




Impacts of the social security programs on the employment status of informal labor in rural Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

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The social welfare system is an important way to provide employment and income for informal labor in the context of shock economies in rural areas. This study evaluates factors impacting the employment status of rural informal labor during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic in rural Vietnam. This paper uses two models, including a binary logistic regression model and a quantile regression model, with survey data collected from 215 rural informal laborers. The results show that marital status, education, and health positively affect employment status. However, age, gender, and head of household are not identified as significant factors. The results also show that single laborers have lower chances of employment because they do not have to take care of raising their children and other members of their families. Furthermore, our models also confirm that rural informal laborers entitled to basic living allowances are less likely to be employed, but the finding is that employment and entrepreneurship services lead to a higher likelihood of being used among these laborers during COVID-19. Besides, this paper gives some policies to help informal laborers find jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Primarily, the research focused on the influence of social security programmes on the employment situation of rural informal labor in emerging nations such as Vietnam, particularly amid economic upheavals like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Contribution/Originality: This study aims to evaluate the effects of social security policies on employment among rural informal laborers in Vietnam during the COVID-19 pandemic. It specifically focuses on the function of the social welfare system in establishing job opportunities for informal laborers during times of economic shocks.

1. INTRODUCTION

Social security programs have had a positive effect on reducing income inequality, increasing employment, and enhancing income and quality of life. Social security programs enable laborers to make the most of new opportunities in the labor market, help them with security and income, and remain in good health when moving to a new job with new skills (Kristina, Sundstrup, Skovlund, & Andersen, 2020). Besides, informal laborers are defined as those who work in informal jobs, referring to those who are not subject to national labor legislation, income taxation, entitlement to social protection, or certain other employment benefits. Informal laborers often have difficulty accessing social protection. As a result, informal workers cannot access health care services and ensure a basic income; they are easily left in a vulnerable situation. And they are faced with many difficulties in ensuring personal welfare as well as their human rights, which are guaranteed by the government (ILO, 2021). Especially informal workers and their families

face more difficulties in accessing social security programs during economic shocks like the Covid-19 crisis (ILO, 2021).

Vietnam has had high levels of unemployment among informal laborers during the Covid-19. According to data from the General Statistics Office (2022), it is estimated that the number of people who lost their jobs accounted for about 5% and 32% of the people who had to temporarily stop business; nearly 50% of people have their working hours cut or forced to take time off work or alternate jobs; and about 80% of people have reduced income. The average monthly income of employees in the third quarter of 2021 is 5.2 million dong, down 877 thousand dong compared to the second quarter and 603 thousand dong lower than the same period last year. This is a significant decrease, weakening the purchasing power of the market and negatively affecting informal laborers' lives. The government therefore needs to improve social security policies to support informal labor in the context of economic shocks.

Stemming from the acknowledgment of the above-mentioned points, by using the binary logistic regression and quantile regression models, this study is conducted first to analyze the impact of social security programs on the employment of informal labor in rural Vietnam during the COVID-19 pandemic. There has been no research on this topic for social security programs in a developing country like Vietnam in the context of an economic shock. Besides, we recommend that social security programs be more creative and improve employment during COVID-19 in rural Vietnam.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Bastagli et al. (2019) indicate that social benefits are non-contributing social protections intended for low-income households and vulnerable groups. These social security programs include some programs providing cash, fee allowances, and allowances for children. In addition, these social programs are related to ensuring risks through programs such as pension funds and unemployment support funds. In addition, social security programs are related to programs aimed at preventing and reducing poverty, inequality, vulnerability, and the social exclusion of vulnerable groups in society. Social protection systems often provide benefits to individuals or households to ensure a stable income and easy access to health care programs. Social programs include cash allowances, old-age allowances, in-kind transfers, and disability allowances. With these programs, some countries develop more sustainably, stabilize the macroeconomic environment, and avoid the negative impacts of the global economic crisis. In particular, social security programs can support vulnerable groups to access more jobs, increase income, and improve their quality of life, so these groups can escape poverty status and improve their social status (ILO, 2021). Besides, many social security programs often focus on stimulating consumer demand and promoting production. So social protection programs can help revive the economy and create more jobs during economic crises.

