Research Article

Vietnamese Government's Policy Strategies to Address Human Trafficking (2017–2021)

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Abstract

Vietnam, as one of the countries in the ASEAN region, has various complex factors that encourage the occurrence of human trafficking problems. This study aims to analyze the strategies of the Vietnamese government in overcoming human trafficking in the 2017-2021 period using qualitative methods. It applies the concept of the anti-trafficking strategy approach as outlined by Cornelius Friesendorf, which emphasizes four key approaches in addressing human trafficking. The study result shows the Vietnamese government's strategies in the 2017-2021 period to implement anti-trafficking strategies through policies to prevent and address the root causes, strengthen and enforce the law, protect victims, and establish partnerships. In these strategies, the government also focuses on victim protection by providing rescue, recovery, education, and economic capacity-building services to non-governmental organizations. There has been progress in policy formation and emphasis on the number of victims. On the other hand, there are challenges, such as a lack of coordination between the central and regional governments, limited resources, and inconsistent law enforcement officials, which serve as obstacles to effectively addressing human trafficking.

Keywords: Human Trafficking, Vietnam, Policy, Government, Strategy

INTRODUCTION

Human trafficking remains a pressing issue in International Relations, a grave violation of human rights that transcends national borders. Defined as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of individuals through exploitative means such as force, coercion, fraud, or deception for exploitation. Typical forms of exploitation include forced labor, sexual exploitation, forced marriage, forced begging, organ removal, and forced marriage. Human trafficking has devastating effects, leaving survivors with enduring physical and psychological trauma (UN, 2024). Human trafficking, also called modern slavery, continues to evolve in various forms and has become more organized and adaptive to changing global conditions, including digital platforms that traffickers use to recruit and exploit victims. In addition, the forms of human trafficking exploitation that occur are gender-dependent, with women being more likely to be victims of sexual exploitation. At the same time, men are more likely to be trafficked in the construction sector. World problems such as war, deteriorating rule of law, climate change that strains livelihoods, exacerbates poverty, and other issues can create

situations of vulnerability to human trafficking (UN, 2023). Overall, human trafficking is still entrenched in many societies as a persistent problem that requires deep and sustained efforts to address.

Globally, between 2017 and 2021, the number of trafficking victims fluctuated significantly. Particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of trafficking victims has seen an alarming increase, with a peak of 118,932 victims identified in 2019 (State, 2022). Furthermore, according to the Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2024, since the pandemic, the number of human trafficking victims has increased with a global detection increase of 25 percent between 2019 and 2022 (UN, 2024). Although the number of cases within ASEAN is presumed high, during the 2017–2021 period, precise data remain incomplete due to inconsistent reporting practices among member states, including discrepancies in detailing victims' nationality, investigations, and suspect identifications (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2022). This period was particularly crucial as it encompassed pre-pandemic and early pandemic phases, offering a comprehensive view of shifting trafficking trends, policy responses, and systemic vulnerabilities exposed by the global crisis.

Vietnam, as part of the ASEAN region, experiences substantial human trafficking concerns, acting both as a source and transit country. Historically, Vietnam has grappled with significant victim numbers, rising from 938 victims in 2007 to 1,128 victims in 2016. However, from 2017 to 2021, Vietnam witnessed a gradual decrease in identified trafficking victims, declining from 670 in 2017 to 126 in 2021 (State, 2022). Multiple interconnected factors influence human trafficking in Vietnam. Pervasive gender discrimination significantly increases women's vulnerability, pushing them towards seeking opportunities that, unfortunately, can lead to exploitation. Socioeconomic vulnerabilities, particularly poverty in rural and border areas, further compound this risk by limiting legitimate economic options, thereby making deceptive job offers from traffickers appealing. Additionally, limited educational opportunities restrict access to critical information, leaving potential victims unaware of human trafficking risks and unable to identify exploitative situations. Lastly, Vietnam's strategic geographic position, bordering countries such as China, Laos, and Cambodia, which also face significant trafficking issues, facilitates cross-border trafficking networks, making effective prevention and control challenging. The deeply entrenched patriarchal norms exacerbate vulnerabilities among women, compelling them to seek alternative livelihoods and inadvertently becoming susceptible to exploitation and trafficking (Duong, 2012).

Poverty, particularly pronounced in Vietnam's rural and border regions, further heightens the risk of exploitation. Limited economic opportunities coupled with low educational attainment create an environment conducive to human trafficking operations. These socioeconomic disparities contribute to substantial rural-urban divides, enhancing susceptibility to deceptive employment offers that frequently culminate in forced labour or sexual exploitation (Anh Duong, 2012). Moreover, forced marriages involving Vietnamese women trafficked into China illustrate a prominent exploitation form within Vietnam's trafficking landscape (Liu,

Qiu, and Zhang, 2021). Alarmingly, traffickers often exploit existing community bonds, leveraging familial and social trust to facilitate trafficking processes (LeBaron, 2014; Shrestha et al., 2015)

Previous studies addressing human trafficking mitigation strategies have predominantly focused on internal economic empowerment initiatives or external cooperative mechanisms involving law enforcement collaboration and international partnerships. For instance, Tran Thanh Hung and Le Tien Hoang (2020) highlight that addressing economic vulnerabilities through vocational training and microfinance significantly reduces trafficking susceptibility. Do Thi Thanh Binh (2020) underscores the critical role of transnational legal cooperation, specifically in managing complex border-region trafficking dynamics. Meanwhile, Fitriyanti and Salsabila (2023) emphasize cooperation with international organizations such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to strengthen law enforcement capacity and victim assistance services (Ramadhani, Haryadi and Apsari, 2023).

