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Citizens' Opinions of and Experiences with Government Responses to COVID-19 Pandemic in Vietnam

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Abstract

The study aims to understand the impact of COVID-19 on citizens' livelihoods, the accessibility and effectiveness of the Government's relief packages, and public confidence and trust in the government responses to the pandemic. The study reveals several important findings as follows. First, the government responses to contain the COVID-19 outbreak have proved to be swift and effective, according to citizens surveyed. This is evident in the respondents' high consensus of strong support for government policy and actions to contain the pandemic. Importantly, people who have positive experiences with their provincial performance in governance and public administration were more supportive of the government's responses during the pandemic. Second, despite such government and citizen responses, the COVID-19 pandemic has generated negative impacts on the Vietnamese citizens and the national economy as a whole. The survey findings reveal that 24 percent of the respondents reported job losses because of the pandemic. These are also 65 percent of the respondents reporting income loss. Third, the findings of the survey reaffirm an overall positive feedback from citizens of and experience with the government's support package. People who received supports from the package were more likely to support the government's responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19; government's responses, aid package; economic impact.

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1. Introduction

Viet Nam has been praised by citizens and the international community for its effectiveness in curbing the SARS-CoV2 pandemic outbreak (better known as the COVID-19 pandemic, or COVID-19).¹ Since January 2020, the Government of Viet Nam (GoV) has been quick in implementing important measures to contain COVID-19, similar to the ones which brought Viet Nam success in SARS containment in 2003. “A task force was formed, information gathering was centralized and virtually the whole government was mobilized to deal with the infection and its consequences”.² Only one week after Viet Nam’s first case of COVID-19 was reported on 23 January 2020, Viet Nam promptly established the National Steering Committee on COVID-19 Prevention and Control to develop a multi-sectorial response plan.

While many countries were debating the trade-offs between health and economic growth, GoV made an unequivocal decision to prioritize health over economic growth by launching strong measures to prevent COVID-19, “fighting the epidemic as an enemy”.³ In fact, Viet Nam was among the first countries to halt all air travel from China as well as other high-risk areas, to quarantine international travelers⁴ and eventually banned all international travels in late March⁵. Other aggressive measures include a national lockdown in April during the first wave of the pandemic, selected lockdowns during the second wave in July and August 2020 and massive multi-tier approach to contact tracing and isolation.⁶ Alongside with these aggressive measures, the GoV also run one of the most extensive and intensive propaganda campaigns it has ever carried out in history. The public were informed of personal protective behaviors against COVID-19 such as wearing face masks, washing hands and social distancing.⁷ To date, there has been very few daily cases of community transmission in the country.⁸

Evidence from the decade-long policy advocacy tools of the Viet Nam Provincial Governance and Public Administration Performance Index (PAPI) reveals that improved governance and responsiveness of central and local governments have contributed to the

¹ See <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/04/30/vietnam-offers-tough-lessons-us-coronavirus/>. Accessed on 30 December 2020.

² See <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/05/07/world/sars-epidemic-containment-vietnam-halted-sars-saved-life-nurse.html>. Accessed on 30 December 2020.

³ See <https://blogs.worldbank.org/health/containing-coronavirus-covid-19-lessons-vietnam>. Accessed on 30 December 2020.

⁴ See <https://www.bangkokpost.com/travel/1848369/vietnam-suspends-all-china-flights>. Accessed on 21 November 2020.

⁵ See <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/pm-orders-suspension-of-all-international-flights-in-covid-19-fight-4072670.html>. Accessed on 21 November 2020.

⁶ See <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/how-vietnam-fought-a-pandemic-and-won-4209547.html>. Accessed on 30 December 2020.

⁷ See <https://ncov.moh.gov.vn/vi/web/guest/-ieu-can-biet>. Accessed on 30 December 2020.

⁸ See <http://vncdc.gov.vn/vi/phong-chong-dich-benh-viem-phoi-cap-ncov/14127/ban-tin-cap-nhat-dich-benh-covid-19-ngay-20-11-2020>. Accessed on 21 November 2020.

country's effective responses to the global COVID-19 pandemic.⁹ Demonstrated progress in the performance of the public healthcare services, transparency and control of corruption in the public sector—which have been the focuses of advocacy for the PAPI research in the past decade — might have increased citizens' trust in government, who in return might have been more willing to comply with extensive contact tracing, quarantine and lockdown measures. The decrease in community transmission as a result of such strong measures has helped the country quickly ease restrictive measures and reopen domestic economic activities.