Similarly, according to the ILO (2021), government programs related to providing minimum income support to the poor are also social security programs. These social work programs include two basic activities: lending assistance in the form of direct cash transfers or in-kind assistance like food stamps and rent subsidies. Overall, some studies show that social security programs provide necessary measures for protecting the health of vulnerable groups and reducing inequalities. In addition, social security programs play an essential role in supporting and raising living standards, promoting socio-economic development, enhancing capabilities against shocks, and triggering an economic cycle. Good economics help boost jobs, productivity, tax revenue, and overall national economic growth, especially in developing countries (ILO, 2021).

According to White, Hodges, and Greenslade (2015), social protection programs are usually classified into three categories, including social assistance, social insurance, and labor market programs. These programs differ in aspects of their design, scope, and possible arrangement of funds in relation to their impact on national growth and equity. In addition, Goodin (1988) identified six possible goals of social policy, including poverty reduction, promotion of social equality, promotion of social stability, promotion of social integration, promotion of economic efficiency, and

promotion of autonomy. Furthermore, Goodin (1988) points out that social security policies include solutions for unconditional universal subsidies, unconditional vehicle test grants, and conditional education and training grants.

Social assistance programs also affect the employment status of laborers, including informal laborers. Currently, there are many studies on this impact on employment. Some studies suggest that social security programs do not encourage laborers to look for work, while others suggest that these programs assist laborers in finding more suitable jobs (Shen-Cheng, Chan, & Han, 2019). Thomas (2020) points out that unemployment and minimum income subsidies have successfully supported laborers to find work and reduced unemployment status in the labor market. Moreover, if there is a large gap between the benefits of entrepreneurs and laborers, the support of these programs demonstrated by trade unions will contribute to reducing this gap and encouraging laborers to continue working. Besides, Kristina et al. (2020) also show that employment status relates to barriers and willingness to accept re-employment, including factors such as another job function, different education, less responsibility, work time reduction, lower salary, below your competencies, higher transport time, and poorer working conditions.

Furthermore, some studies give different arguments for the negative impact of social security programs on employment status. Howell and Azizoglu (2011) also argue that support programs lead to increased unemployment during the economic crisis. However, in the context of the economic crisis, these programs will support unemployed labor to ensure their lives and continue looking for suitable jobs. Büchel and Frick (2005) also suggest that social security programs should focus on providing entrepreneurship services such as capital employment and vocational skills training. In this opinion, social security programs should focus on vocational services and skills training for laborers. Laborers receiving these vocational services will easily find suitable jobs, be employed longer, and, since then, reduce their unemployment status in the long term.

In addition, Brauning (2004) also shows that the relationship between social security programs and employment status depends on the distribution of job opportunities for laborers. Employment services are likely to be more successful if governments and enterprises create more suitable jobs for informal laborers. On the contrary, according to the author, if the government continued the provision of subsidies such as basic living allowance and tied aid services, these allowances would lead to a stronger fence for laborers in finding jobs in the long term, especially when good jobs are fewer in economic shocks. Some studies evaluate the impact of social security programs on employment (Asif, 2013; Shen-Cheng et al., 2019). These findings have also shown an increase in public assistance and support services, including improving the quality of humans and reducing poverty and unemployment rates (Akinbobola & Saibu, 2004). Informal laborers receiving some security programs such as a basic living allowance, will enhance their living conditions (Haque, 2011). According to Altman, Mokomane, and Wright (2014), the government can provide social security for the young poor to help them access new jobs, such as training and education courses, or some for informal laborers when they need aid. Besides, Bian (2014) proposed employment and entrepreneurship services rather than traditional unemployment benefits to encourage them to find suitable jobs. And Shen-Cheng et al. (2019) also conclude that there is a significant relationship between social security systems and the growth of the employment rate. Furthermore, some studies have devoted themselves to evaluating the impact of social security programs on employment by using a mean regression approach such as binary logistic regression or OLS regression (Asif, 2013; Shen-Cheng et al., 2019). Overall, a number of prior studies evaluate the impact of social security programs on the employment status of labor. Although they did to some extent examine the impact, not a single one emphasized the impact of the social security programs on the employment status of rural informal labor in developing countries like Viet Nam. Therefore, in this paper, the author will attempt to fill this knowledge gap.