However, existing literature exhibits significant research gaps by focusing narrowly on single-aspect interventions, neglecting the holistic integration of victim protection, internal law enforcement strategies, and preventive measures. This fragmented approach limits comprehensive understanding and effectiveness in combating human trafficking in Vietnam. Thus, a critical research gap exists in evaluating integrated multi-dimensional strategies, combining internal policy mechanisms, preventive socio-economic initiatives, victim protection frameworks, and cross-sector partnerships.

This study systematically evaluates Vietnam's anti-trafficking strategies from 2017 to 2021, addressing existing research gaps. This period represents a critical turning point in Vietnam's national anti-trafficking strategy, as it coincides with the implementation of the second phase of the National Action Program for the Prevention and Eradication of Human Trafficking (2016–2020), followed by transitional measures leading to the 2021–2025 plan. Notably, from 2017 onwards, Vietnam strengthened its engagement in regional and international cooperation in combating trafficking in persons, reflecting a more comprehensive and security-oriented approach (Huong & Vu, 2023).

Against the backdrop, this article analyzes comprehensive government actions, including prevention policies aimed at socioeconomic root causes, strengthened law enforcement via legal revisions and regional treaty adherence, proactive victim protection through rescue, rehabilitation, reintegration programs, and strategic partnerships with NGOs. Emphasizing the significance of an integrated anti-trafficking strategy, this analysis highlights that coordinated approaches ensure more effective resource utilization, enhanced victim protection and underscores the necessity for cohesive collaboration among governmental and international actors to combat human trafficking sustainably.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative research type that focuses on the strategies of the Government of Vietnam in addressing human trafficking in 2017-2021. This period

is selected for its historical relevance for its historical relevance and analytical value, capturing the period when Vietnam shifted its focus towards a more structured and multidimensional anti-trafficking strategy. The timeframe also provides for complete policy development, allowing for a review of more appropriate and effective policies in the future. Furthermore, a qualitative approach is more suitable for a deeper analysis of the policies, strategies, and programs implemented. In addition, human trafficking is a complex phenomenon where a qualitative approach can comprehensively explain the social and economic factors that encourage crime to occur. The qualitative approach can also explore the role of various actors and the government in contributing to the anti-trafficking strategy.

This study used empirical evidence to show the government's strategy in addressing human trafficking through policies, implementation, and outcomes achieved. The study also considers the contributions of institutions involved in strategies to address human trafficking together with the government, providing a comprehensive picture of the various strategies that have been made and the challenges and successes that have been achieved. The data collection technique used in this research is a literature-based method, which involves a comprehensive review and analysis of secondary sources to address the research questions.

This includes collecting data from a wide range of digital sources such as academic books, journal articles, government documents, legal frameworks, Vietnam's annual official trafficking report, publications of NGOs in Vietnam, websites and official statistics issued by national and international agencies, including the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the United States Department of State's Trafficking in Persons Report. These sources were selected based on their credibility, relevance to the 2017-2021 period, and contribution to understanding Vietnam's anti-trafficking strategy.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK
Concept Anti-Trafficking Strategy

Human trafficking is a crime that violates human rights, which includes illegal or prohibited trafficking in human beings for exploitation. Exploitation itself includes the exploitation of prostitution of persons or other forms of exploitation with sexual orientation, forced labor or forced labor, the practice of slavery or other practices similar to slavery, or the taking of human beings in their entirety And Organs. The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) recommended principles and guidelines on human rights and trafficking, stating that the human rights of trafficking victims should be at the center of all efforts to prevent and combat trafficking, including protecting and accompanying victims. (OHCHR), 2003). Therefore, states have a responsibility under international law to act to prevent trafficking, investigate and prosecute traffickers, and protect trafficked victims.

Cornelius Friesendorf, in his book *Strategies Against Human Trafficking: The Role of the Security Sector*, highlights the complex interplay between security policies and human rights in the global response to trafficking. This book is an

important key reference due to its critical and comprehensive framework for understanding anti-trafficking strategies. In-depth, it offers a multidisciplinary and multisectoral model that goes beyond conventional law enforcement approaches, emphasizing the importance of involving various actors, including state institutions, international organizations, and civil society, in prevention and victim protection. Friesendorf's analysis is valuable for its critique of over-securitized responses to human trafficking, which often prioritize state security over being victim centered. The book is crucial in providing a balanced perspective of anti-trafficking strategies that integrate human security and state interests. This makes it an effective tool for evaluating whether national strategies are truly addressing the root causes and human dimensions of human trafficking.

The approach used in the anti-trafficking strategy is based on three main pillars or the "3P Approach", namely Prevention, Protection (victim protection) and Prosecution (law enforcement against the perpetrator). Prevention is done by addressing the problem's root cause and increasing public awareness. Victim protection emphasizes the rapid response to rescue victims and the importance of providing medical, legal, psychological, and sustainable reintegration services. Meanwhile, law enforcement against human traffickers is related to legal action for perpetrators, capacity building of legal institutions, establishing a legal basis, and establishing a national action program. (Friesendorf, 2009). The three main pillars are then equipped with one aspect that is no less important, which aims to strengthen and maximize the anti-trafficking strategy: Partnership. Partnerships are related to cooperation or collaboration with regional countries or partnerships with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in implementing strategic actions for anti-human trafficking.

Human trafficking is a complex problem, so strategies to respond to these crimes must be multi-faceted and comprehensive. Therefore, with targeted and complementary coordination, collaboration from various stakeholders such as regional organizations, government agencies, civil society, NGOs, and the private sector is needed (UNODC, 2012). (Friesendorf, 2009) also, the security sector has a significant role in the anti-trafficking strategy. The security sector includes several agencies, including police and law enforcement, border security guards, judicial institutions, international organizations, and NGOs.

Institutions that are included in the security sector function in protecting victims, arresting and punishing traffickers, guarding borders, ensuring access to justice, and providing technical assistance and advocacy to victims. Security sector reforms are also important in improving the effectiveness of handling human trafficking, which involves increasing the capacity of law enforcement officials to identify victims, preventing the involvement of security actors in human trafficking practices, and strengthening security governance (Friesendorf, 2009).

