

# Human Development in Vietnam today From Perception to Practice

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**Abstract:** Fostering human development has always been an important target of the Communist Party of Vietnam and the State. People have always been placed at the centre of socio-economic development and the objective of socio-economic development is to serve the people. The people are both the objective and the driving force of the development process and they are also the subject of the development process. Human rights are respected, each individual has the same equal rights in the development process, there are no discriminations on ethnicity, religion, cultural, domicile, education level, gender, etc. Comprehensive development of the Vietnamese people with specific virtues, suitable with each development stage of the country and closely aligning with improvements in the living standards of the people, therefore, issues on economic development, education and training, cultural life, healthcare and environmental protection are highly prioritized.

**Key words:** Human development; perception; practice; Renovation; integration; Vietnam.

The advanced ideologies on people and people liberalization have always been the cornerstone of Ho Chi Minh's revolutionary career. He used to regard human factor as the most valuable capital and therefore, according to Him, one needs to appreciate and protect the people. This ideology is also reflected in the perception that the people are the decisively contributing factor to all victories of the Vietnamese revolution. People are also the citizens in specific conditions, holding a significant role in the revolutionary road and establishment of the new society. "All the benefits are for the people. All the powers are of the people. To carry out reform and to build are the responsibilities of the people. To revolutionize and build the nation are the jobs of the people. Authorities from communal to central Government level are elected by the people. Organizations from Central to communal levels are organized by the people. In short, the power and resources rest with the people"(Ho Chi

Minh, 1995, Vol.5: 698).

Regarding people as both the objective and the driving force of revolution, of social development was the most consistent ideology throughout Ho Chi Minh's revolution career. According to Him, building the people means paying attention to all aspects in the life of the people, from material to spiritual one. The people need to be well fed, well clothed, to go to school and to enjoy their right to freedom and happiness. People need to be developed holistically, to be patriotic, to be conscious and to have the spirit of ownership; to have virtues and ethics, to be dedicated to serve the people and revolution; to be eager for knowledge and in possession of cultural knowledge; and to have a simple and healthy lifestyle etc.

Ho Chi Minh's thought on the people

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has covered what the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) perceives today as the key to human development. The three main areas which the UNDP regards as crucial to human development have been asserted by Ho Chi Minh throughout his fight for national independence, that is, national independence should go in hand with the freedom and happiness of the people in all aspects such as food, clothing, shelter, education, work, eradication of hunger, illiteracy and aggression. His Testament stated that the first works were about the people. Ho Chi Minh's ideology always aimed for the people and placed the people above everything else. President Ho Chi Minh's ideology on the people remains an invaluable asset in Vietnam's history of thought.

Placing the people as the center of the development process is a thought deep-rooted in Vietnam's tradition, of President Ho Chi Minh and that is also the ideology of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) and State. In each historical period, this ideology is reflected in different ways. Ever since the 3<sup>rd</sup> National Party Congress (1960), the Communist Party of Vietnam asserted that the people are the most valuable asset to the country. The 6<sup>th</sup> National Party Congress (1986) marked a turning point in the country's perception on the people. The people and holistic human development were the first priorities. At the 7<sup>th</sup> National Party Congress (1991), the role of the people in socio-economic development continued to be emphasized: "Economic development places the people at the center" (CPV, Vol.51: 26). "The main objective and driving force of development is for the people, by the people, foremostly for the labourer. That is also the perception on the unity between the objectives of economic

policies and social policies – all for the people" (CPV, Vol.51:56). The Political Program to build and protect the nation in the transitional period to socialism (1991) put the emphasis on education to help build a new civilization and new people. The 8<sup>th</sup> National Party Congress (1996) stated: Together with science and technology, education and training are the top national policies that can help improve the intellectual standards of the people, train personnel, nurture talents, and develop human resources to meet the demands of industrialization and modernization. "Promote good people, good deeds. Establish a value system and social standards in accordance with the tradition, national identity and the demands of the era" (CPV, 1996:113). The Resolution of the 5<sup>th</sup> Central Party Committee (8<sup>th</sup> legislature) put forward the mission the build the Vietnamese people in the new period with five specific virtues.