3. DATA AND METHODS

3.1. Data

To collect data from participating startups and increase their willingness to be part of our study, a multistage approach was employed. First, informal laborers were geographically narrowed down to three northern areas of Viet

Nam including Hung Yen province, Phu Tho province, and Ha Giang province. We selected these areas because they are considered the rural informal labor hubs of Viet Nam, and these areas were also heavily affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. A random sample of registered informal laborers was then drawn from a complete list in each area provided by local authorities, and then 215 informal laborers were selected from the listed members. With the assistance of local authorities, interviews were also set up.

3.2. Methods

In order to evaluate the impacts of social security programs on the employment status of low-income groups in urban China, Shen-Cheng et al. (2019) use the binary logistic regression model. In this study, we also use the binary logistic regression model to evaluate the effects of social security programs on the employment status of informal laborers in rural Vietnam. However, our research is placed in the context of economic shocks like the Covid-19 pandemic. So, we not only study social security programs (including basic living allowance, tied aid services, and capita employment and entrepreneurship services) but also study the level of willingness to work again during the Covid-19 pandemic (variables of barriers to accepting employment). Binary logistics is a model used to estimate the probability that an operation will happen. The dependent variables in the binary regression model take two values, including 0 and 1. The Binary Logistic binary regression equation has the form:

$$\log_e \left[\frac{P_i}{1-P_i} \right] = B_0 + B_1X_1 + B_2X_2 + \dots + B_kX_k$$

Where:

P_i represents the employment status of informal laborers in Rural Vietnam.

$\text{Logit}(e)$ represents the natural logarithm of the ratio of the probability of occurrence and non-occurrence.

β_0 is the intercept term of the regression.

$\beta_{1,2,3,\dots,k}$ are the coefficients of independent variables.

$X_{1,2,3,\dots,k}$ are the independent variables of the model.

Besides, the quantile regression was used to determine the relationship at different points in the conditional distribution of employment to find the level of the impact of social security on the employment status of informal labor in rural Viet Nam during the Covid-19 period, which is heterogeneous across all considered percentiles of employment distribution (Koenker & Kevin, 2001):

$$y_i = x_i \beta_{\theta} + u_{\theta i}$$

$$\text{Quantile}_{\theta}(y_i | x_i) = \inf\{y : F_i(y|x)\theta\} = x_i \beta_{\theta}$$

$$\text{Assumption : Quantile}_{\theta}(u_{\theta i} | x_i) = 0$$

Quantile (y/x) : θ , i is the regression of the $(0;1) \in$ the percentile of the dependent variable y ; percentage change $\theta (0;1) \in$ will reflect the entire distribution of the variable y . We use the quantile model to evaluate the effects of the length of time spent receiving social security on the employment status of rural informal laborers in Viet Nam. The quantile regression analysis would provide better information for policy-makers regarding the contribution of social security to informal labor in rural Vietnam.

The dependent variable is the status of employment for informal laborers. The selected independent variables include individual (gender, age, marital status, education, health condition, head of household) and systematic variables relating to social security programs (basic living allowance, tied aid system employment system, and barriers to accepting employment). Besides, the characteristic variables of barriers to accepting employment include another job function, different education, less responsibility, work time reduction, lower salary, below your competencies, higher transport time, and working conditions (see Table 1).

Table 1. The definition of the dependent variable and independent variable.