In addition, the concept of an anti-trafficking strategy focuses on the implementation of four comprehensive actions that are also supported by a more systematic policy implementation, strengthening a more coordinated human trafficking countering network, and continuous research and evaluation of the

strategies that have been made. The concept of an anti-trafficking strategy can be a strong foundation for understanding the Vietnamese government's strategies to address human trafficking because this approach highlights the multidimensional aspects of combating human trafficking, which is in line with Vietnam's policy in dealing with this issue comprehensively.

RESULT AND ANALYSIS

Vietnam has over the years, endeavored to confront the complex and growing challenge of human trafficking, gradually building legal, and developing institutional and cooperation frameworks to combat this crime more effectively. To understand the efforts made so far, a comprehensive conceptual approach is needed to analyze Vietnam's strategy in addressing trafficking. Cornelius Friesendorf's *Strategies Against Human Trafficking: The Role of the Security Sector* serves as the foundational approach in this research, as it offers a critical and multidimensional anti-human trafficking strategy to evaluate how national strategies can integrate cross-sector coordination and victim-centered approaches (Friesendorf, 2009). Furthermore, the multidimensional anti-trafficking strategy includes several key approaches, namely, prevention, protection, prosecution, and partnerships. This is the key to analyzing Vietnam's strategy against human trafficking.

In order to understand the government's response to human trafficking, there are at least four initial policies set by the Vietnamese government. First, the government launched the National Action Program for the Prevention and Countering of Child Trafficking for the period 2004–2010, which served as an early framework for combating trafficking-related crimes, particularly involving children. Second, Vietnam strengthened its regional cooperation by signing a joint memorandum of understanding with Cambodia, Thailand, China, and Myanmar. This initiative led to the establishment of the Coordinated Mekong Ministerial Initiative Against Trafficking (COMMIT), a multilateral partnership that now includes six countries and plays a vital role in facilitating cross-border anti-trafficking coordination (Nguyen, 2020). Then, in 2011, the government enacted Law No. 66/2011/QH12, which is known as the Law on Human Trafficking Prevention and Combat. This law provides a legal basis for the prevention, handling, and prosecution of human trafficking cases while also ensuring the protection, reception, and support of trafficking victims (Pham, 2023). Finally, 2015, Vietnam revised its legal framework by adopting the Vietnam Penal Code 2015 under Law No. 100/2015/QH13, replacing the 1999 Penal Code. This revision further codified criminal provisions related to human trafficking, demonstrating the government's continued commitment to strengthening its legal response.

The Vietnamese Government's strategies to address human trafficking before 2017 were largely still focused on establishing a basic legal framework. However, since 2017, the Vietnamese government has begun to increase its strategies in addressing human trafficking with more comprehensive policies and a focus on anti-trafficking strategies. The strategies made by the Government of Vietnam in addressing human trafficking in 2017-2021 can be analyzed through four anti-

trafficking approaches: prevention, protection, law enforcement, and partnership strategies. This highlights the government's commitment to comprehensively addressing human trafficking by integrating various multisectoral approaches.

Trafficking in Prevention Policy and Addressing the Root Causes

An important aspect of eradicating human trafficking is prevention strategies to minimize crime and strategies to address the root causes of human trafficking to tackle crimes that have occurred. The human trafficking prevention policy established by the Government of Vietnam in 2017-2021 is listed in the following table 1.

Table 1. Trafficking in Persons Prevention Policy 2017-2021

No.	Government Policy	Year	Key Focus
1.	Implementation of the National Target Program for Sustainable Poverty Reduction for the period 2016-2020	2016-2020	A national target program to significantly and evenly reduce poverty rates across the country and focus on disadvantaged areas
2.	National Program for the Prevention and Eradication of Human Trafficking with a Vision Towards 2030	2021	Ratification of the national action plan on the prevention and eradication of TIP in the period 2021-2025 with a vision until 2030 (Ramadhani et al., 2023)
3.	Determination of the National Strategy for Gender Equality for the 2021-2030 Period	2021	Narrowing the gender gap and creating gender equality in sectors of social life

Source: D. Van, 2020; Hoa, 2022

Policy The Vietnamese government in the prevention of human trafficking is seen in the policy of ratification of the national action plan for the prevention and eradication of TIP in the 2021-2025 period with a vision towards 2030 and the policy of implementing a national strategy for gender equality for the 2021-2030 period. From 2017 to 2021, the government of Vietnam will implement a national action program to prevent and eradicate human trafficking from 2016 to 2020. Likewise, the national strategy for gender equality implemented in this period is a national strategy for 2011-2020. As a continuous strategy, in 2021, the government renewed and re-established the two programs to continue long-term preventive actions.

The national poverty reduction target program is a strategic initiative of the government that aims to reduce poverty rates significantly and sustainably. The program is designed to accelerate the rate of poverty reduction, limit the return of poverty, and create conditions for poor individuals and families in remote areas to access essential social services better. Specifically, this national poverty reduction target targets an average reduction of 1-1.5% per year in the national poverty rate, with a special focus on districts and sub-districts that face severe difficulties, where it is expected that the reduction will reach 4% per year following the national poverty standards for the 2016-2020 period (Vovworld, 2015).