Despite the early reopening of domestic economic activities, there are certain inevitable economic costs. The lockdown has a negative effect on the economy (Dang and Nguyen, 2020). According to the General Statistics Office of Vietnam (GSO), Viet Nam's GDP growth rate was only 0.4 percent by the end of June 2020¹⁰ but increased to 2.91 percent by the end of December 2020¹¹, the lowest growth rate in the past decade. As of June 2020, 30.8 million people aged 15 and over in the country were negatively affected economically by the COVID-19¹². Some sectors such as manufacturing, tourism, accommodation and food services, transport, wholesale and retail trade were more affected while agriculture, forestry and fishing, which overall employ 18.9 million workers, have been relatively isolated (ILO, 2020). Yang et al. (2020) conducted a phone survey in June and found that 38 percent of households reported job loss because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The crisis also struck the informal sector especially hard and exacerbated the challenges faced by migrant workers (ILO, 2020) and vulnerable people (UN Viet Nam, 2020).

To mitigate adverse impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, GoV has implemented several economic relief measures. Companies struggling amid the pandemic outbreak were assisted with tax breaks, delayed tax payments and reductions in land lease fees via a fiscal stimulus package worth VND 180 trillion.¹³ A different social protection package with cash transfers worth VND 62 trillion was initiated to support poor and near-poor households, social protection beneficiaries, people with meritorious service to the country, wage workers and household

⁹ See Reopening Vietnam: How the country's improving governance helped it weather the COVID-19 pandemic by Trang Nguyen and Edmund Malesky at <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/05/20/reopening-vietnam-how-the-countrys-improving-governance-helped-it-weather-the-covid-19-pandemic/>, accessed on May 20, 2020.

¹⁰ See <https://www.gso.gov.vn/en/data-and-statistics/2020/10/social-and-economic-situation-in-the-3rd-quarter-and-9-months-of-2020/>. Accessed on 30 December 2020.

¹¹ See <https://www.gso.gov.vn/du-lieu-va-so-lieu-thong-ke/2020/12/hop-bao-cong-bo-so-lieu-kinh-te-xa-hoi-quy-iv-viet-nam-2020/>. Accessed on 30 December 2020.

¹² See <https://www.gso.gov.vn/en/data-and-statistics/2020/07/report-on-the-impact-of-the-covid-19-on-labour-and-employment-situation-in-viet-nam/>. Accessed on 30 December 2020.

¹³ See <https://nhandan.com.vn/chungkhoan/kip-thoi-trien-khai-goi-ho-tro-tai-khoa-180-nghin-ty-dong-den-doanh-nghiep-455077/>. Accessed on 21 November 2020.

businesses being affected by COVID-19. As of 22 August, VND 11.98 trillion was disbursed to 12.06 million people and 13,725 household businesses.¹⁴

In the context of government responses' success, to our best knowledge, there have been no large-scale and representative studies examining why COVID-19 has been successfully controlled in Vietnam despite a number of studies on COVID-19 responses in Vietnam. La et al. (2020) used media content analysis to review and compile GoV responses with their corresponding timelines. Tran et al. (2020) and Riyanti et al. (2020) compared responses of different ASEAN nations using the same approach. There are two studies, Nguyen et al. (2020) and Tran et al. (2020), which aimed to depict respondents' perception and attitudes about the government responses and adaptation capacity of local authorities and community to the epidemic respectively using online surveys. However, sample of these surveys were selected via snowball sampling technique, where existing study subjects were asked to recruit other participants from their acquaintances; therefore, representativeness of the samples was not guaranteed and statistical inferences could not be generalized to population¹⁵.

This study aims to provide empirical evidence to explain the success of the GoV in containing the epidemic. The study examined public confidence and trust in the government responses to COVID-19, in particular how the Vietnamese citizens perceived and experienced the preventive measures adopted by central and local governments. It was conducted on the assumption that, without citizens' support for government measures and trust in responsible authorities, no measure would work. Furthermore, this study also aims to investigate the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on employment and income of Vietnamese citizens and the accessibility and effectiveness of the social protection package.¹⁶ Findings from this study are reflected from data collected by Computer Assisted Telephone Interviews (CATI), which was conducted with a nationally representative sample using the 2019 PAPI sample frame, with an intention to compare how citizens experienced local governance before and during the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic. It provides insight into the reasons for Viet Nam's success to date in containing COVID-19 and suggest policy implications for central and local governments in response to possible next waves of the COVID-19 pandemic or a similar pandemic.

