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ARTÍCULO DE INVESTIGACIÓN

Justicia social en Vietnam en el contexto de los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible: una revisión

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Resumen. La justicia social es un pilar fundamental del desarrollo sostenible y un elemento central de la Agenda 2030 de las Naciones Unidas. El propósito de este estudio es revisar sistemáticamente la situación de la justicia social en Vietnam en el contexto de los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible. Un marco analítico de tres pilares equidad en la distribución de los resultados del desarrollo, equidad en el acceso a las oportunidades de desarrollo y equidad en la garantía de los derechos sociales y el bienestar guía el análisis. Los resultados muestran que Vietnam ha logrado avances significativos en la promoción de la justicia social, en consonancia con los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible, particularmente en la reducción de la pobreza, la ampliación del acceso a la educación y la atención médica, y el desarrollo de sistemas de protección social. Sin embargo, persisten desafíos importantes, como la desigualdad de ingresos, las disparidades regionales, el acceso desigual a servicios de salud y educación de calidad, y la limitada participación social de los grupos vulnerables. El estudio concluye que, si bien la trayectoria de desarrollo de Vietnam muestra avances significativos hacia la justicia social en el contexto de los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible, se necesitan más reformas institucionales, una mayor capacidad de gobernanza y una integración más sólida del crecimiento económico con las políticas sociales. Estos hallazgos proporcionan información relevante para la formulación de políticas en Vietnam y lecciones más amplias para otros países en desarrollo que buscan un desarrollo inclusivo y sostenible.

Palabras clave: justicia social, desarrollo sostenible, Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible, reducción de la desigualdad, Vietnam.

Social justice in Vietnam in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals: a systematic review

Abstract. Social justice is a fundamental pillar of sustainable development and a central element of the United Nations 2030 Agenda. The purpose of this study is to systematically review the state of social justice in Vietnam within the context of the Sustainable Development Goals. A three-pillar analytical framework, equity in the distribution of development outcomes, equity in access to development opportunities, and equity in the guarantee of social rights and well-being guide the analysis. The findings show that Vietnam has made significant progress in promoting social justice, in line with the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly in poverty reduction, expanding access to education and healthcare, and developing social protection systems. However, significant challenges remain, including income inequality, regional disparities, unequal access to quality health and education services, and the limited social participation of vulnerable groups. The study concludes that while Vietnam's development trajectory shows significant progress toward social justice within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals, further institutional reforms, stronger governance capacity, and more robust integration of economic growth with social policies are needed. These findings provide relevant information for policymaking in Vietnam and broader lessons for other developing countries seeking inclusive and sustainable development.

Keywords: social justice, sustainable development, Sustainable Development Goals, inequality reduction, Vietnam.

INTRODUCTION

Sustainable development has emerged as a central global paradigm in the twenty-first century, aiming to address economic, social, and environmental challenges in an integrated manner while safeguarding the well-being of both present and future generations. Within the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, social justice is recognized as a cross-cutting normative principle, most explicitly articulated through the commitment to reduce inequalities within and among countries. This perspective underscores that economic growth is meaningful and sustainable only when it is accompanied by social justice, inclusive development, and a firm commitment to leaving no one behind. In the case of Vietnam, social justice has long been identified as both a fundamental development objective and a key driver of national transformation. Since initiating the renovation reforms, Vietnam has made significant progress in economic growth, poverty reduction, and improving living standards. Parallel to these achievements, the country has progressively expanded its social policy framework to enhance access to education, healthcare, social protection, and essential public services. Nevertheless, rapid economic transformation and deepening international integration have also generated new and complex challenges, including income inequality, pronounced regional disparities, uneven development across social groups, and unequal access to development opportunities and resources. Against

this backdrop, examining social justice in Vietnam through the lens of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is of both theoretical and practical significance. While existing studies have extensively addressed sustainable development or specific social policies in Vietnam, relatively few have systematically analyzed social justice as a foundational pillar of sustainable development within the SDG framework. This gap limits a comprehensive understanding of how development outcomes, opportunities, and social rights are distributed in the context of Vietnam's ongoing development trajectory.

The objectives of the study are as follows:

First, the study clarifies the theoretical foundations of social equity within the framework of the SDGs.

Second, it assesses the current state of social equity in Vietnam in the context of implementing the SDGs.