In 2017-2021, the Government of Vietnam is implementing the National Target Program for Sustainable Poverty Reduction for 2016-2020. The program is coordinated by the Ministry of Manpower, Persons with Disabilities, and Social

Affairs (MOLISA), the central government agency responsible for planning, implementing, and monitoring various poverty reduction initiatives. Meanwhile, MOLISA, the Ministry of Planning and Investment, and the Ministry of Finance formulated an action plan and allocated the necessary budget. Furthermore, the program is implemented by the provincial and district governments under local conditions. These strategic actions include improving access to basic social services, infrastructure development in poor areas, economic empowerment and skills training, and social assistance and subsidies. Based on the program's implementation, Vietnam has reduced the national poverty rate from 4.25% in 2016 to around 2.75% in 2020, meaning that about 6 million people have successfully lifted themselves out of poverty (D. Van, 2020). This program is carried out to overcome the most important root cause of human trafficking, namely poverty. Through poverty alleviation, the Vietnamese government seeks to reduce the vulnerability of the poor and vulnerable to exploitation, including the risk of becoming a victim of human trafficking.

Furthermore, the National Program for the Prevention and Eradication of Human Trafficking is a program that functions to coordinate all strategies to eradicate human trafficking throughout the territory of Vietnam. In 2017-2021, the Government of Vietnam has implemented various concrete actions in the implementation of the national action program for the period 2016-2020, which include the establishment of a daily action program agency for the prevention and eradication of human trafficking, increased international cooperation by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Vietnam (MOFA), the provision of rehabilitation services for victims through the Wisma Damai facility by MOLISA, the capacity building of law enforcement with the Ministry of Public Security (H. Van, 2024). As a sustainable strategy, the Government of Vietnam endorsed the National Action Program for the Prevention and Eradication of Human Trafficking for 2021-2025 with a Vision Towards 2030.

In addition, to strengthen the implementation of the Program to Prevent and Eradicate Trafficking in Persons with a Vision Towards 2030, the Government of Vietnam specifically established an Interdisciplinary Working Group and Steering Committee 138. These two agencies are under the auspices of the Ministry of Public Security, which coordinates with other government agencies. The Interdisciplinary Working Group consists of representatives of government agencies and ministries that function to formulate policies, coordinate between agencies, and establish international cooperation on human trafficking. Meanwhile, the 138 Steering Committee is responsible for supervising and evaluating programs and policies on the prevention and control of human trafficking. The agency continues to maintain coordination between sectors under the direction of the Ministry of Public Security to ensure effective and sustainable implementation of the program.

Then, in the 2017-2021 period, the Government of Vietnam implemented the national strategy for gender equality for the period 2011-2021, which aims to narrow the gender gap and continue to create equal conditions for women and men to be able to participate in various sectors of social life that support the sustainable

development of the country (Hoa, 2022). As a form of evaluation and implementation of sustainable strategies, the government has again established the National Strategy for Gender Equality for 2021-2030. The target is to increase the role of ethnic minority women in positions in various sectors such as politics, economy, health, and education. These strategies are carried out as a form of the government's commitment to prevent violence and human trafficking, especially against women. Through the gender equality strategy, the government seeks to create equal opportunities for men and women to live freely and independently.

Law Enforcement and Law Enforcement Policy Against Human Trafficking

The government's strategies in overcoming human trafficking, especially in the legal aspect, certainly require a solid foundation and reference. Therefore, various regulatory policies are established to implement sustainable handling strategies. The efforts to strengthen the law and enforce the law on human trafficking include policy evaluation and capacity building of law enforcement officials, which aim to maximize legal enforcement against human trafficking perpetrators. All policies related to law enforcement established by the Government of Vietnam in the 2017-2021 period are listed in table 2.

Table 2. Law Enforcement and Law Enforcement Policy Against Human Trafficking

No.	Government Policy	Year	Key Focus
1.	Revision of *the Penal Code 2015*, which was passed in Law No. 12/2017/QH14	2017	Revision of the Vietnamese Penal Code 2015 (Law No. 100/2015/QH13) to improve legal consistency and adapt criminal law to international standards
2.	Ratification of the ASEAN Convention against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (ACTIP)	2017	Ratification of legal frameworks to prevent and eradicate trafficking in human beings, especially against women and children, in the ASEAN region
3.	Capacity building of law enforcement officials by the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) and collaboration with UNODC	2017-2021	Procurement of training of law enforcement officers in dealing with human traffickers by the Ministry of Public Security, as well as sharing legal information to update Vietnam's legal framework in the fight against transnational crime, including human trafficking

Source: Huong & Vu, 2023; UNODC, 2021c

The policy of strengthening the law is seen in revising the 2015 Penal Code and ratifying the ASEAN Convention against Human Trafficking (ACTIP). The revision seeks to improve and strengthen Vietnam's criminal law against human traffickers. Meanwhile, law enforcement policies that strengthen the judicial system can be seen through the capacity building of law enforcement officials and international organizations, namely UNODC.

In 2017, the Vietnamese Government made amendments or revisions to the 2015 Vietnamese Penal Code, which is a criminal code (KUHP) against human trafficking. The Criminal Code is the cornerstone of Vietnamese law enforcement that criminalizes offenses and establishes penalties. The law includes provisions for the prevention of human trafficking, the handling of offenses, and the protection of victims. Through the revision, the Government of Vietnam expanded the definition of the crime of human trafficking to include the movement of persons for commercial purposes, forced labor, and sexual exploitation and imposed stricter sanctions. This revision also includes increasing protection measures for victims and affirming criminal responsibility for legal entities (corporations), including the role of security forces, prosecutors, and courts in handling criminal cases (Huong & Vu, 2023). The revision was carried out to minimize legal ambiguity, as well as ensure that Vietnam's criminal law meets international law enforcement standards related to human trafficking and human rights.

Furthermore, government policies in ratifying the *ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, especially Women, and Children* (ACTIP) shows the Vietnamese Government's awareness that strengthening the law through ratification of the ASEAN Convention is needed as a rule that complements Vietnam's domestic legal basis in the anti-trafficking strategy. The ratification of the convention also demonstrates the commitment of the Government of Vietnam to establish regional partnerships related to the handling of trafficking in order to improve coordination in efforts to eradicate trafficking in persons. In addition, this regional cooperation allows for the exchange of information, best practices, and capacity building of law enforcement officials in handling human trafficking cases more effectively. Meanwhile, in 2020, the Government of Vietnam enacted a plan that requires all ministries, relevant agencies, and provincial agencies to implement their plans for implementing ACTIP (Huong & Vu, 2023). In addition, maximum law enforcement against human traffickers certainly requires adequate capacity and capabilities from judicial institutions and law enforcement officials. Therefore, the Government of Vietnam is trying to increase the capacity of law enforcement officials and employees in charge of dealing with human trafficking.