¹⁴ See <http://hanoitimes.vn/vietnam-labor-ministry-proposes-second-covid-19-credit-package-worth-us800-million-313941.html>. Accessed on 21 November 2020.

¹⁵ See <https://research-methodology.net/sampling-in-primary-data-collection/snowball-sampling/>. Accessed on 30 December 2020.

¹⁶ During and after the COVID-19 outbreak and lockdowns in Vietnam, there has been some concern about the lack of transparency in distribution of the 62 billion VND cash transfer support for individuals facing difficulties as a result of the pandemic and government responses. (<https://vietnamnet.vn/vn/tuanvietnam/tam-diem/nha-lau-xe-hoi-van-can-ngheo-can-bo-tu-tui-dau-phai-do-luong-thap-646978.html?fbclid=IwAR2BixYfhTy4rg2HSqmD3uG0Pp815Uere7pU5Wfny0B6krzNsMis358qqUg>)

2. Methods

This survey applied a computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) method to collect data. Specifically, callers conducted phone interviews via a voice API and recorded the responses into tablets. A questionnaire was developed and programmed for the tablet, incorporating some questions from the PAPI 2019 survey questionnaire. It was refined based on a pilot of 10 representative households.

The sampling frame is the 2019 PAPI survey, which covers 14,333 participants from 63 provinces nationwide. Among 9,982 respondents providing phone numbers, 1,337 individuals are randomly selected.¹⁷ Interviews were successfully completed for 1,335 respondents, whose demographic characteristics' distribution is presented in Appendix 1. Moreover, sampling weights are also calculated and used to ensure that the surveyed sample is representative at the national level, for urban and rural areas and with male and female, Kinh majority and non-Kinh majority respondents¹⁸. In this report, the survey is referred to as the 2020 COVID survey.

Data collection lasted 24 days in September 2020, right after the outbreak of the COVID-19 wave 2 in several central provinces was better controlled. The average interview duration is 27 minutes. Data collected include respondents' knowledge about COVID-19, their corresponding behaviors and experience with the pandemic, their assessment of government responses and the VND 62 trillion aid package.

The data was analyzed via the STATA software. Graphs and charts were mainly used to present the distribution or the proportion of respondents by their opinions on the pandemic. In addition, regression analysis is employed to examine association between characteristics of respondents and their opinions of government responses to COVID-19. Further details of the regression method are presented in Appendix 2.

3. Empirical findings

3.1. Citizens' Perception of the COVID-19 Pandemic

As one explanation for Viet Nam's COVID-19 success includes the massive media campaign to raise citizens' awareness on the matter¹⁹, this section provides evidence of great public

¹⁷ The official sample was randomly collected via a two-stage design to ensure that all 831 villages in the 2019 PAPI survey had their representatives and the sample was proportionally to number of respondents in each province in the 2019 PAPI survey. Four replacements in the same village were also selected for each observation in the official sample. Among more than 2,000 phone calls, 1,335 individuals were successfully conducted, corresponding to an attrition rate of 33 percent.

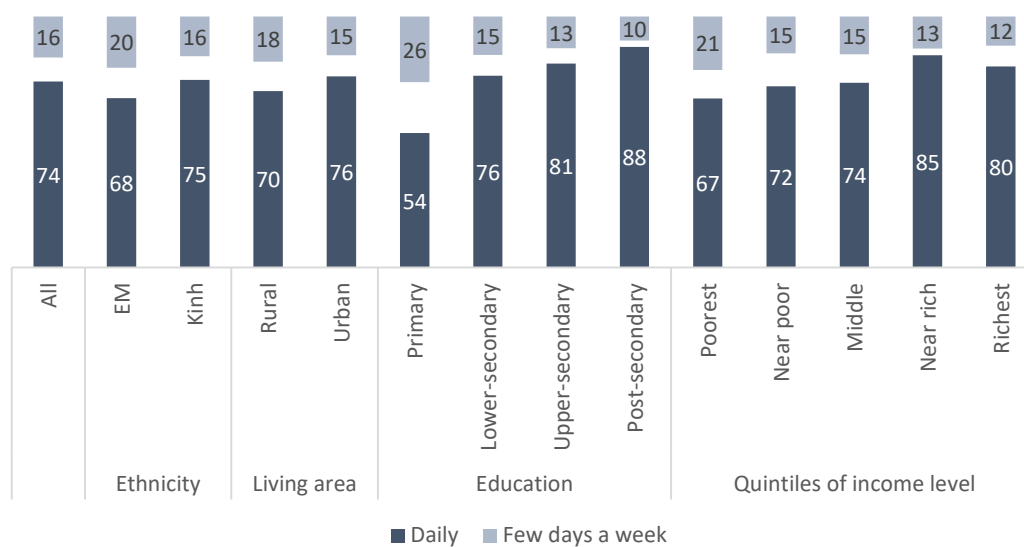
¹⁸ Demographic characteristics of the respondents were compared with those of individuals in the 2019 PAPI survey who had provided phone numbers but were not selected for the 2020 COVID survey. The research team do not find any significant differences in the demographic characteristics between the two samples.