Variable	Definition	Mean	SD
Dependent variable	1: Employment; 0: Unemployment	0.48	0.50
Independent variable			
Gender	1: Male; 0: Female	0.57	0.49
Age	The actual age of respondents	37.78	6.24
Marital status	1: Married; 0: Single, divorced or widowed	0.86	0.34
Self-rated health status	1: Poor; 2: Normal; 3: Good	2.41	2.78
Education	1: Lower high school, 2: Primary vocational, 3: College, 4: University and higher	2.27	1.05
Household	1: Household, 0: Member	0.85	2.28
Basic living allowance	An allowance to offset the cost of basic living when you are in low-income households, 1: Yes, 0: No	0.15	2.21
Tied aid services	Per capita tied aid services that must be spent on goods or services produced and enjoyed by interviewed family: 1: Yes, 0: No	0.44	2.25
Employment services	Types of per capita employment and entrepreneurship services: 1: Yes, 0: No	0.71	2.01
Amount of support	The amount of per capita support (Million VND)	24.99	2.06
Length of support	The length of receiving support (Month)	5.02	2.10
Another job function	Have to be willing to take another job function. 1: Yes, 0: No	0.63	2.15
Different education	Have to take a completely different job from your education, 1: Yes, 0: No	0.92	2.09
Less responsibility	Have to be willing to work with less responsibility. 1: Yes, 0: No	0.86	2.14
Work time reduction	Have to be willing to work with time reduction. 1: Yes, 0: No	0.35	1.88
Lower salary	Have to be willing to work with lower salary, 1: Yes, 0: No	0.42	1.97
Below your competencies	Handle job tasks that are significantly below your competencies. 1: Yes, 0: No	0.42	1.90
Higher transport time	Increased transport time compared with your previous job, 1: Yes, 0: No	0.47	1.99
Working conditions	Accept poorer working conditions, 1: Yes, 0: No	0.48	1.93

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Impact of Social Security Program on the Employment Status of Rural Informal Laborers

As seen in Table 1, rural informal laborers have good health (2.41), informal laborers are mainly of working age (37.78), and their education is their primary vocation (2.27). During the Covid-19 period (2020 - 2022), the length of time to receive social security is 5.02 months with 24.99 million VND (unit of Vietnamese currency). Besides, rural informal labor will do another job function (0.63), different education (0.92), a job with less responsibility (0.86), but they do not will to do a job with work time reduction (0.35), lower salary (0.42), and below their competencies (0.42).

The binary logistic regression model was used to explain factors affecting the employment status of rural informal laborers during the Covid-19 time in rural Vietnam. Of all the described variables in Table 2, only age, health status, education, and employment services affect the employment of rural informal laborers ($p < 0.05$). Besides, some of the factors relating to the willingness to accept a job have a positive impact, including another job function, a different education, less responsibility, a low salary, and a higher transport time.

The variables of gender, age, householder, basic living allowance, tied aid services, amount of support, length of support, work time reduction, below your competencies, and poorer working conditions do not impact the employment status of informal laborers (Table 3). The education factor also has a positive impact on the status of employment of rural informal labor in Viet Nam with 0.306 times. The more educated informal laborers are aware of importance of finding a job and getting more employment. The informal laborers taking part in some training courses

will have higher skills and find it easier to find suitable jobs in Rural Vietnam. Besides, for the willingness to get a job, married informal workers and informal workers with good health will want to work more and therefore have a higher probability of getting a job.

Table 2. The regression result of the binary logistic model on the employment status of respondents.