The government establishes no special regulations to increase the capacity of law enforcement officers. However, the Government of Vietnam directly provides the capacity building program by organizing various trainings on the law on the prosecution, prevention, detection, and handling of traffickers. The entire training program provided to security and law enforcement agencies is coordinated by the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) from the central to the regional level (Nhan, 2021). Legal capacity building is also done through cooperation with international organizations, namely the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). The cooperation was held to update Vietnam's legal framework in combating transnational crime, including human trafficking, through workshops. More than 60 prosecutors and government officials from Vietnam, as well as UNODC and foreign criminal justice experts, participated in the exchange of information and shared expertise on mutual legal aid in Vietnam, practical difficulties faced, and results

achieved (UNODC, 2021c). The information collected and studies conducted by UNODC will also serve as a basis for the Government of Vietnam to align national law with international standards and enhance international integration and cross-border cooperation.

Human Trafficking Victims Protection Policy

An important aspect of addressing trafficking is strategies to protect victims of trafficking. Victims of trafficking are mostly subjected to prolonged physical and psychological violence and exploitation, thus requiring comprehensive interventions for their recovery and reintegration into society. Therefore, the Government of Vietnam has adopted various protection policies for victims, which include rescuing victims, establishing policies to provide support, and providing rehabilitation, reintegration, and repatriation services. However, the victim protection strategies, which include rescue, provision of rehabilitation, reintegration, and repatriation services, do not appear in the form of regulations but directly involve collaborative actions between the Government of Vietnam and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). The Vietnamese Government's policies related to the protection of victims of human trafficking in the 2017-2021 period are listed in table 3.

Table 3. Human Trafficking Victims Protection Policy

No.	Government Policy	Year	Key Focus
1.	Establishment of the *Law on Legal Aid 2017*	2017	Providing free legal aid to vulnerable groups, including victims of trafficking, to protect their rights and improve access to justice
2.	Establishment of Vietnamese Government Regulation No. 20/2021/ND-CP	2021	Improved operational procedures to prevent human trafficking, protect victims, and strengthen law enforcement

Source: Forum, 2018; Nhan, 2021; H. Van, 2024

The government's strategies to protect victims of human trafficking are strengthened through the establishment of a support policy. Support includes free legal aid support and direct assistance for victims. The two policies related to the provision of support complement each other, where victims of human trafficking need access to the law and direct assistance to be able to support their living needs.

In 2017, the government of Vietnam sought to provide legal aid to all victims through state legal aid centers and organizations that participated in legal aid. The country's legal aid center provides services at provincial and district levels within a network of trafficking protection services. The Vietnamese Government's strategies in providing legal aid were then stipulated in the Vietnam Legal Aid Law of 2017 (Huong & Vu, 2023). The regulation is designed to provide legal assistance to underprivileged citizens, vulnerable groups, victims of human trafficking, unprotected children, and citizens facing human rights violations. Legal assistance also includes legal consultation, assistance in court, mediation, and legal information (Forum, 2018).

In its implementation, *Law on Legal Aid 2017* establishes legal aid centers at the national and regional levels that provide legal consultation services, assistance in court, and legal advocacy for beneficiaries. In addition, the law also regulates mechanisms for cooperation between government agencies, international organizations, and NGOs in expanding the scope of legal aid services, including in remote areas and vulnerable communities. The Vietnamese government, through the Ministry of Justice, is responsible for overseeing the implementation of this law and ensuring that legal aid services are widely accessible, including to victims of human trafficking who often face obstacles in the legal system. The law also strengthens the protection mechanisms for witnesses and victims, ensuring they can testify without fear of threats or intimidation from traffickers (Forum, 2018; Huong & Vu, 2023).

Moreover, The Vietnamese government is seeking to create a more intensive legal space to help victims of human trafficking, with the promulgation of Vietnamese Government Regulation No. 20/2021/ND-CP. This regulation regulates the social assistance policy for social protection recipients. This includes a range of support for victims of trafficking, which means that benefits for victims of trafficking have been increased to meet their real needs. The support and allowances for trafficking victims in the regulation cover several things, first, essential needs and travel expenses. The Vietnamese government provides basic assistance for victims to meet their daily needs during rehabilitation and covers their travel expenses (H. Van, 2024; Vietnam, 2021).

In the 2017–2021 period, the Government of Vietnam, through the Ministry of Labor, Persons with Disabilities, and Social Affairs (MOLISA), provided a wide range of direct support services for victims of human trafficking. These services include basic needs, medical and psychological support, legal aid, vocational training, and financial assistance to support social and economic reintegration. For example, in 2020, of the 300 victims identified, 269 of received assistance that included initial psychological counseling, health counseling, legal and financial assistance, and vocational training (State Gov, 2020, 2023). In addition, the government also provides initial allowances and capital loans to victims to support their economic sustainability. This step aims to help victims rebuild their economic lives as part of reintegration.

