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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Making universal education a priority for sustainable development: The EU, Vietnam and education

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Abstract

This article highlights the need to bring education to the forefront of EU policies to promote sustainable development in Vietnam. The EU is increasingly concerned with promoting sustainable development worldwide. It does this in its aid policies, and since 2010, it has included in its trade agreements provisions on labour, environmental and gender rights. But what about education rights? This article analyses the role of the EU and the Vietnamese government in the field of education. It argues that both actors could pay more attention to education, and in particular to the problem of unequal access to education for poor and minority children in Vietnam. To improve educational opportunity, both direct funding for the system and contextual support for students are needed. In remote and poor areas, Vietnam and the EU should provide increased salaries for teachers to reduce corruption, funding to support families, local social enterprises and improved local infrastructure. The article 'double-decenters' the study of European foreign policy by (1) focusing first on education policy issues in the targeted state and then on EU policy and (2) listening not only to the government but also the citizens of Vietnam.

1 | THE CONTEMPORARY IMPERATIVE: BRINGING EDUCATION TO THE FOREFRONT OF DEVELOPMENT POLICIES

This article makes the case for bringing education to the forefront of EU and Vietnamese policies, which aim to promote economic and social development. It argues that both the EU and the Vietnamese government need to pay more attention to education, in particular to the problem of unequal access to education for poor and minority children in Vietnam.

Education is widely considered to be the highest priority on the list of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations.[1] It is said to foster 'the right type of skills, attitudes and behavior that will lead to sustainable and inclusive growth,' and it is strongly linked to health and income (Amer Ahmed et al., 2018; Bengtsson et al., 2018; Raghupathi & Raghupathi, 2020; Rodrik, 2010; The Lancet, 2020; World Bank, 2022a). However, the goal of universal education, that is, education for all, children and adults, women and men, disabled, poor and minorities, has not yet been achieved.

This research answers the following question: to what extent does the EU focus on education for all in its foreign policy towards Vietnam? In order to do so, it investigates two other questions: what are the challenges of education policy in Vietnam, and how has the Vietnamese government dealt with them?

The EU was selected as an external actor because of its declared commitment to promoting economic and social development worldwide. Its aim is to improve living standards, reduce stark social divergencies and protect the environment. In 2006, it promoted the idea of 'Global Europe', based on trade policies aiming to expand free trade and help poor countries develop. The following year, the primary aim of eradicating poverty in the world was stated in article 208 of the Treaty of Lisbon. Since 2010, the EU has included clauses in its trade agreements on sustainable development,

establishing labour, environmental and gender rights. In 2012, the Commissioner for Development said that the EU would allocate at least 20 per cent of EU aid to social protection, health and education (European Union, 2012). Do EU foreign policies linked to education match EU legislative aims?

Vietnam is a 'least likely' case or 'hard' case study (George & Bennett, 2005, p. 83). Vietnam is recognised internationally as implementing successful economic and educational policies (Kataoka et al., 2020; Le et al., 2022; Pond, 2014). It has known an economic boom since *Doi Moi*, the economic renovation policy that started in 1986. There was a significant reduction in the poverty rate from 58 per cent in 1993 to five per cent in 2020 and an annual growth rate of six per cent between 1990 and 2018. A priori, given its economic success story and the substantial progress made generally in its education policies, one would assume that there are no education challenges there, and the EU would not have much of a role to play. However, a closer look through primary and secondary sources reveals concerns about unequal access to educational opportunities. If we find that even in Vietnam, which is doing relatively well economically and generally in its education policy, there are challenges to its education policy, and the EU is not addressing these, then these findings are likely to be relevant in all other states that are not doing as well economically as Vietnam.

One could expect the EU to play an important role in education policy in Vietnam, as the EU and Vietnam are close economic partners. The EU is the largest grant donor there, the second largest trading partner, Vietnam's first export market and one of the main foreign investors in the country. A new EU-Vietnam trade agreement with provisions on sustainable development, that is, labour rights and environmental protection, has been effective since 2020.