Variables	Coefficient	SE	P-value
Gender	-0.825	0.531**	0.104
Age	-0.129	0.047**	0.006
Marital status	0.610	0.764**	0.042
Self-rated health status	0.107	0.331**	0.046
Education	0.306	0.254***	0.022
Householder	-0.129	0.992*	0.092
Basic living allowance	-0.203	0.275**	0.004
Tied aid services	-0.051	0.400**	0.008
Employment services	0.673	0.409***	0.001
Amount of support	-0.420	0.383**	0.003
Length of support	-0.173	0.400**	0.005
Another job function	0.210	0.220**	0.031
Different education	0.096	0.318**	0.076
Less responsibility	0.026	0.325***	0.093
Work time reduction	-0.987	0.353**	0.025
Lower salary	1.306	0.526*	0.013
Below competencies	-0.775	0.613**	0.026
Higher transport time	0.547	0.472**	0.024
Working conditions	-0.232	0.684***	0.012
Constant term	2.210	2.235**	0.032
Observations	215		
Pseudo R ²	0.473		

Note: *** p < 0.01, ** p < 0.05, * p < 0.1.

The binary logistic model indicates that those receiving a basic living allowance and tied aid services, as well as the amount and length of these supports, are less likely to be employed. Social assistance programs reduce employment in informal labor and encourage welfare dependence among their beneficiaries. This finding is the same as that of Shen-Cheng et al. (2019). However, as discussed in this study, welfare dependence on informal laborers places a greater focus on the context of Covid-19. Thus, the government should concentrate on the balanced development of social security programs to support these laborers during the pandemic when they have to stay at home and stop their work.

However, the result in Table 2 shows that the basic living allowance has a composite effect on the decision to take a job for informal labor in Rural Viet Nam with -2.03 times. This means that if the government increases the per capita basic living allowance for a long time, informal laborers will not be able to find jobs because they can depend on this allowance to continue their lives and take care of their children. Moreover, the model gives the same conclusion about the impact of the tied aid, system on the employment of informal laborers. The more labor receives the tied aid the less they think about finding a job with -0.51 times. Shen-Cheng et al. (2019) also give the same finding. The author confirms that the tied aid system is one of the reasons for unemployment status when people get this aid for a long time. Most of them refuse to find jobs because they depend too much on their social support. In contrast, employment service supports have a significant positive effect on the employment status of informal labor (0.673 times). The finding shows that employment services and training job skill courses lead to a positive effect for informal labor to find suitable jobs. By receiving support in career skills and knowledge, informal laborers improve their competencies to be easier accepted by entrepreneurs, and these supports also give them more information about the labor market.

In the analysis of 215 rural informal laborers, we also found several important possibilities for employment status. They do another job with other job functions (0.210), different education (0.069), less responsibility (0.026), lower salary (1.306), and higher transport time (0.547) during the Covid-19. However, work time reduction (-0.987), below competencies (-0.775), and poorer working conditions (-0.232) do not encourage them to get a job during the Covid-19. If labor receive a job below their competencies, they may be underestimated compared to their true competencies. The below competency factor has an impact on the status of employment, which is the same result as the opinion of Kadefors and Hanse (2012). Employers' negative attitudes towards laborers affect their willingness to join a job again. Besides, a poor work environment does not improve the labor commitment level or achievement-striving ability significantly. Both labor commitment and achievement-striving ability do not improve labor performance. So poorer work will reduce the willingness to join the job (Zhenjing, Chupradit, Ku, Nassani, & Haffar, 2022).

4.2. The Effects of the Length of Social Security on the Employment Status

The binary logistic regression model in Table 2 confirms that basic living allowance and tied aid services, as well as the amount and length of these supports, do not encourage rural informal labor to get a job, but employment service supports are found to increase employment status by 0.67 times. The estimates from quantile regression in Table 3 reveal that the basic living allowance and tied aid services tend to decrease with employment quantiles, while employment services tend to increase with employment quantiles.

Table 3. Quantile effects of the length of receiving social security on the employment status of rural informal labors.