The results of this study align with the findings of Thương (2025), which emphasizes the need for harmonization between national and international laws in efforts to prevent human trafficking in Vietnam. In addition, Huong and Vu (2023) identified challenges in the implementation of ACTIP, including a lack of coordination between agencies and limited resources. This study adds perspective by highlighting the important role of partnerships between governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in filling gaps in victim protection and policy implementation, which have not been extensively discussed in previous studies.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are also critical in filling the service gap that the government cannot reach. Blue Dragon Children's Foundation and Hagar International provide safe housing, psychosocial support, life skills training,

and legal aid. These programs are designed to help victims recover from trauma and prevent re-trafficking. International support also plays a role in strengthening these efforts. The United Nations Voluntary Trust Fund for Victims of Human Trafficking (UNVTF), managed by UNODC, has supported more than 90,000 victims globally through NGO partners, including in Vietnam. Assistance provided includes health services, psychosocial support, education, vocational training, and access to financial inclusion (UNODC, 2021a, 2021b).

In the 2017-2021 period, the Government of Vietnam, together with NGOs, engaged in efforts to protect victims of trafficking through rescue assistance of victims in rehabilitation services, including repatriation and reintegration services. As for the various NGOs operating in Vietnam, the NGOs involved explicitly with the Vietnamese Government in victim protection strategies are the Blue Dragon Foundation, Pacific Links Foundation (PALS), and Hagar Vietnam. First, the Blue Dragon Foundation, together with the Ministry of Public Security (MPS), is engaged in operations to rescue vulnerable people and rescue victims of exploitation, including human trafficking (repatriation), through *the Step Ahead* and *Legal Advocacy* programs. Then, rehabilitation and reintegration were carried out with the Ministry of Manpower, Invalidity and Social Affairs (MOLISA) in the *Project X* program. Overall, the program is implemented in all regions of Vietnam and is coordinated in a targeted manner by two relevant government agencies.

Second, the Pacific Links Foundation (PALS), together with the Ministry of Manpower, Invalidity and Social Affairs (MOLISA), is engaged in reintegration services throughout Vietnam that focus on education and economic capacity building through the provision of educational and job skills scholarships to support their reintegration into the community. Meanwhile, Hagar Vietnam focuses on protection efforts that prioritize trauma recovery and counseling for victims through rehabilitation services in The Whole Journey program.

Partnerships with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Addressing Human Trafficking

Human trafficking remains a complex phenomenon that demands comprehensive and sustained collaborative efforts. While the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2012) emphasizes the importance of multidimensional approaches involving diverse actors, the effectiveness of such synergy relies critically on clearly defined roles and responsibilities among stakeholders. The Vietnamese government's establishment of regulatory frameworks and national strategies signifies essential leadership. However, governmental efforts alone frequently fall short in addressing deeply embedded social and economic vulnerabilities that facilitate human trafficking. In this context, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) become indispensable, not merely as secondary actors filling gaps but as proactive agents driving innovative and localized protection measures.

The evidence suggests that NGOs' ability to build trust within vulnerable communities and provide holistic services, such as psychosocial rehabilitation, legal

advocacy, and economic empowerment, significantly enhances victim recovery and reduces the risk of re-victimization. Consequently, fostering authentic partnerships—not just superficial cooperation—between government agencies and NGOs is crucial. Without genuine collaboration and sustained mutual engagement, even the most comprehensive strategies risk becoming fragmented or ineffective, underscoring the critical need for a systematic and integrated partnership model. NGOs that are actively involved in supporting governments in dealing with human trafficking can be seen in table 4.

Table 4. Human Trafficking Victims Protection Policy

No.	Non-State Actors/NGOs	Focus Handling	Government Collaboration
1.	Blue Dragon Foundation	Victim rescue, rehabilitation (psychological support, education, and skills), and prevention of human trafficking *(Blue Dragon Annual Report)*.	Ministry of Manpower, Invalidity and Social Affairs (MOLISA), Ministry of Public Security (MPS).
2.	Pacific Links Foundation	Empowerment of education and improvement of economic capabilities for the vulnerable (prevention of human trafficking) *(PALS Annual Report)*.	The Ministry of Public Security (MPS) and Manpower, Invalidity, and Social Affairs (MOLISA).
3.	Hagar Vietnam	Trauma recovery services and social and economic reintegration assistance for victims of human trafficking and violence *(Hagar Impact Report)*.	Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Manpower, Incapacitation, and Social Affairs (MOLISA), Ministry of Public Security (MPS), and Provincial Authorities: Education, Health, People's Committee, Police.

Source: Processed by the author from various sources

Each NGO focuses on handling and providing protection services for victims. However, the difference in focus on handling serves to complement other aspects in maximizing protection for victims of human trafficking. The involvement of NGOs is clear proof of how anti-trafficking approaches can be implemented through strategic actions to create comprehensive protection for individuals from the threat of human trafficking.

First, Blue Dragon is a non-governmental organization (NGO) based in Hanoi, Vietnam. For more than 20 years, Blue Dragon has been a leading institution in the fight against human trafficking in Vietnam (Foundation, n.d.). Overall, Blue Dragon plays a role in crime prevention, rescue of trafficking victims, and the provision of support and rehabilitation, which is included in 7 work programs that can be grouped into three primary roles, namely (1) prevention: Prevention of human trafficking is realized in the *Stay in School* and *Tertiary Scholarship Program* (providing tuition fee waivers and educational scholarships for youth who cannot afford higher education). In addition, a *Safe and Sound program is* implemented in two central provinces, namely Hue and Dien Bien, in Vietnam (providing child

protection facilities in poor areas that include financial assistance, education, needs, life, and empowerment of local communities); (2) rescue: The focus of rescuing victims of crime is in the *Step Ahead* Program (rescuing street children trapped in violence, drugs, and sexual exploitation. The program also includes protections for street children who are vulnerable to trafficking). In particular, the program *Legal Advocacy* (rescue of victims of human trafficking and slavery, the provision of repatriation facilities, and the provision of legal support for access to legal guarantees and justice for victims); and (3) provision of Support and Rehabilitation: Support for victims is provided through *the Project X* program, which includes long-term psychological, emotional, and financial assistance to support their education, training, and independence. In addition, The *Psychology and Social Work program* provides counseling and therapy services for victims of trauma due to human trafficking, sexual exploitation, and physical and psychological abuse.