This article analyses flaws in Vietnamese and EU policies on education for all in Vietnam and shows that there is a demonstrable need for these policies to be improved and prioritised. This piece highlights the following points. First, Vietnam has made immense progress in education, but an analysis based on the voices of minorities and poor people, as well as secondary sources, shows these citizens are left behind. Inequalities in remote and poor areas, including gender inequalities, are of particular concern. Second, public opinion in Vietnam concurs with the literature on economics, law, education and politics that education should be a high priority for the development agenda, and policymakers cannot ignore education, especially education for all, if they want to reduce inequalities. Third, policies in Vietnam and in other states worldwide for promoting education cannot be limited to funding to train teachers. Direct funding support for poor people and minorities, free compulsory education and fighting corruption can contribute to a better education system.

Policy implications

- Education needs to be brought to the forefront of policies by states and international organisations to promote sustainable development. It is the priority of citizens worldwide.
- Only seven per cent of EU development aid goes to education. This must change.
- Policymakers must understand education policies as providing education for all, including children and adults, women and men, the disabled, the poor and minorities. They should focus on making education free and compulsory until the end of secondary education. In remote and poor areas, states and organisations should provide increased salaries for teachers to reduce corruption and fund families, infrastructure and local social enterprises.
- Vietnam could focus on free education at primary and secondary levels, higher salaries for teachers in poor and remote areas and lifelong education for all.
- The EU must bring education to the forefront of its development aid policy. This should be the case even when education is not the main priority of governments in partner states, as it is, at least in the case of Vietnam, the priority of citizens.
- As the international community spends 11 per cent of development aid for education, the EU should allocate at least this percentage of its own development aid to the global South.
- The EU could use its trade agreements to encourage companies worldwide to ensure lifelong training and to discuss progress on UNESCO recommendations on lifelong education for all.
- The EU could 'double-decentre' its policies to listen not only to the concerns of governments in partner states but also to citizens through the organisation of civil society forums.

Fourth, the EU provides little development aid for education, and increased funding is necessary in this field in Vietnam and elsewhere. Through its trade policies, the EU could encourage partner states to respect national and international law related to education.

In terms of methodology, most articles about development policies of external actors analyse EU policies from an EU perspective, running the risk of Eurocentrism. This article 'decentres' the study of European foreign policy, as it focuses first on the

interests of Vietnam and only then on EU policies. It follows the example of recent research on the importance of 'decentring' (Chakrabarty, 2000; Fisher-Onar & Nicolaïdis, 2013; Keukeleire & Lecocq, 2018; Lucarelli & Fioramonti, 2010; Morozov, 2013; Nayak, 2010).

It operates a second 'decentring' by considering the views of not only the government but also those of citizens in the targeted state. It gives people, especially poor people and ethnic minorities, a voice, and shows that not all segments of society benefit from Vietnamese education policies. It draws on over thirty semi-structured interviews conducted mostly in 2017 with citizens, teachers, students and civil servants in Brussels, Belgium and in Hanoi, Sapa and Cat Ba, Vietnam.[2] Some interviewees wished to remain anonymous, and others were made anonymous so they could feel free to give their opinion without endangering their employment, with the aim of encouraging 'candid, reliable responses' (Dougherty, 2021).

The first part is an overview of the literature in the fields of economy, law and political theory, which shows why and how education matters for sustainable development and why it should be a priority in foreign and domestic policies. The second part looks at the education problems faced by minorities and poor people in Vietnam, and the third part shows how the Vietnamese government and the EU are underperforming in their education policies in Vietnam because of their limited focus on reducing educational inequality. The article concludes with policy suggestions on how to enhance these policies in Vietnam and in other states worldwide. The EU could finance parents and local social enterprises in remote and poor areas, focus on building technological capabilities and facilitating knowledge transfer at university level and add clauses on education equality to the free trade agreement between the EU and Vietnam. A radical innovation would be for the EU to set up an anti-corruption agency that could analyse corruption in EU member states and partner states.