Third, based on the challenges identified in ensuring social equity in Vietnam in relation to the SDGs, the study proposes policy implications aimed at promoting social equity, inclusive growth, and sustainable development in Vietnam in the coming period.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social justice and sustainable development in Vietnam, in the context of the SDGs, have attracted scholars both domestically and internationally. The following are some of the most representative works related to this topic. The article "*Social justice as a link between sustainability and educational sciences*" argues that social justice constitutes a central nexus linking sustainable development and educational sciences. The author maintains that sustainable development strategies cannot achieve long-term effectiveness without a solid foundation of equity in access to education, the distribution of learning opportunities, and the enjoyment of knowledge. Based on theoretical analysis, the study demonstrates that education is not merely a means of knowledge transmission but also a social institution that plays a critical role in restructuring unequal social relations, thereby promoting social participation, empowerment, and human agency. At the same time, the study emphasizes the necessity of integrating social justice into Education for Sustainable Development programs, viewing this integration as a prerequisite for education to make a substantive contribution to the achievement of the SDGs, particularly SDG 4 and SDG 10. On this basis, the author affirms that educational sciences play a pivotal role in translating sustainability values into socially just and inclusive practices (Ketschau, 2015). At the theoretical level, many scholars conceptualize social justice as a constitutive pillar of sustainable development, alongside economic growth and environmental protection. In contemporary sustainability studies, Kate Raworth's "*Doughnut Economics*" offers an influential theoretical framework that seeks to overcome the limitations of traditional growth-centered models. Raworth argues:

That development should not be measured solely by GDP growth, but rather situated within a "safe and just space for humanity", bounded by two concentric limits: a minimum social foundation and an ecological ceiling. Within this framework, social justice is

regarded as an indispensable condition of sustainable development, reflected in the fulfillment of basic human needs such as education, healthcare, employment, gender equality, and social protection for all. This approach underscores the necessity of harmonizing economic growth, social justice, and environmental sustainability, and has had a significant impact on contemporary development thinking as well as on policy debates surrounding the implementation of the United Nations' SDGs (Raworth, 2017).

Another foundational contribution to the theoretical discourse on development and social justice is Amartya Sen's "*Development as Freedom*". Sen criticizes the tendency to equate development with economic growth alone and argues that development is, in essence, a process of expanding people's substantive freedoms. From a capability approach, he emphasizes that social justice should not be assessed merely through income distribution, but through the extent to which individuals are guaranteed real opportunities to access education, healthcare, employment, and participation in social life. Sen further highlights the intrinsic link between freedom, social justice, and sustainable development through key forms of freedom, including political freedoms, economic opportunities, and social opportunities (Sen, 1999). This perspective has profoundly influenced modern development thinking, particularly the human development framework of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the formulation of the SDGs.

From a global policy perspective, numerous studies focus on the relationship between social justice and specific SDGs, notably SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). UNDP reports (2020, 2023) indicate that income inequality, unequal access to public services, and disparities in opportunities constitute major obstacles to SDG implementation in many countries. Recent research also emphasizes the cross-cutting and integrative role of social justice across the entire SDG framework (UNDP, 2020; UNDP, 2023). Sachs & et al in their article "*Sustainable Development Report 2021: The decade of action for the Sustainable Development Goals*", argued that social justice serves as both a goal and a driving force for the SDGs, because without justice, economic growth can exacerbate social polarization and undermine long-term sustainability (Sachs, Kroll, Lafortune, Fuller, & Woelm, 2021). Nevertheless, much of the international literature remains highly generalized, with a primary focus on global analytical frameworks, while the specific institutional, cultural, and developmental contexts of individual countries have yet to be examined in sufficient depth. The work "*Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2018: Putting Together the Pieces of the Poverty Picture*" argues that social justice in developing countries is important in relation to the SDGs. In developing countries, social justice is often considered in relation to issues such as poverty, income inequality, access to basic social services, and the inclusiveness of development policies. Many studies indicate that, despite achieving relatively high economic growth rates, many developing countries continue to face what is called an "inclusive growth deficit" (World Bank, 2018). Empirical research in Asia, Africa, and Latin America shows that inequalities between social groups, such as between the rich and the poor, urban and rural populations, and vulnerable groups, are major barriers to achieving the SDGs. For example, Oxfam (2019) points out that in many developing countries, the benefits of economic growth are disproportionately concentrated in a small segment of the population, while vulnerable groups reap only limited benefits from development policies (Oxfam, 2019).

Nevertheless, much of the literature on developing countries remains oriented toward policy evaluation or the analysis of individual country experiences, with relatively limited attention paid to the theoretical foundations of social justice in its dialectical relationship with sustainable development.