¹⁹ See <https://thediplomat.com/2020/08/vietnams-covid-19-success-is-a-double-edged-sword-for-the-communist-party/>. Access on 30 December 2020.

attention on COVID-19 as a result of prompt and strong dissemination of information and how it shaped their perception and attitude towards the pandemic.

As part of the propaganda campaign, the Ministry of Health launched a website and a mobile application to disseminate information on COVID-19 latest developments accurately and quickly. At the same time, state media constantly released information about the pandemic hotspots.²⁰ According to a report of the Ministry of Information and Communication, from 1 February to 31 May 2020, the press published a total of 560,048 pieces of news and articles on the COVID-19 pandemic.²¹ The campaign was also deployed on other communication platforms such as messaging via SMS and social media. Messages were sent daily to citizens living in COVID-19 hotspots to warn and remind them about the risks and prevention measures.²² The campaign also included the release of “Ghen Co Vy”, a well-known pop song given new lyrics and turned into a viral educational song on handwashing to prevent COVID-19 infection.²³

Figure 1. Frequency receiving COVID-19 news update (%)



Our survey results reveal the effectiveness of this massive awareness raising media campaign with only 0.8 percent of respondents who have never heard about COVID-19. As high as 90 percent of the respondents heard about COVID-19 at least a few days a week and a majority of them has access to COVID-19 news on a daily basis. In general, all population

²⁰ See <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/the-secret-to-vietnams-covid-19-response-success/>. Access on 30 December 2020.

²¹ See <https://ncov.moh.gov.vn/-/thu-tuong-truyen-thong-gop-phan-lam-nen-thang-loi-cua-cuoc-chien-chong-dich-covid-19>. Access on 30 December 2020.

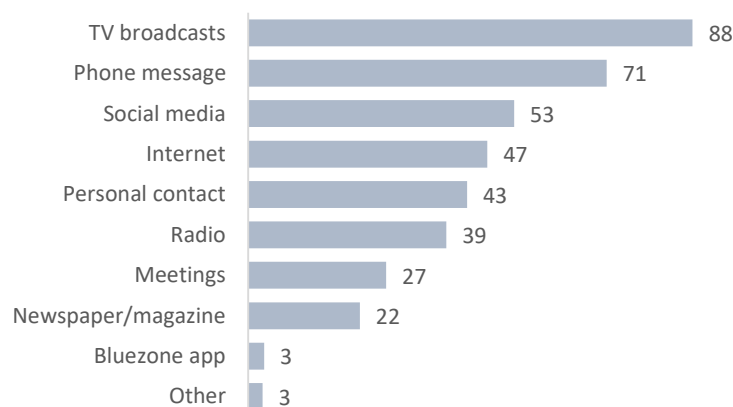
²² See <http://www.hanoimoi.com.vn/tin-tuc/Doi-song/974024/gui-115-trieu-tin-nhan-phong-chong-dich-covid-19-cho-thue-bao-tai-da-nang>. Access on 30 December 2020.

²³ See <https://vovworld.vn/en-US/current-affairs/ghen-co-vy-vietnamese-covid19-safety-song-goes-viral-836990.vov>. Access on 30 December 2020.

groups are interested in COVID-19 latest developments. Figure 1 shows that Kinh and urban respondents are slightly more frequently informed than ethnic minorities and rural respondents. The poor and the less educated also received COVID-19 news less frequently.