The 9<sup>th</sup> National Party Congress (2001) emphasized: "All cultural activities shall aim to make Vietnamese people develop comprehensively in politics, ideology, intelligence, ethics, physical strength, creativity, community awareness, kindness, tolerance. Culture shall become the driving force for people to perfect their personality, inheriting the national revolutionary tradition, promoting patriotism, self-reliance, self-strengthening, building and protecting the nation" (CPV, 2005: 659). "Look after the people, protect the legitimate rights and interests of every person; respect and implement international treaties on human rights to which Vietnam is signatory or a participating member" (CPV, 2005: 676). The 9<sup>th</sup> National Party Congress included the Human Development Index (HDI) in the official document by demanding for measures to help improve significantly

Vietnam's HDI (CPV, 2001: 160). The people are the most valuable asset. They are both the driving force and objective of the revolution, of the national reform; the human factor with its noble spirit helps people develop comprehensively, live in an equal and kind society surrounded by healthy social relations. People are placed at the center of socio-economic strategies, expanding opportunities and creating favourable conditions for human development. These are the viewpoints of the Communist Party and the State which have been deduced from 20 years of nation-building experience (CPV, 2006: 79).

The 10<sup>th</sup> National Party Congress (2006) continued to elaborate on the ideology of human centrality in development as it asserted the key objective to be the establishment of “a prosperous society, a powerful, fair, democratic, civilized nation; led by the people; with a highly developed economy based on modern production forces and production relations that are suitable with the development level of production forces; with an advanced culture, immersed in national identity; where the people are free from suppression, unfairness, and have access to a prosperous life, freedom, happiness, comprehensive development; all the peoples within the Vietnamese community live on equal terms, in unity and support each other for mutual progress; with a rule-of-law socialist State of the people, by the people and for the people under the leadership of the Communist Party; with friendship and cooperation relationship with countries in the world” (CPV, 2005:17-18). Factors that impact human development such as economy, education, healthcare, etc. were specified and emphasized

further. The National Congress put forward the national strategy on enhancing the statute, health, life expectancy and race of the Vietnamese people.

Throughout the national congresses, it can be observed that the Communist Party has understood more completely and profoundly about the people and the role of the people in the national development process. The Party has placed the people at the center and regarded the human factor as both the objective and driving force of the development process. These viewpoints continued to be solidified in the 11<sup>th</sup> National Party Congress (2011). The National Program on building the country in the transitional period to socialism of 2011 stated: “People are the center of the development strategy, and they are also the subject of development. Respecting and protecting human rights, attaching human rights with the rights and interests of the population, of the nation and with the people's right to be in charge. Combine and promote in full the role of society, family, educational facilities, labour communities, organizations and residential communities in nurturing and building Vietnamese people full of patriotism, willing to be in charge and be responsible citizens; to be knowledgeable, healthy, competent labourers; to live civilized, respecting sentimental values and bondage; to have legitimate international spirits. To build wealthy, progressive and happy families which are truly the healthy cells of society, as well as the crucial environment, directly in charge of shaping up lifestyles and personalities of the people. Production, educational facilities, workplaces and battle units should train people for a disciplined, skilled, efficient working style, should enrich friendships

and co-working relations between people; establish the personality of the people and Vietnamese culture” (CPV, 2011: 76-77).

The Resolution of the 9<sup>th</sup> Central Party Committee (11<sup>th</sup> legislature) put an emphasis on the objective and mission to develop the Vietnamese people comprehensively, aiming for truthfulness-goodness-beauty, completing the standards for cultural values and Vietnamese people, creating the environment and conditions for the development of personalities, ethics, knowledge, creativity, physical strength, soul, social responsibility, citizen duty, legal compliance, promote patriotism, national pride, conscience, responsibility of each person to his/herself, family, community, society and country.