In Vietnam, social justice is a central component of the Party and State's development orientation, consistently reflected in official documents since the Renovation reform period, particularly through the principle of "linking economic growth with social progress and social justice". A large number of domestic research works have approached social justice from various perspectives, including philosophy, political economy, sociology, and public administration. Some studies focus on clarifying the theoretical foundations and the Party's viewpoints on social justice. The book *"Economic Growth and Social Progress and Justice in Vietnam"* by Than and Ty (2010) represents a comprehensive research effort based on a national-level scientific project. It analyzes the relationship between economic growth, social progress, and justice in the Vietnamese context. Drawing on a theoretical framework of growth and social justice, the authors review international experience and examine Vietnam's economic growth and the integration of social objectives through survey data and empirical research conducted in multiple localities. The study identifies both achievements and limitations in combining economic development with social justice and proposes perspectives and solutions to enhance harmony between economic growth and social progress and justice in subsequent stages of development (Than & Ty, 2010).

Similarly, *"The Relationship between Economic Growth and Cultural Development and the Realization of Social Progress and Justice in Vietnam"* by Loi and Huong (2019) offers a systematic analysis conducted within the framework of a national-level research project. Based on a theoretical examination and an assessment of the period 2001–2018, the authors identify achievements, limitations, and emerging challenges in linking economic growth with social objectives. The study also proposes policy orientations and solutions to ensure a balanced relationship among economic growth, cultural development, and social justice toward 2030, thereby providing an important scientific basis for research on sustainable development in Vietnam (Loi, 2024). In *"Some Theoretical and Practical Issues of Socialism and the Path toward Socialism in Vietnam"*, Trong (2022) systematizes and further deepens key theoretical issues concerning Vietnam's socialist development model, emphasizing the necessity of closely integrating economic growth with social progress and justice. The author argues that social justice is not only a development goal but also a driving force of development, and must be realized at every stage and in every socio-economic policy, with people placed at the center. These arguments are particularly significant for guiding research and assessment of social justice in Vietnam today, especially in the context of SDG implementation, where inclusive development and the principle of leaving no one behind are emphasized as cross-cutting imperatives.

Overall, domestic studies tend to examine social justice primarily as a development objective or a political-social requirement, while systematic analyses of social justice in relation to the SDGs remain limited. From a review of both international and domestic literature, several key gaps can be identified. First, while international studies provide general theoretical and policy frameworks on social justice and the SDGs, they have not sufficiently clarified the

specific characteristics of developing countries, particularly those following a socialist-oriented development path such as Vietnam. Second, research on developing countries largely focuses on policy evaluation or comparative experiences, with insufficient in-depth analysis of the theoretical foundations of social justice within sustainable development. Third, although Vietnam has a considerable body of research on social justice, relatively few studies adopt a systematic approach to social justice within the SDG framework or place Vietnam in comparative perspective with other developing countries.

Against this background, this article seeks to analyze social justice in Vietnam in the context of SDG implementation by integrating international theoretical frameworks, the experiences of selected developing countries, and contemporary Vietnamese practice, thereby contributing to a clearer understanding of both the theoretical and practical issues facing Vietnam's sustainable development trajectory.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a systematic qualitative review design to examine social justice in Vietnam within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The research aims to synthesize existing theoretical and empirical evidence in a structured and transparent manner, ensuring analytical rigor and methodological reproducibility in line with international social science journal standards.

Data for the review were collected from three principal groups of sources. First, international policy and analytical reports published by the United Nations, UNDP, the World Bank, UNESCO, and Oxfam were used to provide conceptual frameworks, SDG-related indicators, and comparative benchmarks. Second, academic literature was drawn from peer-reviewed journal articles and scholarly books indexed in Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar to establish theoretical foundations and synthesize empirical findings. Third, national documents and official statistics from Vietnam, including reports of the Government of Vietnam, documents of the Communist Party of Vietnam, legal texts, and publications of the General Statistics Office, were employed to assess Vietnam's social justice performance and institutional context. Only officially published and publicly accessible sources were included to ensure transparency and verifiability.

A systematic literature search was conducted between January and March 2025 using combinations of keywords such as "social justice", "sustainable development", "Sustainable Development Goals", "inequality", "inclusive development", and "Vietnam". The search period covered publications from 2010 to 2024, corresponding to the growing integration of social justice into global sustainable development discourse, particularly following the adoption of the SDGs in 2015.

Following the initial search, a total of approximately 320 records were identified, including academic publications and policy reports. After removing duplicates and screening titles and abstracts for relevance, 187 records were retained for full-text assessment. Based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, 72 sources were finally included in the qualitative synthesis, comprising 45 peer-reviewed academic journal articles and scholarly books, and 27 interna-

tional and national policy reports and official documents. These figures constitute the core data underlying the study's systematic review process and provide the basis for a simplified PRISMA flow representation.

