned from facilitating negotiations about international trade agreements to facilitating the actualization of international trade commitments, thus aligning with Vietnam's dynamic developmental imperatives. Also, the EU's strategy papers contain explicit reference to good governance dimensions such as the involvement of more transparent and accountable civil service, transparent and professional financial management systems, a predictable and comprehensible legal system, and greater autonomy for the three branches of the State.

The Covid-19 pandemic deepened and brought about new changes in the Vietnam-EU development cooperation relationship. Both Vietnam and the EU engaged in activities to support each other in responding to the pandemic and caring for people's health. For instance, Vietnam supplied over half a million domestically produced antibacterial masks to support the people of Europe in their efforts to prevent the spread of the disease. On the EU's part, the organization made significant efforts to help Vietnam access vaccine sources and prevention resources for Covid-19. Following the peak of the pandemic, the EU provided financial support to support Vietnam in its post-pandemic recovery and efforts to achieve sustainable development goals. Thus, the adjustments made by the EU to Vietnam's development goals demonstrated a high demand for the effectiveness of cooperative development policies.

The EU's adaptations align with Vietnam's socio-economic policies, thereby strongly supporting the government's efforts to restructure the economy for the long-term growth and welfare of the population. The EU allocated development cooperation to sectors where Vietnam sought to progressive reforms to maximize the synergy between government policies and development cooperation programs, thereby contributing to the overall objectives of inclusive and sustainable growth, poverty reduction, equity, and global economic integration [17]. Also, Vietnam's proactive and independent approach to

formulating strategies, plans, and development goals made Vietnam become a preferred and reliable partner for EU development cooperation programs.

3. Conclusion

Development cooperation entails a broad spectrum, encompassing diverse sectors. The dynamics of development cooperation between partners are contingent upon several factors, including the recipient's needs, the recipient's managerial capabilities, and the advantages accruing to the implementing party. Evaluating these factors to devise contextually appropriate policies significantly affects both policy efficacy and the overall nature of the development cooperation relationship.

Development cooperation between Vietnam and the EU has been promoted significantly in terms of scope and scale, with an increasing focus on comprehensiveness and adaptability. Since 1990, the EU has emerged as a major contributor to socio-economic development objectives. Various development programs and projects with diverse mechanisms, sectors, and beneficiaries have been effectively implemented in Vietnam. As a development partner and financial sponsor, the EU demonstrated a keen effort to align with Vietnam's development strategies and goals to ensure the effectiveness of aid. At the same time, Vietnam proactively engaged in formulating its own development strategies in line with its path of reform and national progress. Vietnam established strategic objectives for each period, enabling the country to actively receive and accommodate development assistance policies from the EU, effectively addressing the nation's development requirements. The EU's development cooperation programs in Vietnam aimed to support the country's economic and social development, improve living standards, and strengthen the overall relationship between the two partners. These programs have been adapted to address the evolving needs and challenges encountered by Vietnam while remaining aligned with the EU's strategic objectives.

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