Throughout the official documents, the development strategies and policies of the Communist Party and of the State from 1986 to date have illustrated the aspiration for the development of the Vietnamese people, which were reflected in the following main aspects:

*- People have always been placed at the centre of socio-economic development and the objective of socio-economic development is to serve the people. The people are both the objective and the driving force of the development process and they are also the subject of the development process;*

*- Human rights are respected, each individual has the same equal rights in the development process, there are no discriminations on ethnicity, religion, cultural, domicile, education level, gender, etc.*

*- Comprehensive development of the Vietnamese people with specific virtues, suitable with each development stage of the country and closely aligning with improvements in the living standards of the people, therefore, issues on economic*

*development, education and training, cultural life, healthcare and environmental protection are highly prioritized.*

Experience from the past 30 years shows that such ideologies have been implemented proactively, fiercely, with a strong sense of political determination and spirit. The thirty years of reforms witnessed the continuous development and perfection of democratic institutions to ensure the basic rights and comprehensive development of the people with many valuable lessons. Respecting and protecting human rights are the mission and objective of all policies, measures and laws of the country. In practice, associating human rights with national interests and the interests of the people, protecting all the rights and interests of the citizens for the development of the citizens themselves have remained the noble objective of the Communist Party of Vietnam and the State.

Social history has shown that, under any era and circumstance, either being acknowledged in full or not, people have always been the basic and leading production force, holding the central position in the development process. A socio-economic development strategy can only succeed if it gives the highest priority to the actual development of the people, liberalizing human capability from all restrictions and impediments to development. Only democratic institutions can truly liberalize the capabilities of the people and communities. The quality of the institutions does not produce inherent impacts but is also crucial to the development environment, development quality and competitiveness of the entire economy. Institutions also represent the decisive condition to help promote effectively national advantages, to exploit and promote the potentials and capabilities of each

individual, community and of the nation as a whole. There cannot be a high quality development process without high quality institutions (not only economic institutions) to generate modern and effective national governance. Similarly, there cannot be a joint national power without democratic institutions that are suitable with the conditions of the nation and of the people in each specific historical period.

In the past 30 years, the Communist Party of Vietnam and the State have worked tirelessly to complete the legal system that can ensure the basic rights of the citizens. The Communist Party has developed and continuously perfected social policies and economic development programs alongside the actual enforcement of social equity and progress to serve the human development goals in the new era. There remain, nevertheless, certain limitations in institutional development and social policies formulation that need to be addressed and perfected in order to exercise more completely human rights and to meet better the human development goals. The legal system lacks comprehensiveness and a long term vision; there are overlapping provisions between legal documents; many new legal articles and laws have remained purely as legal frameworks, lacking the necessary conditions to be actually enforced. Few citizens are aware of their rights while those who are have yet understood that those *rights go in hand with civic obligations and duties*. Bureaucracy and corruption have not been effectively prevented or fought, resulting in violations of civic rights and human rights in certain locations and instances.

In the past 30 years, Vietnam's progress in human development has also been reflected in the steady and stable rise of the country's Human Development Index

(HDI), both in absolute value and ranking. Through its achievements in human development, in the UNDP's Human Development Report 2013, Vietnam was among the 40 developing countries with above-expectation achievements in human development in recent decades<sup>(1)</sup>. In 2010, Vietnam ranked 129/187; in 2011, it was placed 128/187; and in 2012, it ranked 127/186 and was among the average group (UNDP, 2013). "Vietnam is one of the most dynamic countries and it has achieved rapid progress in human development" (UNDP, 2013). In 2013, Vietnam was ranked at 121/187 countries. However, if compared to other countries in the region, and against the development requirements and targets, Vietnam's HDI is still below the development requirements and expectations of the people.