The selection of sources was guided by clearly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Included sources were those that: directly addressed social justice or social justice in relation to sustainable development or the SDGs; focused on Vietnam or offered comparative insights relevant to developing countries; and were peer-reviewed academic publications or officially issued policy and analytical reports. Sources were excluded if they consisted of non-scholarly commentaries, opinion pieces, unpublished manuscripts, or lacked methodological clarity or relevance to the research objectives.

The analytical framework of the study is structured around three interrelated pillars of social justice: equity in the distribution of development outcomes; equity in access to development opportunities; and equity in the guarantee of social rights and welfare. This framework guided the synthesis and interpretation of evidence across key SDG-related domains, including poverty reduction, education, healthcare, social protection, and inequality reduction.

Data analysis followed a multi-step qualitative synthesis process. First, selected sources were systematically screened and categorized according to thematic relevance and their linkage to specific SDGs. Second, thematic coding was conducted to identify recurring patterns, achievements, and challenges related to social justice. Third, a comparative analysis was undertaken between international SDG benchmarks and Vietnam's development outcomes to highlight areas of convergence and divergence. Finally, a policy-oriented synthesis integrated empirical findings with theoretical perspectives to derive policy implications aimed at promoting social justice and inclusive sustainable development in Vietnam.

Key statistical indicators cited in the study, such as poverty rates, GDP per capita, education enrollment rates, health insurance coverage, and the Human Development Index (HDI), were interpreted based on official definitions and measurement approaches used by international organizations and Vietnamese authorities. The study does not recalculate these indicators but relies on standardized and authoritative data sources to ensure consistency, comparability, and methodological transparency.

This study employed a single-coder qualitative synthesis approach due to constraints related to scope and data availability. As a result, inter-coder reliability measures such as Cohen's Kappa coefficient were not calculated. This constitutes a methodological limitation, and future research may enhance reliability by applying multi-coder designs and formal inter-coder agreement testing.

Analytical Framework of the Study. This study employs an analytical framework for examining social justice in relation to sustainable development, structured around three interrelated pillars: equity in the distribution of development outcomes; equity in access to development opportunities; and equity in ensuring social rights and welfare. This framework facilitates a systematic and comprehensive assessment of social justice in Vietnam during the implementation of the SDGs, allowing for the identification of both achievements and persistent challenges across key development domains.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Social justice within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals

Social justice is a core category in social philosophy and policy sciences, reflecting the relationship between individuals and society in the distribution of resources, opportunities, and the benefits of development. In contemporary approaches, social justice is not equated with absolute egalitarianism; rather, it emphasizes the guarantee of fair opportunities for development, equitable enjoyment of development outcomes, and the protection of vulnerable groups.

From the perspective of Marxism–Leninism, social justice is situated in a dialectical relationship with specific socio-economic conditions and the level of development of the productive forces. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels argued that “the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all” (Marx & Engels, 1995, p. 628). Social justice thus possesses both historical and class-based characteristics and cannot be separated from the regulatory role of the state in addressing inequalities generated by spontaneous market mechanisms. With profound insights into human beings and social justice, and through the synthesis of experience, inheritance, and creative development grounded in the realities of the Vietnamese revolution, Ho Chi Minh left the Vietnamese nation a particularly valuable ideological legacy, including his views on social justice. These views are implicitly expressed through his perspectives on national sovereignty, national independence, and freedom, understood as ensuring that the country achieves complete independence, the people enjoy full freedom, and that every citizen has enough food, clothing, and access to education. Ho Chi Minh wrote:

All people are born equal. The Creator has endowed them with certain inalienable rights, among which are the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; “extended this” and elevated it to a legal basis for the rights of all nations in the new era: “All nations in the world are born equal; every nation has the right to life, the right to happiness, and the right to freedom” (Minh, 2011b, p. 1).

According to Ho Chi Minh, equality among individuals and among nations constitutes a prerequisite for social progress. He affirmed that: “only communism can save humanity and bring to all people, regardless of race or origin, freedom, equality, fraternity, solidarity, prosperity on this earth, employment for all and for the benefit of all, joy, peace, and happiness” (Minh, 2011a, p. 496).

Ho Chi Minh’s conception of social progress is also inseparably linked to the goals of national independence and socialism, within which justice, equality, freedom, democracy, and the happiness of the people form the essential content. He held that the ultimate purpose of building socialism is to continuously improve the people’s living standards. The foremost objective of economic development, therefore, is to enhance the material and spiritual well-being of the people, especially the working population, so that their lives become increasingly sufficient, prosperous, and happy. In his view, material life must first address fundamental needs such as food, clothing, housing, and healthcare. In other words, social progress is achieved when each individual is provided with ever better conditions for development, with the fundamental prerequisite being the ability to master one’s own destiny and that of the nation. Guided by Ho

Chi Minh's thought on social security and social justice, the Communist Party of Vietnam has consistently upheld the objective in recent years of "effectively implementing social policies; ensuring social security and social welfare, human security; creating strong transformations in social development management; realizing social progress and social justice; and improving the quality of life and happiness of the people" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2021, p. 47).