The public received news about COVID-19 on diverse information channels that the media campaign covered such as TV broadcasts, social media, radio, newspapers and direct communication in the community. It reflects the fact of how extensively media campaign were carried out. Figure 2 reveals the list of the most effective channels for information dissemination. The most common information channel mentioned by respondents (88 percent) is TV broadcasts. Phone text messages are less effective than TV broadcasts. However, it still plays an important role in delivering COVID-19 news to Vietnamese citizens as it reaches 71 percent of the population. Other information channels such as social media, internet, word of mouth via personal contact, etc. were identified by about half of the population as their source of information.

Figure 2. Diverse information channels (%)

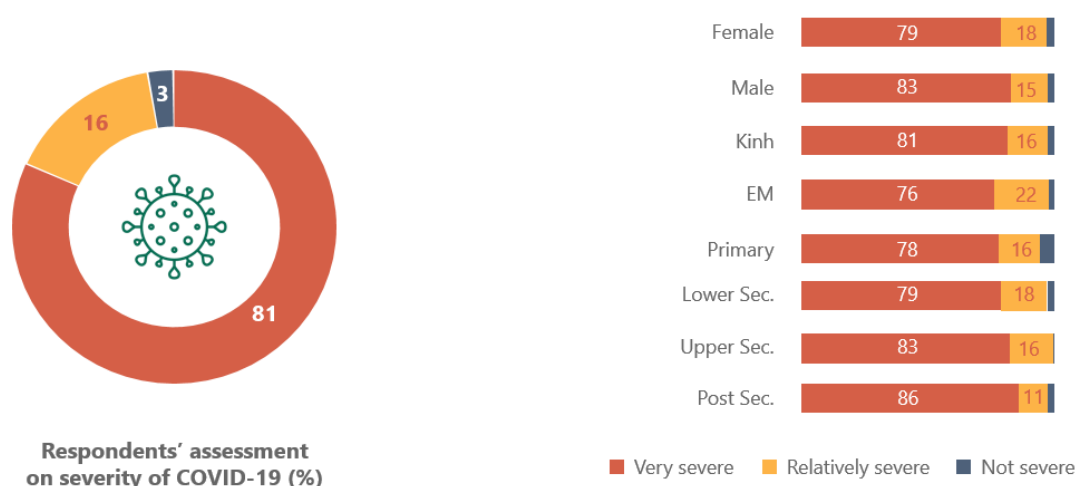


More importantly, the full transparency of information results in high public trust with nearly all respondents (98 percent) said that they believed in the accuracy of the information on COVID-19. This is of particular significance and value for public buy-in of the seriousness of COVID-19 and state measures against the virus's spread. Almost every respondent in our survey considered COVID-19 a serious issue. Specifically, 81 percent of the respondents considered COVID-19 a very severe problem and 16 percent considered it as a relatively severe problem (Figure 3). People with higher education were more serious about the COVID-19 pandemic than those with lower education.

Regression analysis was performed to further examine the variation in the public attention paid to the COVID-19 pandemic across population sub-groups using an aggregate index which was constructed from a number of sub-indicators using a principal component

method (Appendix 2). This aggregate index, which measures the level of citizens' attention to and concern about COVID-19, was regressed on variables of respondents' characteristics. The results reveal several interesting findings.²⁴ Respondents, who experienced job loss due to COVID-19, are more concerned about COVID-19 than others. This is rather easy to explain since these people would have a grasp of how the pandemic is affecting them and thus are more worried about the matter. In addition, respondents who have had better experience with governance and public administration are more likely to pay attention to COVID-19 developments and take it more serious.²⁵ Provinces with higher governance and public administration might have better dissemination of COVID-19 information, which in turn attract more attention from local people to the pandemic.

Figure 3. Respondents' assessment on the severity of COVID-19 (%)



As the majority of the population are aware of the seriousness of the pandemic, it is no surprise to find that Vietnamese citizens actively protect themselves from the coronavirus and are compliant with the GoV's social distancing policies. This observation has been confirmed in other studies such as Nguyen et al. (2020) and Yang et al. (2020).