*Achievements in political, social areas, enforcement of democracy, human rights are also another aspect of the human development indicators. Maintaining political stability, ensuring the citizens' rights to participate in the management of the State and society are fundamental conditions to ensure the exercise of human rights and improve the citizens' exercise of their human rights. The exercise of all rights are strengthened and better ensured for all social classes, communities, social groups and youngsters. Only in a stable and development society can people have the opportunity and conditions for development. It can hardly be denied such achievements of Vietnam in the past 30 years.*

Combining in harmony economic development with social equity was another achievement in Vietnam's human development. Equal

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<sup>(1)</sup> A growth rate of 41% in the past two decades.

access to opportunity and resource allocation have become a strategic orientation for the Communist Party and the State in the 30 years of reform in order to meet the human development targets, all of which have been solidified in each policy and development stage.

However, in the next development period, many challenges and difficulties remain ahead the road towards achieving human development goals. Vietnam is stepping into the golden population period which is estimated between the years 2010 and 2045. The population has and is experiencing changes with some noteworthy characteristics. The age structure of the population has been changing rapidly in the sense that the ratio of children under 14 years old have started to decline, and correspondingly, the population within the age group of 15-64 years old have tended to increase, and the senior population from 65 years old and above have also been rising. As of now, Vietnam has in part taken advantage of the changing age structure of the population for economic development. However, compared to the contribution of the changing age structure to economic growth in other regional countries (around 30%), Vietnam's ratio is still very modest.

Meanwhile, the quality of growth of Vietnam is still very poor and unsustainable. Although in the past 30 years, Vietnam has achieved high and continuous growth rates – a favorable condition for increasing investment in human capital, actual investments have not met the expected benefit and capacity, and have focused more on capital investment rather than on human development and growth. High yet unsustainable growth and low quality of growth are also reflected in

the country's low labour productivity<sup>(2)</sup>. The average income and living standards of the people although having been improved in recent years have remained low. Rising income inequality has also become an issue. Although the economy has registered high and continuous growth rates across the past 30 years, it has not been able to stimulate job opportunities and to improve workers' income. Rising income levels did not ensure livelihood safety and sustainability, especially in some regions, sectors and labour groups. Furthermore, human development, both in theory and practice, can hardly be sustainable when the economy's human capital accumulation capacity and ability are still modest. Despite significant progress in poverty eradication recently, the gap between regions, areas, population has not been closed but even expanded.

In the recent years, the Communist Party and the State have increased educational expenses and the great efforts by the government and the people have resulted in significant progress in education. However, education as one of the most influential factors to human development is now going through many difficulties. The products of education have not been able to meet human development requirements and have become a source of distress and concern for society. The lack of skills in some sectors and areas, and also abundant unskilled workers and bachelor, postgraduate workers... are the characteristics of Vietnam's labour force nowadays. This might be the outcome of poor education and of education that

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<sup>(2)</sup> "Average productivity of Vietnamese people is only 1/15 of Singapore's" See <http://kinhdoanh.vnexpress.net/tin-tuc/doanh-nghiep/mot-nguoi-singapore-lam-bang-15-nguoi-viet-2989707.html>.

misaligns with social demands. This is a big obstacle to future human development in particular and to the country's social development in general.

Unequal access to education and to human development in Vietnam has persisted despite the country's multiple efforts to address these issues<sup>(3)</sup>. Education inequality has direct implications to income levels. The income of households with higher education backgrounds have increased faster than that of households with a lower education level, both in urban and rural areas; and the increase was higher for urban workers, resulting in bigger income gaps between workers with better and lower education backgrounds. Without timely and effective measures to address such illegal and unreasonable inequality in education, in the future, income inequality in future generations as well as unequal access to opportunities and education will continue to rise.

Low-skilled workers which result in low productivity and low income levels cannot be addressed in the next couple of years. The quality of human resource is now one of the impediments to economic development as well as to overall national development. Unstable, unsustainable jobs and the changing work structure cannot catch up with the changing economic structure, threatening significantly the livelihood and living standards of workers.