The United Nations' approach to sustainable development extends and operationalizes the concept of social justice within the context of globalization. Social justice is understood as the assurance of equal opportunities, equitable access to resources and services, and meaningful participation in the development process, particularly for disadvantaged and vulnerable groups (United Nations, 2015). Rather than emphasizing uniform outcomes, this approach highlights fairness in access, capabilities, and institutional arrangements that enable individuals and social groups to benefit from development.

Within the SDGs framework, SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) occupies a central and cross-cutting position, closely interconnected with other goals, including poverty eradication (SDG 1), quality education (SDG 4), good health and well-being (SDG 3), and the promotion of inclusive, accountable, and effective institutions (SDG 16). These interlinkages underscore that progress toward social justice is not confined to a single policy domain but depends on the coordinated advancement of multiple, mutually reinforcing development objectives.

The state of social justice in Vietnam in the context of implementing the Sustainable Development Goals

First, social justice in poverty reduction (SDG 1 – No Poverty). Over recent decades, Vietnam has achieved remarkable progress in poverty reduction alongside relatively rapid and stable economic growth. Improvements in per capita income, combined with periods in which income growth in rural areas outpaced that in urban areas, have contributed to narrowing income disparities across regions and social groups. These achievements have been internationally recognized, as Vietnam met the Millennium Development Goal on poverty reduction ahead of schedule and has continued to maintain positive momentum under Sustainable Development Goal 1 (No Poverty).

According to the World Bank's international extreme poverty line, defined as income below US\$2.15 per day in purchasing power parity (PPP) standards in 2017, Vietnam's extreme poverty rate has fallen sharply from 5.7% in 2019 to below 3.4% in 2023 (General Statistics Office, 2023). However, when higher poverty thresholds reflecting improved living standards and greater economic resilience are applied, poverty rates remain at 4.2% under the lower-middle-income line (USD 3.65 per day) and rise to 19.7% under the upper-middle-income line (USD 6.85 per day) (OECD, 2025). These figures indicate that while Vietnam has largely succeeded in eliminating extreme poverty, a substantial share of the population remains economically vulnerable and at risk of falling back into poverty in the face of economic shocks, health crises, or climate-related hazards.

TABLE 1. Poverty rate by household head's ethnic, residence (%)

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Whole country	5,7	4,8	4,4	4,2	3,4
By the household head's ethnic					
Kinh/Chinese	2,2	2,4	2,3	2,0	1,4
Other	28,3	22,7	21,3	23,7	19,3
By residence					
Urban	1,2	1,1	1,0	1,5	1,2
Rural	8,0	7,1	6,5	5,9	4,8

Source: This data is from the General Statistics Office of Vietnam, taken from the Statistical Yearbook/Press Release on the results of the 2023 Household Living Standards Survey.

The observed reduction in multidimensional poverty in Vietnam reflects the effectiveness of long-term investments in economic growth, social protection, and the expansion of basic public services. However, the persistent concentration of poverty in rural, mountainous, remote, and ethnic minority areas indicates that poverty reduction outcomes remain uneven and structurally constrained. In particular, the high multidimensional poverty rates in poor and extremely disadvantaged districts highlight the limits of growth-led poverty reduction when underlying disparities in development conditions, infrastructure quality, and access to productive resources are not adequately addressed. By 2024, the multidimensional poverty rate had declined to approximately 4.1% of the population, reflecting the relatively broad coverage of essential public services nationwide. Nevertheless, poverty continues to be highly concentrated in rural, mountainous, remote, and disadvantaged areas, particularly among ethnic minority groups. Notably, in 74 poor and extremely disadvantaged districts primarily located in coastal and island regions, the multidimensional poverty rate remains close to 40%, with income poverty accounting for 24.9% and the near-poor rate reaching approximately 15% (OECD, 2025).

These findings suggest that Vietnam's poverty reduction strategy needs to move beyond a primary focus on aggregate poverty rates toward a more nuanced, equity-oriented approach that explicitly targets vulnerability, spatial inequality, and resilience. Policy efforts should prioritize place-based and group-specific interventions, strengthen the integration of social protection with livelihood development, and enhance access to quality education, healthcare, and social services in lagging regions. Moreover, improving policy coordination across sectors and levels of governance is essential to ensure that poverty reduction measures are responsive to regional contexts and capable of mitigating risks associated with economic shocks and climate change. Such reforms are critical for advancing social justice and for sustaining Vietnam's progress toward inclusive and sustainable development under SDG 1.