In the COVID-19 propaganda campaign, citizens are recommended to wear mask outside, especially in busy public spaces, frequently wash hands with soap or hand sanitizer, avoid crowded public spaces and practice social distancing. This propaganda campaign must have achieved excellent results as Figure 4 shows that almost every respondent reported they wore face masks when going outside (99 percent). This aspect significantly distinguishes Viet Nam from other countries as the GoV has been requiring citizens to wear masks outdoors from

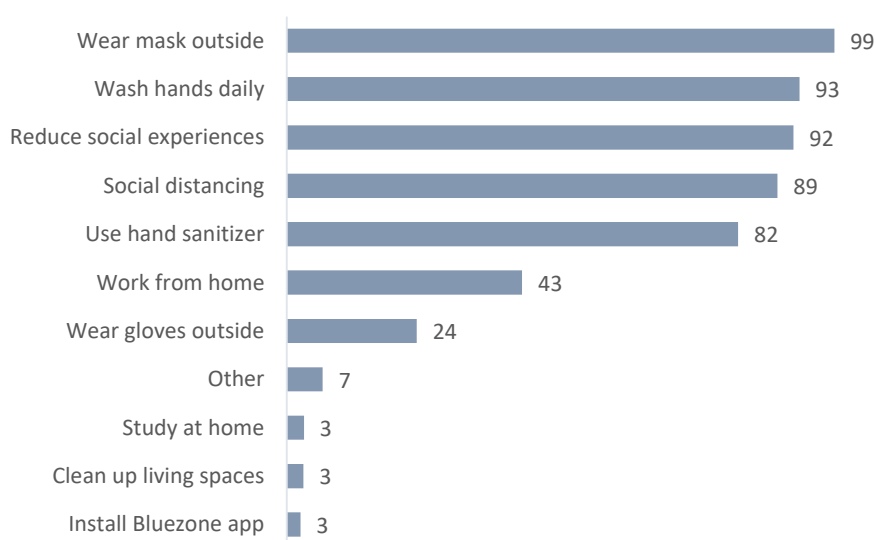
²⁴ See Appendix 3.

²⁵ The 2019 PAPI survey contains information on index of citizens' experiences with governance and public administration. Higher value of the PAPI index means positive governance and public administration. We include this variable as an explanatory variable in the regressions.

the start, when health authorities in many countries were debating and waiting for evidence on the effect of masks on the spread of COVID-19. According to a survey conducted by Belot et al. (2020) in late April 2020, the proportion of people who often wear face masks outside home was 82 percent in China, 80 percent in South Korea and 68 percent in Japan. This figure is even much lower in western countries such as Italy (44 percent), United Kingdom (13 percent) and the US (35 percent). The habit of wearing masks could have been a powerful deterrent to the spread of the coronavirus.

However, wearing masks is only one of several protective measures practiced by the Vietnamese people. Our survey shows that most respondents washed hands daily with soap (93 percent) and frequently use hand-sanitizers (82 percent). They also coped with the pandemic by avoiding meetings with other people (92 percent) and practiced social distancing (89 percent). A much lower proportion of respondents chose to work from home, which could be justified given how well-controlled the pandemic was domestically.

Figure 4. Compliance with COVID-19 prevention measures (%)



As opposed to the success of the media campaign in the dissemination of the above mentioned COVID-19 prevention measures, the Bluezone app, which made frequent appearance on the media as it was meant to help the GoV in contact tracing, was not widely recognized and used. Despite the high number of downloads of around 20 million times²⁶, only 3 percent of our survey respondents mentioned it as a measure to prevent COVID-19. A possible reason for the app not to be used by many is a low number of COVID-19 cases in the community because most F0 and F1 cases have to be quarantined. The chance to meet such

²⁶ See <https://vietnaminsider.vn/bluezone-covid-19-tracking-app-exceeded-20-million-downloads/>. Accessed on 30 December 2020.

cases in community is very small. Moreover, there is a concern about the security and privacy when using this app.²⁷

To examine further which characteristics of the respondents determine their compliance with the GoV's prevention and control guidance, we also constructed an aggregate index which measures the compliance with COVID-19 preventive measures and regress this index on a range of respondents' characteristics (Appendix 2). Findings from the regression show that those respondents with higher value of the aggregate index are more likely to protect themselves from COVID-19 by washing hands, wearing face masks and avoiding meetings. Appendix 3 shows that male respondents were less likely to undertake the preventive measures than female respondents. Respondents with post-secondary education tend to follow protective measures more strictly than those with lower education.