2 | INTERDISCIPLINARY LITERATURE ON WHY EDUCATION MATTERS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Since the late 1990s, debates about development have focused on poverty, gender, sustainable livelihoods, human rights and participation in politics. In 2000, one of the eight UN Millennium Development Goals was to achieve universal primary education by 2015, and in 2015, 'quality education' was one of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the UN General Assembly to be achieved by 2030. However, international actors are neglecting to press for the promotion of education in development policies (Harber, 2014; McCowan & Unterhalter, 2015; Mcgrath, 2018; Mcgrath & Gu, 2015; World Bank, 2022b). Education, and especially education for all, should be made a priority by actors who want to promote sustainable development. Education policies can be driven by three ideas: education is good for economic growth, as it provides human capital; it is a human right, and needs to be protected and promoted; and it is a capability, it offers an opportunity for people to achieve social and emotional development.

2.1 | Education benefits capital and economic growth

Education fosters the full physical, mental and social development of human beings and the economy and social structures of a state, whether a developing or developed state. This assumption goes back to the fifth century BC; Confucius believed that education meant high-quality human resources for the management of the state (Chan et al., 2017, p. 21). Adam Smith said in 1776 that the 'fixed capital' of a society was made up of machines, buildings, land and the abilities of people. For him, such abilities are acquired through education, study, or apprenticeship (Smith, 1775, p. 217). In the 1930s, economists started analysing the relationship between education and economic development (Gorseline, 1932). Theodore Schultz listed investment in primary, secondary and tertiary education as one of the five factors that explain growth in human capabilities or national income (the other four being health services, job training, study programmes for adults and migration; Schultz, 1961, pp. 9–10). In 1964, Gary Becker offered his theory of human capital, describing it as the knowledge a worker has that contributes to and enhances his or her productivity and wages (Becker, 1993).

Wages and earnings depend on years of schooling, literacy rate and years of labour market experience (Hicks, 1980; Mincer, 1974). Researchers disagree on the better return on investment of different levels of schooling: for some, primary school gives a better return than other forms of formal education, and investment in girls is better than boys (Carniero & Heckman, 2003; Mortara & Oguntoye, 2021; Psacharopoulos, 2006, p. 332). For others, it is more important to focus on secondary and tertiary education (Barro & Lee, 2013; Hanushek & Woessmann, 2010). Education of disadvantaged pupils is especially important. When a state invests in their education, it has a higher return in the long term in terms of reducing crime and welfare dependence and raising income than when it invests in the education of advantaged pupils. Education increases the quality of labour, innovation, growth, trade and inward investment and the diffusion of knowledge (Constantinescu, 2014; Lauder & Mayhew, 2020). Universal primary education and broad-based secondary education are likely to bring large segments of the

population out of poverty. This is why it is essential for the EU and partner states to prioritise education for all if their aim is development.

2.2 | Education is a human right

Lawyers argue that education is a human right and that states need to respect the conventions they have ratified on the right to education for all. They warn of the risk of privatisation of what is considered a public good (Beiter, 2006; Lee, 2013; Tomaševski, 2003). It is not sufficient to have laws and regulations on education; they must be implemented. This is where international actors such as the EU can play a role.

2.3 | Education provides human capabilities

Education is not only a means to economic development, and it is not only a right to be respected; it enables people to thrive personally, participate in public decisions and influence policy, including over time in authoritarian regimes. Confucius said that it was difficult for common people to be educated but that lifelong education should be provided to all (Huang, 2011; Sun, 2008). John Rawls argues in *A Theory of Justice* that education is important for citizens to gain equality of citizenship and social and economic benefits. Amartya Sen developed the 'Capability Approach', which emphasises the non-economic benefits of education, that is, the social, moral, political and emotional benefits for individuals and their quality of life (Alkire, 2002; Comim et al., 2008; Robeyns, 2006; Sen, 1979). Sen says that 'illiteracy can … muffle the political opportunities of the underdog, by reducing their ability to participate in the political arena and to express their demands effectively' (Sen & Fukuda-Parr, 2003, pp. 3, 4). Education can lead to the progressive democratisation of authoritarian regimes (Carnevale et al., 2020; Sanborn & Thyne, 2014). Students of Sen's work have shown that education also means lower levels of fertility, which is positive for development (Agarwal et al., 2005; Murthi et al., 1995). Some authors (Nussbaum, 2000, 2006; Vaughan, 2016) say that human capabilities should be there for all, not just for some individuals, and education provides social justice.