Second, social Justice in Education (SDG 4 – Quality Education). Owing to the consistent implementation of universal education programs, Vietnam has achieved notable progress in expanding access to basic education. Since 2015, the net enrollment rate at the primary level has reached approximately 99%, and by 2020, the corresponding rate at the lower secondary level

had exceeded 90%, with further improvements observed in subsequent years. These achievements indicate that Vietnam has come close to ensuring minimum access to education for the vast majority of its population, in line with the core objectives of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4). Education is widely recognized as one of the most critical pillars of social justice and sustainable development, both as a fundamental human right and as a key instrument for expanding development opportunities and breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty and inequality. In Vietnam, the legal framework governing education, most notably the Law on Education, has institutionalized the principle of equal access to education regardless of ethnicity, gender, religion, or socioeconomic background, while also establishing support mechanisms such as tuition exemptions, reductions, and study allowances for disadvantaged groups.

Despite these significant advances in educational access, the outcomes primarily reflect broad coverage of basic education. Persistent challenges remain with respect to educational quality, substantive equity, and access in disadvantaged and remote regions, which continue to constrain the full realization of SDG 4.

TABLE 2. Age-appropriate school enrollment rates by educational level in selected regions of Vietnam (%).

Region	Primary	Lower secondary	Upper secondary
Red River Delta	99	98,7	92,9
Mekong River Delta	98,5	87,2	63,9

Source: Compiled by the authors based on General Statistics Office of Vietnam (2023) and Ministry of Education and Training (2023).

However, when examined from a substantive social justice perspective, education in Vietnam continues to exhibit significant limitations. Comparative regional data reveal pronounced disparities in age-appropriate enrollment rates, particularly at the upper secondary level. While the Red River Delta maintains an age-appropriate enrollment rate of over 90% at the upper secondary level, the corresponding figure in the Mekong River Delta is only about 63.9%. This gap reflects not only uneven socioeconomic conditions across regions but also differences in the quality of educational infrastructure, physical access to schools, household livelihood constraints, and the early entry of adolescents into the labor market in disadvantaged areas.

Persistent disparities in educational quality between urban and rural areas, between more developed and disadvantaged regions, and among different social groups indicate that educational equity in Vietnam has been achieved primarily in terms of access, while equity in educational quality and learning outcomes remains limited. These structural constraints stem from unequal allocation of educational resources, capacity gaps in local education governance, and insufficient coordination between education policies and broader poverty reduction and social protection frameworks. This evidence underscores the need for a strategic shift in policy emphasis from expanding access toward improving quality and inclusiveness so that education can function more effectively as a driver of social justice and sustainable development.

Third, social Justice in Healthcare and Social Protection (SDG 3 – Good Health and Well-being). The expansion of universal health insurance coverage, together with the gradual development of the social security system, has contributed substantially to enhancing social justice in healthcare in Vietnam. Through health insurance, social insurance, and social assistance policies, access to basic healthcare services, particularly for vulnerable groups, has been progressively secured, thereby reducing financial risks and improving access to essential healthcare. By the end of 2023, health insurance coverage had reached 93.35% of Vietnam's population, placing the country among those with high levels of health insurance coverage in the ASEAN region (Vietnam Social Security, 2024). This achievement reflects sustained efforts to improve policy design, expand coverage, simplify administrative procedures, and promote equitable access to quality healthcare services. The near-universal protection of the population against health-related risks provides clear evidence of the effectiveness of social protection policies in advancing social justice.

Nevertheless, social justice in healthcare has not yet been fully or substantively realized. Inequalities in access to high-quality healthcare services remain a major challenge, manifested in the burden of out-of-pocket health expenditures borne by households and significant disparities in service provision capacity across healthcare levels and regions. These limitations disproportionately affect poor households, rural and mountainous populations, and other vulnerable groups, thereby weakening the effectiveness of health insurance coverage in ensuring equitable access to healthcare services. The underlying causes include uneven distribution of healthcare human resources and infrastructure, limited service quality at the primary care level, and shortcomings in healthcare financing and insurance reimbursement mechanisms. Accordingly, progress toward SDG 3 in Vietnam requires deeper reforms aimed at improving quality, efficiency, and equity within the healthcare system, rather than focusing solely on expanding coverage.