With regard to the healthcare system, Vietnam's health index has fared much better than other countries with the same human development index as public expenditures on healthcare have been constantly increased, especially the ratio of health insurance spending over public healthcare spending in the past decade has

increased rapidly and steadily. Health insurance plays a significant role in improving people's access to healthcare services and in reducing direct expenditures from the people's income. However, despite progress in reducing the gap of access to healthcare between regions, areas, social groups, between ethnic groups, unequal access to healthcare services still prevails and cannot be addressed anytime soon. Therefore, unequal access to healthcare services will continue to be an issue in upcoming years.

With regard to social welfare and security, there remain many urgent issues: The social insurance system is now confronting with many challenges resulting from the design and operation of the system. Changes in society and household heads have and will continue to create changes in the morbidity structure, in the causes of morbidity and death. Domestic violence, child labour, child crimes, educated criminals, transnational crimes, gender-biased sex selection, risks of loss of traditional and non-traditional security... are pressing social issues with direct implications to human development.

The past three decades of human development have seen many important and undeniable accomplishments that have significant importance to the next period. However, it has also accumulated many unresolved issues, and in the new context (international integration, economic restructuring, education reforms, etc.) many new issues have emerged while the urgency of previous issues have increased, threatening

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<sup>(3)</sup> For instance: rising budget spending on primary education, giving fee waivers to certain groups such as poor households, enforcing preferential policies to regions, areas, etc.

at different levels human development in Vietnam in the upcoming period.

Considering the characteristics, in other words, the qualitative criteria for human development in Vietnam in the reform era, it can be seen that Vietnam is on the right track. The criteria laid out for the development of the Vietnamese people are not quantitative in nature but are clearly comprehensive in all aspects, being both orientated with direct guidelines as well as long term strategic orientation.

The human development ideologies prescribed in the resolutions of the Central Party Committees are complete, comprehensive, overriding, scientific and suitable with the specific conditions of Vietnam. The characteristics, objectives and missions for human development in Vietnam that were indicated in the resolutions are general, overriding features for an extensive historical period but which are still valid, scientific and practical. These human development ideologies and perceptions should be inherited and maintained as the guidelines for human development in Vietnam in the current and upcoming periods.

Fifteen years of human development following the characteristics laid out in the Resolution of the 5<sup>th</sup> Central Party Committee (8<sup>th</sup> legislature), Vietnam has achieved significant progress in many aspects. The patriotic spirit of the Vietnamese people have not weakened but on the contrary, has become stronger, reflected in diverse forms, by different age groups, professions, regions and locations. The accomplishments achieved so far in national development could not have been realized without the patriotic working spirit, the willpower to catch up with the progress and development level of

other countries. The collective spirit in labour, the community-based spirit have been improved; the solidarity, working for the common good have been enhanced and spread in the wider public. These have been well reflected in the social life, particularly in special circumstances such as natural disasters, fire, poverty, diseases, etc.

The Vietnamese people nowadays, especially the youngsters, students, are more aware of environment protection issues. They are also better aware of the various facets of life. They are less delusional, more realistic, pragmatic (though not following pragmatism), quick-witted, open to cultural exchange, and have better self-control and independence than the previous generations. The people are also more capable to integrate with the outside world, not only because they are enjoying more favorable conditions but mainly because they are better equipped in all aspects. Vietnamese people nowadays are living a healthy and civilized lifestyle, they are hardworking, honest, benevolent and righteous, and they respect national discipline and the norms of the community. These virtues are actually present and continue to be effectively promoted, creating for the stability and development in the Vietnamese society in recent periods.

Vietnamese people are diligent labourers with high work ethics, skills, creativity and productivity to serve the interests of themselves, of their families, collective and society. The technical skills, labour productivity and creativity of today's generation are well above those of the earlier days. People work not only to alleviate hunger and poverty but also to become wealthy and prosperous. The ability to catch up with and to own

new, modern world technologies in today's generations is much better and faster.