Others have shown that education is not the only capability needed for a person to develop their intellect. Other capabilities are needed, such as adequate income, supportive organisations, a helpful state, peace and favourable cultural norms (for instance, pro-feminism; Al-Samarrai, 2006; Conradie & Robeyns, 2013). These authors suggest that governments must concentrate not only on education policies for all but also on other economic and security policies to create the right environment for such policies to work. The following section shows that Vietnam is not providing basic education for all, and it is failing to concentrate on improving the general quality of life of minorities and poor people.

3 | UNVEILING EDUCATION PROBLEMS FACED BY MINORITIES AND POOR PEOPLE IN VIETNAM

Access to education is a critical problem for both minorities and poor people in Vietnam (Tran & Yang, 2022). If we relied only on a cursory reading of Vietnam's educational progress in general, this problem would be invisible. There has been a rapid expansion in primary education over the last two decades (Le Thuc & Nguyen Thi Thu, 2016). The rate of net primary school enrolment for children six to ten years old increased from slightly below 90 per cent in 2008 to 98 per cent in 2021 (Glewwe et al., 2017; UNICEF, 2021). Vietnamese education policies are quite impressive in terms of gender equality: in primary school, there is no difference in the attendance of girls and boys, and in upper secondary school, 67 per cent of boys and 74 per cent girls attend (UNICEF and General Statistics Office, 2015, pp. 196, 206). Vietnam did better in the 2015 PISA tests than countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom.[3] This is especially striking, given the evidence that students in many developing countries learn much less in school than their counterparts in developed countries (Glewwe & Kremer, 2006). Vietnam has seen the number of universities and colleges change from 101 in 1987 to 436 in 2014 (Nguyen & Nugyen, 2008, p. 121; Phan & Coates, 2016, pp. 183–84). Five Vietnamese universities are in the QS World University Rankings 2024.[4] There were just over half a million participants in adult learning and non-formal education programmes in 1999 and 10 million in 2008 (UNICEF and General Statistics Office, 2015, p. 27). Vietnam, together with China, is doing better than Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand in terms of early grade reading assessment (World Bank, 2018, p. 6,9). Similarly to Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore and the Philippines, it has achieved gender parity in primary enrolment since the 1990s, and it is doing better than Myanmar, Brunei, Malaysia, Laos and Cambodia in this field (Yeung, 2022). It has a better record than Cambodia, Laos and Timor-Leste for education in rural areas (Price, 2020, p. 12).

But there remains a major problem with education in Vietnam. Most interviewees there mentioned education when asked about the main issue necessary for development. Education was especially a concern for minorities and poor people, who earn less than $1.90 a day and represent two per cent of the 96 million Vietnamese (the 54 minorities represent 15 per cent of

Vietnamese and 73 per cent of the poor in Vietnam). These people are discriminated against in terms of employment opportunities, health, exploitation and education (Lam, 2017; World Bank, 2022c). Limited access to schools for minorities and poor people is mostly due to the financial cost of school and private tuition. These inequalities are even more blatant at the university level.

3.1 | Inequalities at school

The progress made in education policies conceals serious and unwarranted problems (Tran & Yang, 2022). It is striking that education is not available to all. Inequality among children for access to school starts at the preschool level. In 2017, preschool enrolment for five-year-olds was 99.81 per cent, out of which 85.6 per cent was full-day with lunch provided at school. The percentage of ethnic minority children was lower: 75.52 per cent of them were studying full-day with lunch (World Bank, 2017a, p. 116).

At primary school level, in the Central Highlands, five per cent of children aged six to ten were out of school (six per cent for boys and four per cent for girls), and in the Northern Midlands and Mountainous area, six per cent of girls were out of school against three per cent of boys, totalling 4.5 per cent for all children. Children out of school were from the poorest households (six per cent) and ethnic minority households (seven per cent; UNICEF and General Statistics Office, 2015, p. 193). Children who live in fishing villages are known for not attending school ("Interview, Cat Ba," 2017).