Variables	The 25 th quantile		The 50 th quantile		The 75 th quantile	
	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE
Gender	-0.001	0.105**	-0.111	0.067**	-0.255	0.127**
Age	-0.002	0.083*	-0.009	0.005*	-0.018	0.010*
Marital status	0.084	0.150**	0.062	0.096**	0.083	0.182**
Self-rated health status	0.014	0.068**	0.018	0.043**	0.062	0.082**
Education	0.104	0.048**	0.041	0.031**	-0.002	0.058**
Householder	0.018	0.187**	0.062	0.119**	-0.104	0.226**
Basic living allowance	-0.016	0.403***	-0.005	0.025**	-0.029	0.048***
Tied aid services	-0.062	0.070**	0.027	0.045**	-0.043	0.085**
Employment services	0.097	0.058***	0.022	0.037***	0.023	0.070**
Amount of support	-0.133	0.065**	-0.159	0.045**	-0.151	0.086**
Length of support	-0.060	0.083**	-0.062	0.053**	-0.105	0.100**
Constant term	0.145	0.457**	0.318	0.292**	1.634	0.553**
Observations	215		215		215	
Pseudo R2	0.305		0.418		0.367	

Note: *** p < 0.01, ** p < 0.05, * p < 0.1.

Table 3 shows that if the government increases basic living allowances (-0.029) and tied aid services (-0.043) for a long time, informal laborers will not want to improve their work skills and find suitable jobs. This problem leads to an increase in the unemployment status of informal laborers in rural Vietnam. The more laborers receive this basic living allowance, the higher their unemployment status rises. Shen-Cheng et al. (2019) also find that if the government increases social security programs (basic living allowance, tied aid services), laborers receiving these supports will reduce their willingness to find jobs. However, the results of the quantile models also confirm the conclusion that informal laborers preferring to receive employment and educational services are more likely to find a job. In general, systematic factors had positive and negative effects on rural informal labor during the COVID-19 pandemic, and these effects depended on the kind of social security programs with 0.097 (the 25th quantile model), 0.022 (the 50th quantile model), and 0.023 (the 75th quantile model).

5. CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concludes that the identified individual factors, including marital status, health status, and education, have a positive impact and are similar to the findings of previous studies. However, age, gender, and head of household

are not identified as significant factors. The results also show that single laborers have lower chances of employment because they do not have to take care of raising their children and other members of their families (Damaske, Bratter, & Frech, 2017).

Furthermore, this study also finds that, during COVID-19, among rural informal laborers entitled to the basic living allowance, having a higher education leads to a higher likelihood of being employed. The models indicate that rural informal laborers entitled to basic living allowances and tied aid services are less likely to be employed. This finding in the models highlights the adverse effects of welfare dependence. These results show that informal labor relies on the social assistance system when they have received this support in the long term. When economic shocks occur, they cannot face them immediately, so they need this social security support to overcome difficulties such as lockdown and unemployment. However, in the long term, the government needs to have other social security programmes, such as employment services and training courses, to encourage them to improve their new occupation skills and find a good job. Additionally, this suggests that the government should continue to introduce employment services. So, the government should implement support policies on vocational education and help informal sector workers develop their skills to adapt to the economic shocks, including multi-skills, specialized professional skills, creative skills at work, problem-solving skills, teamwork skills, etc. When informal workers are skilled, they will be able to adapt quickly to changes in the labor market and be better able to secure social security for themselves.

Besides, for the level of willingness to accept the new job, factors including a job with other job functions, different education, less responsibility, a lower salary, and a higher transport time still have an impact on returning a job. However, work time reduction, lower competencies, and poorer working conditions do not encourage them to get a job during COVID-19. So, in order to encourage rural informal take on new jobs, the government should prove some social security programs, such as improving work conditions and arranging suitable work hours, to ensure informal labor can work safely.

However, our study also has some limitations. Our research only focuses on assessing the impact of social security programmes on the employment status of informal laborers in rural Vietnam in the context of shocks such as ID-19. However, in the future research direction, we will focus on assessing the impact of these social security programs on informal labor in urban Vietnam.

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Transparency: The authors state that the manuscript is honest, truthful, and transparent, that no key aspects of the investigation have been omitted, and that any differences from the study as planned have been clarified. This study followed all writing ethics.

Data Availability Statement: The corresponding author can provide the supporting data of this study upon a reasonable request.

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