The physical stature of the Vietnamese people has also been improved continuously in the past 30 years. The average growth rate of people's height every 10 year is ensured, with today's generation being taller than their parents, although Vietnamese people are still smaller, shorter and more stunted than the youngsters in other countries, given that we had a lower starting point<sup>(4)</sup>. Vietnamese people nowadays have more willpower to study, to improve their knowledge and professional skills as well as other aspects. It is a fact that Vietnamese people today, both the State and the citizens, are committed to spending more money, time and effort to invest in education.

Nevertheless, given the demand for national development, international integration, especially how much Vietnam is lagging behind other countries in the region and in the world, it can be seen that human development efforts in the past years have yet to meet these demands. Without a human resource that can meet the national development requirement in the new context, Vietnam will continue to lag behind other nations. This is a tremendous challenge for Vietnam today and in the upcoming decades. The country's human resource is showing many troubled signs. Without timely interventions to address these issues, it is inevitable that the country will fall into a crisis of human development and human resource. With respect to criteria and values of Vietnamese people today, one can point out the following prominent issues:

*Firstly*, a significant part of civil servants and Party members have deteriorated, resulting in serious distrust on the regime. However,

the situation has not been addressed timely and adequately.

*Secondly*, a series of socio-economic development master plans, plans, projects, programs in different areas are either of low and poor quality or delayed in implementation, the cause of which usually originate from human resources.

*Thirdly*, human development and human resources development have exposed many shortcomings and limitations which have not been addressed properly and which have accumulated to create a combined negative impact and shocks, potentially pushing certain areas such as education, training, science, technology and even culture into crisis in the upcoming period. Today's culture is on the edge of crisis, the system of social values is experiencing disturbances at an alarming level.

*Fourthly*, despite various achievements, education and training are still exposing many inadequacies. The abundant training provided to the people does not go in hand with the quality and effectiveness of training. The commercialization of education, training and degrees are continuing to endanger the quality of education.

*Fifthly*, the rising crime rates and their complexity are clear indications of disorders in the value system.

*Sixthly*, during the past 15 years, there has been no specific and actual role model for social classes to look up to and follow.

*Seventhly*, Vietnamese people nowadays, despite the characteristics and virtues mentioned above, have also been showing

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<sup>(4)</sup> See: <http://www.doisong.vnexpress.net/tin-tuc/suc-khoe/nguoi-viet-thap-hon-5-6-cm-so-voi-nhieu-nuoc-2887052.html>.

many shortcomings: jealousy<sup>(5)</sup>, restricted mentality, the tendency to boost achievements, formalism, inferiority complex; poor discipline and respect for the law; lack of professionalism in production and labour; poor social responsibility, etc.

The more alarming fact is that our institution is not reformed rapid enough to suit the demand for human development in today's development stage. The overriding institutional system (including policies, organization for implementation and sanctions) not only fail to limit, address or eliminate the shortcomings of the Vietnamese people and the troubled value system but, at certain times and locations, even make them worse.

In order to timely address this situation, in our opinion, it should be widely perceived the motto "to nurture and develop the Vietnamese people" in theory and institutional development, and not only regarded as a guideline. At the same time, the criteria and values for the Vietnamese people should be supplemented and completed, with the general criteria and values detailed into criteria for different social classes.

On the other hand, human development institutions and socio-cultural institutions should be developed as a part of and as an aspect representing the level of human development and which should illustrate the suitability of socio-cultural relations with the level of human development.

In the upcoming period, Vietnam should prioritize the nurturing and development of the people in the public apparatus, aiming for improvements in the people's capacity to perform their duty, social responsibility, their virtues, national spirit and professionalism in public works. We should give more priority to the implementation phase, to sanctions

and monitoring of human development at different social classes, as mentioned above including the civil servants, managers, followed by the intellectual class and entrepreneurs.

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<sup>(5)</sup> It has been observed recently on websites the jealousy tendency of the Vietnamese people: the rich are hated, the poor are despised, and the smart are under coercion.