For children aged 11–14 years, only 91 per cent attended lower secondary school, while 3.5 per cent of them were still in primary school and six per cent were out of school. Again, the situation is worse in certain areas in Vietnam. Khmer and Mong children are less likely to complete lower secondary school than their peers in other ethnic groups (UNICEF, 2021). In the Central Highlands and Mekong River Delta, fewer than 85 per cent of children attended lower secondary school. For children aged 15–17, 24 per cent were out of upper secondary school in 2014. The situation is much more critical for ethnic minority and poor children; nearly 60 per cent of ethnic minority children aged 15–17 years did not attend upper secondary school, similarly to children living in the poorest households. In the Northern Midlands and Mountainous area, girls aged 15–17 were the majority of out-of-school children (54 per cent; UNICEF and General Statistics Office, 2015, pp. 196, 203, 208). Overall, in secondary school, enrolment in rural areas is nearly 15 percentage points lower than in urban areas (76 percent vs. 90 percent; Tran & Yang, 2022). A poor family might be able to afford to send only one of their children to school, and this child is likely to have to leave school early. The COVID crisis led to schools being closed for a total of 12 months. Online learning was used, but mountainous and remote areas were particularly hit, as teachers there had never used computers, and ten per cent of children there did not have access to a computer (Tao et al., 2022).

3.2 | Inability to pay for state school and private classes

The main reason for not attending school is that the family is unable to pay (Rolleston & Iyer, 2019; World Bank, 2009, p. 25). It is not due to language issues, as Vietnamese is spoken by most people. It is also not mainly because families need to rely on children for work income, or the level of instruction is poor, or the school is far away – although this can play a role too (Asian Development Bank, 2018; Business Insider, 2014; ILO, 2014, p. 12; "Interviews, Sapa and Hanoi," 2017; Le & Tam, 2013). Contrary to the beliefs of policy-makers, it is also incorrect that poor families and minorities do not value education (Le Thuc & Nguyen Thi Thu, 2016; World Bank, 2009, p. 25).

According to schools' official financial statements, the contribution of parents represents almost ten per cent of a school's resources, with 90 per cent coming from the state budget (Trân, 2014, p. 4). However, this would seem to be incorrect, and the inaccuracy is linked to corruption (Mattsson et al., 2022). Vietnam has the highest bribery rates of all the countries surveyed in South East Asia for public schools (Transparency International, 2017, p. 14). The Vietnamese I interviewed said that there is an official school fee of $60 a year, but when asked about extra fees, they all mentioned 'parents' voluntary contributions', which poor families cannot afford. Many children in rural Vietnam cannot attend school because it costs parents between $600 and $1000 a year (Horn, 2014; "Interviews, Sapa and Hanoi," 2017; Tran & Yang, 2022). There are 15 major groups of fees: tuition and enrolment, construction and repair, purchasing equipment, class fund, textbooks and stationery, uniforms, canteen, parking fee, supplementary classes at school, extra classes outside school, insurance, Parents' Association fund, gifts and envelopes for teachers (Trân, 2014, p. 4).

Another issue is the prevalence of private classes in the afternoons. 42 per cent of urban five-year-olds attend pre-school programmes at private facilities, whereas less than one per cent of the same age in the uplands and remote coastal areas do so (Glewwe et al., 2017).

3.3 | Lack of opportunities at the university

The difficulties faced by schools have a negative impact on opportunities for all at universities.

At the university level, the participation rate overall in colleges/universities for students aged 19 to 22 in Vietnam was just 29 per cent in 2015 (OECD Development Centre, 2017, p. 30). This rate is low if we compare Vietnam with China, as China has a 43 per cent participation rate at university level (People's Daily Online, 2017). There are huge disparities between regions in Vietnam; very few people from poor areas attend university. In 2018, ethnic minorities accounted for five per cent of those enrolled in higher education, and only three per cent were from poor families (Vu & Thuy Anh, 2018, p. 74).