Fourth, reducing Regional and Social Group Inequalities (SDG 10 and SDG 16). Reducing inequality lies at the core of Sustainable Development Goal 10 and is closely interconnected with the objective of building effective, inclusive, and accountable institutions under Sustainable Development Goal 16. In Vietnam, the 2013 Constitution enshrines fundamental principles of equality for all individuals and citizens, providing a critical legal foundation for the promotion of social justice across economic, political, and social domains. Building on this constitutional framework, equality rights have been progressively institutionalized and implemented through legislative, executive, judicial, and social oversight mechanisms, thereby contributing to Vietnam's growing international standing and credibility in the protection and promotion of human rights.

These advances are partially reflected in improvements in key development and social welfare indicators. In 2023, Vietnam's Human Development Index (HDI) reached 0.766, ranking 93rd out of 193 countries and territories and placing the country within the group of nations with high human development. Compared with 1990, this represents an increase of 53.5%, indicating substantial progress in health, education, and income. However, when adjusted for inequality, Vietnam's HDI declines to 0.641, corresponding to a development loss of 16.3% due to disparities across the three core dimensions of health, education, and income (UNDP, 2025). In addition, the 2025 World Happiness Report records a significant improvement in Vietnam's ranking, which rose by 31 places to 46th out of 143 surveyed countries, reflecting notable

gains in overall quality of life and social well-being (UNDP, 2025). At the same time, these aggregate indicators tend to mask persistent inequalities across regions and among social groups. The substantial reduction in the inequality-adjusted HDI highlights the uneven distribution of development benefits, particularly in economically lagging regions and among vulnerable populations. These disparities are driven primarily by differences in regional development conditions, unequal access to high-quality public services, and limitations in policy coordination and implementation effectiveness in regional development and social policies. Consequently, advancing SDG 10 and SDG 16 in Vietnam requires continued institutional reform, strengthened governance capacity, and a more equitable, transparent, and targeted allocation of public resources to promote social justice more inclusively and sustainably.

Challenges to ensuring social justice in Viet Nam in connection with the Sustainable Development Goals

First, unsustainable poverty reduction and the persistent risk of falling back into poverty (Directly related to SDG 1 – No Poverty; SDG 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth; SDG 10 – Reduced Inequalities). Although Viet Nam has achieved remarkable progress in poverty reduction, this process has not yet been truly sustainable, particularly in rural, mountainous, and ethnic minority areas. The income gap between the richest 20% and the poorest 20% of the population has not narrowed commensurately with the pace of economic growth; income inequality tends to increase in less developed regions (Loi, 2024). Informal employment still accounts for a large proportion of the labor force, remaining outside or only marginally covered by social protection systems, resulting in income instability and a heightened risk of falling back into poverty when economic or social shocks occur. This situation highlights fundamental challenges in realizing SDG 1 on sustainable poverty eradication and underscores the need for stronger integration between economic growth, decent work (SDG 8), and inequality reduction (SDG 10).

Second, inequalities in access to and quality of education in disadvantaged areas (Directly related to SDG 4 – Quality Education; SDG 10 – Reduced Inequalities). Despite policy commitments to equal educational opportunities, substantial disparities persist in learning conditions and educational quality across regions. Remote, mountainous, and ethnic minority areas continue to face serious constraints in infrastructure, teacher availability and quality, and access to high-quality educational services. Students' learning outcomes and examination performance in these localities are often below the national average, reflecting structural inequalities within the education system. These limitations pose major obstacles to achieving SDG 4 on quality education and undermine efforts to reduce inequalities in development opportunities among social groups, as emphasized in SDG 10.

Third, inequalities in access to healthcare services and the social protection system (Directly related to SDG 3 – Good Health and Well-being; SDG 1 – No Poverty; SDG 10 – Reduced Inequalities). The expansion of health insurance and social protection coverage has made significant contributions to social justice; however, pronounced inequalities remain in access to high-quality healthcare services and social protection policies. Poor households, informal workers, and residents in rural and mountainous areas continue to bear higher healthcare costs and face

greater barriers to accessing modern health services (UNDP, 2025). Slow institutional reforms and incomplete coverage of the social protection system weaken the effectiveness of sustainable poverty reduction policies (SDG 1), exacerbate social inequalities (SDG 10), and pose serious challenges to achieving SDG 3 on ensuring health and well-being for all.

Fourth, regional disparities and inequalities among social groups (directly related to SDG 10 – Reduced Inequalities and SDG 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth) remain a major challenge in Vietnam. Although various policies have been implemented to support disadvantaged regions, significant development gaps persist, particularly between urban and rural areas, as well as between economically dynamic regions and remote, mountainous areas (World Bank, 2022). These inequalities are reflected not only in income levels but also in unequal access to quality education, healthcare, infrastructure, social services, and employment opportunities. The persistence of such disparities suggests that economic growth has not yet been sufficiently inclusive to ensure that all population groups can equally participate in and benefit from development, posing challenges to the realization of SDG 8 and SDG 10.