Blue Dragon's seven main programs for preventing crimes against humanity, including human trafficking, are carried out annually under the supervision of the Ministry of Labor, Invalidation, and Social Affairs (MOLISA), which is transparently reported in its annual report. As for the 2017-2021 period, Blue Dragon has provided various long-term positive impacts, including establishing Sunflower House as a shelter and rehabilitation house (Foundation, 2017). Then, the establishment of a Memorandum of Understanding with the People's Police Academy, which is a collaboration with the Ministry of Public Security of Vietnam (MPS) to step up the fight against human trafficking by developing training programs for more than 10,000 police officers and cadets per year across the country (Foundation, 2017). Blue Dragon also closed the legal loophole in Vietnam's criminal law by submitting letters and advocacy to the Vietnamese Ministry of Public Security (MPS). As a result, Vietnam's Ministry of Public Security removed barriers to legal counsel and ensured that the rights of victims of crime were protected (Foundation, 2019).

Second, the Pacific Links Foundation (PALS) is a non-governmental organization (NGO) operating in Vietnam with a primary focus on implementing strategic actions that emphasize the importance of economic empowerment and education programs for trafficking victims, the vulnerable, and the entire community. All efforts made by PALS in addressing human trafficking use a strategic approach based on individuals and communities and emphasize the importance of strengthening the economy and education through collaboration with the Ministry of Manpower, Invalidity and Social Affairs (MOLISA). The strategic steps are realized in specific programs that can be divided into two main focuses, namely the education program and the modern slavery prevention program: (1) Education Program: PALS invests comprehensively in disadvantaged women and youth to improve access to education and economic opportunities through the Girls Empowerment Mekong Scholarship (GEMS), Scholarships to Elevate Education & Develop Skills (SEEDS), Vocational Training Scholarship, Social Work Summer Institute (SWSI); and (2) Modern Slavery Prevention Program: PALS assists the government in anti-trafficking action on the Vietnamese border by providing access to education, housing, and reintegration services to the most vulnerable populations

and enabling new economic opportunities through Factory Awareness to Counter Trafficking (FACT), Returnee Initial Support Essentials (RISE), Compassion House & Reintegration Service, etc.

Increasing educational opportunities is intensively contained in the Scholarships to Elevate Education & Develop Skills (SEEDS) program and GEMS University. This program provides opportunities for students and students from underprivileged families to gain access to school and college to increase their capacity and support a better economic life. In addition, empowerment and increased economic opportunities are contained in the Vocational Training & Job Placement program, which provides vocational training, job readiness skills enhancement, and financial literacy for the community, especially young people, to protect them from human trafficking. These efforts have assisted the Government of Vietnam in providing access to education and improving the economy better in terms of preventing and addressing human trafficking. One form of collaboration between PALS and the Ministry of Manpower and Social Affairs (MOLISA) in preventive measures against human trafficking is through the Factory Awareness to Counter Trafficking (FACT) program, which aims to increase the awareness of factory workers about the dangers of human trafficking and skills in protecting themselves from exploitation. The program is a training program that provides learning workshops on trafficking prevention for workers and factory managers on human trafficking in Vietnam's industrial zones, especially in garments, electronics, and garment factories.

Third, Hagar Vietnam is part of the global network of Hagar International, a non-governmental organization (NGO) operating in the Asia-Pacific region, one of which is Vietnam. Hagar focuses on providing recovery and empowerment services for victims of slavery, extreme violence, abuse, and human trafficking. Hagar Vietnam is committed to helping victims cope with trauma, rebuild relationships with families and communities, and grow in confidence and resilience. The Hagar Vietnam programs in addressing human trafficking include: (1) the Counselling Project program is an individual mentoring program that provides counseling services face-to-face and via call, psychological assessment, and self-recovery from trauma. The program provided 856 counseling services for victims in Vietnam from 2017 to 2018 (Hagar, 2018); (2) anti-Human Trafficking and Domestic Violence Campaign, this program is implemented in schools and public spaces to raise public awareness. The program includes information on victims' rights, national laws, support services (Hagar Hotline), as well as information on the methods used by human traffickers when searching for targets. In 2017, 10 campaigns were implemented and reached around 7,500 people (Hagar, 2017); and (3) the Whole Journey Program is a development program that providing comprehensive support for victims. It includes trauma counseling, access to education, job skills training, and legal assistance. The program is supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Manpower, Disability and Social Affairs (MOLISA), along with the Yen Bai Satellite Care Centre and Peace House Shelter in Hanoi to provide shelter for victims.

Trauma-Informed Care (TIC) Training is a program about the principles of Trauma-Informed Care to increase capacity in dealing with victims of human trafficking. In this case, Hagar Vietnam was involved together with the Ministry of Public Security (MPS), as well as the Provincial Authority Agency (Education, Health, People's Committee, and Police) of Vietnam in training 970 participants consisting of the government, NGOs, academics, and international organizations (Hagar, 2019).

Based on the contribution of non-governmental organizations through various specific programs, in the 2017-2021 period, three NGOs actively operating in Vietnam, namely Blue Dragon, Pacific Links Foundation, and Hagar Vietnam, have made exemplary achievements in helping the government overcome human trafficking. Table 5 shows these NGO's achievements.