A problem inherent to universities is the extent of corruption, which distorts the results of students ("Interview, Hanoi," 2017; Mccornac, 2012). An interviewee said that if students bribed an English teacher with VND 500,000 ($22), they could pass their final English exam without speaking English correctly ("Interview, Hanoi," 2017). In addition, the curriculum needs further standardisation and internationalisation to make students more attractive on the job market (Pham Quang, 2009; Tran & Marginson, 2018).

Only one in four workers in Vietnam had a vocational or higher education qualification in 2017, and not all courses correspond to the needs of the labour market (International Labour Organization, 2018; "Interview, Hanoi," 2017; Patrinos et al., 2018). This could be a problem in the long term, especially as the Vietnamese economy is currently based on low-skilled employment, which could give rise to a 'low skills trap' situation and a 'middle income trap', being unable to move to the next level of economic development (McGuinness et al., 2021).

4 | UNDERPERFORMING VIETNAMESE AND EU POLICIES ON EDUCATION IN VIETNAM

Vietnam has promoted education as a human right. For its political leaders, education for all is the national priority (*quốc sách hàng đầu*; London, 2023; Nhan Dan Online, 2021). The Law on Universal Primary Education, adopted in 1991, made primary education compulsory for all children aged between six and 11. The 2013 Vietnamese Constitution says education is a priority, and school is free for all (IDEA, 2013). Vietnam signed and ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 1982, and it ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990. In 2000, Vietnam adopted the 'Dakar Framework for Action, Education for All'. In 2012, ASEAN adopted a Human Rights Declaration that recognises the right to education. In 2017, the deputy permanent representative of the Vietnam mission to the United Nations, Ambassador Pham Thi Kim Anh, highlighted the role played by education in reducing social inequality in Vietnam.

Education policies in Vietnam are based on the idea of education as human capital. Vietnam spent five per cent of the state budget on education in 2022 (VnExpress, 2022). It wants education to be advanced by modern standards and highly competitive in international terms (Harman et al., 2010). For the government, universities in Vietnam should be 'more equitable, … and more open to international engagement' (Hayden & Thiep, 2015, p. 12).

However, the Vietnamese government has difficulties addressing the lack of access to school for minorities and the poor. The government merely discourages the use of private tutoring (Vietnam News, 2016). It established a tuition fee policy in 2010, and this had a strong positive effect on school enrolment at primary and secondary levels for children from poor households, but there was no significant impact on poor children's educational enrolment at the high school level (Khiem et al., 2020). In 2018, it said it would exempt tuition fees for junior high school students, but there does not seem to have been progress on this issue (Xinhuanet, 2018).

These policies are insufficient. More funds for preschools are needed in minority areas such as the Mekong area (Hien, 2021; Vietnam News, 2015). The government is not really interested in this issue, as it said that the Mekong province should promote privatisation or self-controlled financial mechanisms (Vietnam News, 2015). One of the reasons for this neglect could be racist prejudice against minorities. For some authors, government officials need to address their own negative perceptions of ethnic groups (DeJaeghere et al., 2015).

EU policies on education would promote the EU's 'normative' agenda of reducing poverty (Manners, 2002; Whitman, 2011). But the EU has had minimal impact on education. The EU was much more engaged with education in Vietnam in the early 2000s than today (Interview, Brussels, 2018a). Between 2002 and 2006, the EU gave €40 million for education and vocational training in Vietnam (European Union, 2007, p. 35). From 2006 to 2008, the EU worked with other donors and the government of Vietnam on the development of the new 'Education Strategic Plan 2008–2020' (European Union, 2010, pp. 74–75). EU assistance to the ministry 'failed' as the education management information system it supported was not implemented by Vietnamese officials. Vietnam has no transparent public expenditure management systems (this is still a problem today), so the EU could not evaluate how its funds were used (OECD, 2009, p. 15; World Bank, 2017b). EU aid for education in Vietnam was reduced, and the EU only spent €25 million from 2007 to 2013 (Interview, Brussels, 2022). Since then, it has only spent very small amounts of direct funding for schools (less than € one million).