Fifth, limitations in safeguarding human rights and social participation rights (Directly related to SDG 16 – Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions; SDG 10 – Reduced Inequalities). Human rights and equality constitute the foundation of social justice; however, in practice, opportunities for participation in state governance and social management remain uneven across population groups. Low-income individuals, informal workers, and migrant laborers often encounter greater barriers in exercising political and social rights, as well as in accessing public services and participating in policy-making processes. Although representation of women, ethnic minorities, and self-nominated candidates in elected bodies has improved, it remains insufficient relative to the requirements of social representation. These limitations reflect persistent challenges in building inclusive, transparent, and accountable institutions, directly linked to SDG 16, while simultaneously undermining efforts to reduce inequalities under SDG 10.

Policy implications in relation to the sustainable development goals

First, in connection with SDG 16 – Effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions, it is essential to strengthen social consensus and ensure meaningful public participation in the formulation and implementation of socio-economic development policies. Social justice should be incorporated from the policy-design stage through the expansion of grassroots democracy, diversification of participation channels, and the protection of citizens' equal rights to discuss, deliberate, and decide on issues directly affecting their legitimate rights and interests. This approach is consistent with the requirement to build inclusive institutions and enhance social trust, both of which are critical preconditions for the successful implementation of the SDGs.

Second, about SDG 16 and SDG 10 – Reduced Inequalities, continued efforts are needed to improve the legal system and enhance the quality of law-making in a manner that ensures transparency, openness, and equality before the law. Reforming legislative processes to promote equal participation by diverse social actors can help mitigate institutional inequalities and unequal access to justice. At the same time, improving mechanisms of political representation and participation at all levels is crucial to ensuring that the voices of different social groups, particularly vulnerable groups, are adequately represented.

Third, in relation to SDG 8 – Sustainable economic growth and decent work, and SDG 10, further refinement of the socialist-oriented market economy institutions toward promoting inclusive growth is a key requirement for advancing social justice. This entails safeguarding freedom of business and fair competition while ensuring equitable distribution of resources and development outcomes. Socio-economic policies should prioritize narrowing income gaps among social groups, regions, and ethnic communities; expanding access to decent and sustainable employment; and reducing informal employment and unemployment, thereby contributing to sustainable poverty reduction.

Fourth, in connection with SDG 16 and SDG 10, accelerating administrative reform and improving the quality of public governance in a transparent, accountable, and responsive manner is a critical condition for ensuring social justice in access to public resources. Equal treatment in administrative procedures, public investment, and state budget allocation can help reduce inequalities in access to public services and enhance the effectiveness of sustainable development policies.

Fifth, linked to SDG 16 and SDG 1 – No Poverty, continued judicial reform toward building a professional, fair, and integrity-based justice system is particularly important for protecting human rights and citizens' rights, especially for poor and vulnerable groups. An accessible judicial system that ensures fair adjudication and legal independence can reduce the risks of social exclusion, effectively safeguard legitimate rights and interests, and thereby support poverty eradication and inclusive development.

CONCLUSIONS

Social justice constitutes a foundational pillar of sustainable development and serves as a key indicator of the inclusiveness and quality of economic growth. Viet Nam's development experience demonstrates that progress in poverty reduction, expansion of social protection, and the safeguarding of fundamental human rights has yielded significant results. achievements, contributing to the country's improved standing in implementing the United Nations SDGs. Nevertheless, persistent challenges, including income inequality, regional disparities, and unequal access to education, healthcare, and opportunities for social participation among vulnerable groups, indicate that social justice in Viet Nam continues to face substantial, long-term issues requiring comprehensive solutions. In this context, institutional reform, enhanced state governance capacity, the promotion of inclusive growth, and the expansion of a comprehensive and sustainable social protection system are urgent priorities. Viet Nam's experience underscores that closely integrating economic growth with social progress and equity, while placing people at the center of development, is a decisive condition for achieving the SDGs, particularly those related to poverty eradication, inequality reduction, and the construction of fair and effective institutions. These outcomes and lessons are not only relevant to Viet Nam but also offer valuable policy insights for other developing countries pursuing sustainable development and social justice.

Author statement

Huynh Van Giau: Conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, original manuscript writing, supervision; **Nguyen Minh Tri:** Data collection, validation, visualization, review writing and editing. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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