Table 5. Achievements of the Vietnamese Government and NGOs in the Protection of Victims of Human Trafficking in 2017-2021

No.	Non-State Actors/NGOs	Achievements
1.	Blue Dragon Foundation	Blue Dragon, together with the Vietnamese police under the supervision of the Ministry of Public Security (MPS), managed to rescue about 775 victims of human trafficking throughout Vietnam. Providing support to approximately 1,141 trafficking *survivors* across Vietnam, including repatriation, reintegration, legal assistance in court, education and training assistance, as well as psychological therapy and access to employment. Providing anti-trafficking training to approximately 19,207 students, 4,290 government officials, and 5,942 parents, teachers, and caregivers.
2.	Pacific Links Foundation	MOLISA provides anti-trafficking training to more than 26,400 factory managers and workers. Providing integration services to more than 294 survivors of human trafficking. With the Ministry of Public Security (MPS), more than 530 government officials and police officers are trained in law enforcement capacity building
3.	Hagar Vietnam	Assisting the Government of Vietnam in providing approximately 24,818 direct humanitarian support to victims of violence and human trafficking, including pandemic relief natural disasters through the direction of the Provincial Authority Agency

Source: Blue Dragon Annual Report; PALS Annual Report; Hagar Impact Report, 2017-2021

The three NGOs have different achievements in victim protection strategies. Although the amount of achievement varies, it does not mean that the greater the number of treatments, the greater the success. The number of achievements shows that every NGO is committed to making maximum efforts to protect victims of

human trafficking in Vietnam. As for the government's various policies and strategies in prevention, protection, law enforcement, and government partnerships with NGOs, the number of victims of human trafficking in the 2017-2021 period has decreased. Before 2017, Vietnam had a relatively high number of victims of human trafficking, whereas in 2016, it could reach 1128 victims. However, the number of Vietnamese trafficking victims decreased from 670 identified victims in 2017 to 126 victims in 2021 (State, 2022).

The number of victims of human trafficking showed positive results with a decrease in victims. However, this does not indicate the success of the Vietnamese Government in its strategies to address human trafficking. Reducing the number of victims of trafficking needs to be accompanied by adequate and sustainable victim handling and consistent preventive measures to achieve maximum results in all aspects to address trafficking comprehensively. Meanwhile, in the 2017-2021 period, Vietnam experienced a decline in the ranking of handling human trafficking. Based on the Trafficking in Person Report Vietnam 2022, in 2017-2018, Vietnam was in Tier 2, which decreased in 2019-2021 on the Tier 2 Watchlist (2WL) (State, 2022). Tier 2 signifies that the government has made significant efforts but has not met the minimum TVPA standards.

Meanwhile, Tier 2WL signifies shortcomings in the provision of protection services for victims. The tier is based on the level of efforts of the governments of countries in meeting the standards for handling trafficking established by the United States Department of State, known as the *Trafficking Victims Protection Act* (TVPA). Although it is not a binding law, the standard is indirectly used by many countries, including Vietnam, only as a reference or recommendation in adjusting measures to address human trafficking globally.

Vietnam's downgrade of human trafficking was influenced by the limitations experienced by the Government of Vietnam. The government's efforts in the anti-trafficking strategy, especially in handling victims, are experiencing obstacles because the coordination between institutions at the regional and provincial levels is still very weak during its implementation. In addition, persistent budget constraints hinder the implementation of adequate protection for victims (State, 2020, 2021). Implementing policies and strategies is often inconsistent in implementing actions between the central government and the regions, so the government's targets in the national action plan are not met.

On the other hand, the Ministry of Manpower (MOLISA) collaborates extensively with NGOs to provide protection service centers for vulnerable groups, centers have uneven staff, under-resources, and a lack of trained personnel to help victims. NGO Observers reported that some officials in the Mekong Delta Region deliberately ignored indicators of human trafficking or revoked formal victim designations to downplay the prevalence of crime for political reasons, leading to fewer referrals of victims to protection services (State, 2020, 2021). These things are what cause the handling of human trafficking to be still not optimal, which has an impact on the decline of Tier Vietnam. Overall, in 2017-2021, the Government of Vietnam has stepped up its strategies with a multidimensional approach to

addressing human trafficking. The Vietnamese government has succeeded in reducing the number of victims of human trafficking. However, the decline in the number of victims does not necessarily signal the success of the Vietnamese Government in addressing human trafficking.

CONCLUSION

The period 2017–2021 is a crucial point in Vietnam's national strategy to deal with trafficking as it includes the complete implementation phase of the second phase of the National Action Plan for the Prevention and Eradication of Trafficking in Persons (2016–2020) as well as the transition to a new strategy for the period 2021–2025. This time frame reflects a fundamental shift in Vietnamese policy, marked by a shift from a previously more fragmented approach to a multidimensional and more comprehensive approach, including prevention, victim protection, law enforcement, and collaboration with non-governmental organizations and international actors. Furthermore, this period is also critical because it includes the beginning of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic that dramatically strengthened social and economic vulnerability, confirming the importance of the adaptability of anti-trafficking strategies in a global crisis.

Thus, the relevance of this study lies in its analysis of how the Vietnamese government succeeded or failed in adjusting its policies in the face of the specific challenges of the period. The results of this study provide important insights into the dynamics of Vietnam's response to human trafficking, particularly related to the involvement of non-state actors that were previously underexplored in depth in the existing literature. The implications of this analysis offer a solid foundation for future policy evaluations, ensuring that strategies taken after 2021 will be more targeted and effective in addressing the evolving challenges of human trafficking.

The findings in this study show that the implementation of anti-trafficking strategies in Vietnam emphasizes a comprehensive approach by involving non-state actors more actively than in previous periods. The Vietnamese government's openness in collaborating with NGOs and international organizations reflects the awareness that human trafficking is a complex issue that cannot be effectively addressed by the state alone. However, weaknesses in inter-agency coordination and limited government resources at the local level remain significant challenges in ensuring consistency in policy implementation across Vietnam. Therefore, an important recommendation from this study is to strengthen structural coordination between central and local government agencies and improve transparency and communication mechanisms with NGOs to ensure that policies are made and effective in their implementation. Regular policy evaluations, as well as capacity building of anti-trafficking networks that include various government and non-governmental actors, need to be continuously improved so that efforts to combat trafficking become sustainable and have a real impact.

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