Instead, from 2013 onwards, it started working for primary and secondary education with the Global

Partnership for Education (GPE), a World Bank project financed by the EU and other donors. From 2013 to 2016, Vietnam obtained a grant of $84 million from the GPE to create 'Vietnam Escuela Nueva'. New teaching and learning practices were introduced for the most disadvantaged groups of primary students (World Bank, 2016). From 2021 to 2025, the EU contributes indirectly to all levels of education in Vietnam as one of the donors, giving a total of 25 million to the GPE, which has a programme in Vietnam (Global Partnership for Education, 2021, p. 9). An interviewee ("Interview, Brussels," 2018b) said that a reason for the general lack of focus on education is that third states decide which policies the EU funds, and Vietnam did not select education. Instead, it selected energy and good governance. The EU adding to or going against the selection of the Vietnamese government could be considered patronising. But it is important to listen to the voices of citizens who are poor and minorities in Vietnam and who 'dream' of education (Asian Development Bank, 2018).

The EU appears to have some interest in education at higher levels. The 2020 free trade agreement between the EU and Vietnam refers to education, but only as the service of higher education, which can be provided by European entities in Vietnam and by Vietnamese entities in the EU.

The Erasmus+ and 'Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degree' programmes have been open to university students in Vietnam since 2005, and the EU says it will contribute to the creation of a European-standard university in Hanoi, majoring in economics, sustainable and green development and business administration. Nine EU educational establishments, 20 leading European universities and several Vietnamese educational agencies are interested in this project (VietnamPlus, 2021).

Team Europe provides support to upscale 'Technical Vocational Education and Training' (TVET) with digital skills, and it will ensure stronger participation by the private sector. This includes policy dialogue with the lead Vietnamese Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA; European Union, 2021, p. 13). Given the problems with vocational training discussed above, more could be done in this area.

5 | CONCLUSION: A CALL TO PRIORITISE EDUCATION POLICIES IN VIETNAM AND IN OTHER STATES WORLDWIDE AND TO LISTEN TO THE CONCERNS OF CITIZENS

The regional and ethnic disparities in education policies and economic opportunities have a long-term impact on the social and economic development of Vietnam, in particular on labour migration and human trafficking (Chen, 2018; "Interviews," 2017; Le Thuc & Nguyen Thi Thu, 2016, p. 6; Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training, 2013, 2016). In Vietnam and in other states worldwide, local and external actors could prioritise education and rethink the importance of education for development through economic, rights and capability perspectives. Vietnam could concentrate on fighting corruption in education. Ray Fisman and Miriam Golden suggest higher salaries for teachers, the establishment of an independent anti-corruption agency for monitoring and enforcement of sanctions against corrupt officials, and transparency through surveys and the press. They give the example of corruption in education policies in Uganda. The fact that for each dollar sent to school districts in Uganda, only 20 cents arrived was publicised by the government in the late 1990s. As a result, over the following five years, 80 cents arrived in school districts (Fisman & Golden, 2017, p. 234, 242). In Vietnam, a similar process occurred with land rights. After the publication of several surveys on the high frequency of 'informal payments' for access to land-use rights certificates (LURC), the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment launched a hotline in 2016 for citizens to report on bribery during the LURC acquisition process. As a result, there was a reduction from 44 per cent to 23 per cent in such payments (Democratic Audit, 2018). A hotline to report bribery in education might be useful. The Global Partnership for Education does this. It is possible to report suspected cases of fraud or misuse of grants and sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment within its programmes.

As in France, teachers in poor areas in Vietnam and other states could be paid more than in other areas. States could follow the Chinese example, where education is compulsory for nine years and free in rural China (Zhang, 2011, p. 7). At the university level, Vietnam and other states could focus on building technological capabilities and facilitating the transfer of knowledge for all students (Kruss et al., 2015; Stiglitz, 1998, p. 5).

The EU cannot be expected to have a major influence on reducing inequalities worldwide. However, given its commitment to respecting international law, it could exert some influence through its economic relations with third states. To facilitate the 'double-decentring' of policy-making, by considering the concerns of both governments and citizens in partner states, it could organise civil society forums in which citizens would have a say on one development priority, which could be education, or another, such as health or gender equality. This is paramount for the EU's contribution to development, and it would give less of a colonial appearance to EU aid policies (Langan, 2018; Ruacan, 2016).

The EU could afford to allocate more than seven per cent of its development aid to education, which is the maximum amount it currently provides to developing states (European Union, 2023a, p. 65). Total international aid for education currently stands at 10.8 per cent. The EU could lead by example and make sure at least 11 per cent of its overall development aid is

allotted to education (UNESCO, 2020). It could ensure development aid is long-term and especially available for primary and secondary schools (Arndt, 1987; Heyneman, 2005). EU policies in Vietnam are far from concentrating on education; instead, they focus on energy transition, climate action, green sustainable development and economic governance, including public finance management, digital transformation and the promotion of the rule of law and access to justice. Giving a bigger share of development aid for education is essential for economic and social development (European Union, 2023b). The EU could replicate in Vietnam and other partner states the joint European Union–China project it undertook in 2001 to improve the quality of compulsory education with the goal of reducing poverty in a poor province, Gansu (Robinson & Wenwu, 2009).[5] It could apply the policy it implemented in Bangladesh, where EU budget support for primary education 'helped greatly' to increase the attendance of girls in primary and lower-secondary education (European Union, 2019, pp. 18–19). Some researchers argue that aid should not only focus on the state; it could also help parents pay for private schools and finance local social enterprises (Karlidag-Dennis et al., 2020; Tooley, 2015, p. 228).

Funding is not the only answer to improving the participation of minorities and poor people in education. The EU could suggest the creation of an independent anti-corruption agency that could analyse corruption in EU partner states and in the EU too. It could share knowledge drawn from its European Disability Strategy 2010–2020. A clause could be included in its trade agreement that would request reports be made on progress on education policies for the poor and minorities and in respect of international law, such as UNESCO recommendations. Another clause could encourage European and Vietnamese companies to focus on lifelong employee training and training for innovation (ILO, 2021, p. 68).

As proposed by Philip Alston, the EU could create an accountability index to measure the extent to which states formally comply with treaties in terms of ratification and reporting (Alston, 2000). With increased liberalisation of the economy in Vietnam –and in other states in the world, the EU, committed to reducing poverty, has a responsibility to include in its foreign policy the promotion of education as a capability and a human right for all.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

No conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is not available.

ENDNOTES

[1] The General Assembly of the United Nations established 17 SDGs in 2015. It called for worldwide action among governments, business and civil society to end poverty and create a life of dignity and opportunity for all.

[2] Interviews were conducted in Vietnam with officials and citizens in the Ministry of Industry and Trade, the Vietnamese Trade Promotion Agency, UNICEF, the EU delegation, the EU Vietnam Multilateral Trade Assistance Project, the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, and the tourist industry in Sapa and Cat Ba. Interviewees were asked to answer the general question, 'how can the European Union contribute to economic and social development in Vietnam?', so their unexpected answers on education were a good basis for insights. Interviews were conducted in Brussels with officials in the Directorate General for Trade, and the Directorate for Cooperation and Development (now known as the Directorate General for International Partnerships or DG INTPA) in the European Commission, the *European External Action Service*, and the European Economic and *Social Committee*.

[3] It is impossible to know how Vietnam did in 2018, as it did not participate in the assessment of global competence in reading, mathematics and science in the PISA 2018 survey.

[4] QS World University Rankings is a ranking made by the higher education analyst Quacquarelli Symonds (QS).

[5] Projects can be difficult to implement. Some NGOs have tried without success to improve the quality of primary education (Carr-Hill, 2011). Others have promoted with some success the idea that it is important to give a 'voice' to pupils on what they expect from their education, and others have implemented the concept of 'Escuela Nueva' in approximately 4000 Vietnamese schools (Phelps et al., 2014).

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