In addition, there is a positive correlation between the previous experience with governance and public administration and the compliance of protective practices. Those respondents with better experiences of governance and public administration tend to implement the protective measures more strictly than others. Again, provinces with better governance and public administration might have disseminated information on COVID-19 more effectively and provided adequate responses to the epidemic. As a result, their local people are more likely to follow the protective practices guidelines from the government. Also, those respondents in provinces with more COVID-19 cases tend to be more compliant. However, in provinces where a longer duration of the lockdown in April was imposed, people were less likely to follow the protective measures against COVID-19.

3.2. Assessment of government responses to COVID-19

Respondent's adherence to the protective measures could be explained by their high consensus on GoV's priority in the wake of COVID-19 that health should be prioritized over economic growth²⁸. When being asked about the GoV's priority, 89 percent of surveyed sample opted to saving lives at the cost of economic benefits²⁹. Meanwhile, the corresponding figure from other countries is 22 percentage points lower, at only 67 percent.³⁰ The GoV's propaganda from early stage of the pandemic outbreak might be an explanation for this profound finding. In fact, on

²⁷ See <https://vietnamnet.vn/vn/cong-nghe/ung-dung/ung-dung-bluezone-co-tac-dung-gi-663317.html>. Accessed on 30 December 2020.

²⁸ See <http://tuyengiao.vn/thoi-su/uu-tien-phong-chong-dich-viem-phoi-la-du-phai-hy-sinh-loi-ich-kinh-te-126427>. Accessed on 30 December 2020.

²⁹ In this question, respondents were asked to choose one statement that they agreed more with between two statements about GoV's priorities – health versus economic growth. These two statements were arranged in a random order to illuminate order bias because people tend to pick up the first one for convenience.

³⁰ See <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/05/coronavirus-health-economy-global-survey/>. Accessed on 30 December, 2020.

27 January 2020, few days after the first case's detection, the GoV stated their priority on health in the battle against the epidemic in a meeting of the National Steering Committee for Prevention and Control of Dangerous and Emerging Diseases. Three days later, on 30 January, the GoV issued the Official Dispatch No. 369/BYT-TT-KT to strengthen propaganda for prevention and control of COVID-19 in 63 provinces³¹.

An additional possible reason why Vietnamese people are gravely concerned with health issue is that young people tend to live with older ones and they care about high risk of COVID-19 transmission for these people, who are considered more vulnerable to this unprecedented disease.³² According to the 2016 Viet Nam Household Living Standard Survey, in approximately 21 percent of households, grandparents lived with their children and grandchildren.

National lockdown in April is a vivid illustration for the GoV's priority on health when reducing the risk of contagion within the country is of utmost importance in containing the epidemic. Particularly, the national lockdown was implemented in 15 days starting from 01 April, only 10 days after the first two cases of community transmission were detected.³³ Vietnam and Laos are the only two nations in Southeast Asia to impose national lockdown for curbing intensity of COVID-19 spread (Riyanti D. et al, 2020).

In general, surveyed respondents claimed that the national lockdown in April was issued timely and people strictly complied with the order (). As regards timing of the lockdown, 88 percent of the respondents agreed that the order was issued timely. Meanwhile, only 9 percent of the respondent thought that the lockdown was put in place early or too early. This statement seems to be more supported by vulnerable people, such as those in lowest income quintile, unskilled and non-farm workers³⁴ (Figure 6). Concerning compliance level of the lockdown, 88 percent of the respondents said that people in their communities followed the order. In the meantime, merely 2 percent of the respondents thought that the lockdown was not followed in their communities.

³¹ See <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/cong-van/The-thao-Y-te/Cong-van-369-BYT-TT-KT-2020-van-dong-phong-chong-benh-viem-duong-ho-hap-cap-do-nCoV-433772.aspx>. Accessed on 30 December 2020.

³² See <https://www.sggp.org.vn/nguoi-cao-tuoi-de-bi-ton-thuong-boi-covid19-652542.html>. Accessed on 30 December 2020.

³³ See https://moh.gov.vn/hoat-dong-cua-lanh-dao-bo/-/asset_publisher/TW6LTp1ZtwaN/content/thu-tuong-chi-thi-cach-ly-toan-xa-hoi-tu-0-gio-1-4-tren-pham-vi-toan-quoc. Accessed on 30 December 2020.

³⁴ These respondents were also hardest hit by COVID-19 in terms of job loss and income reduction.

Figure 5. Assessment of the national lockdown in April 2020 (%)

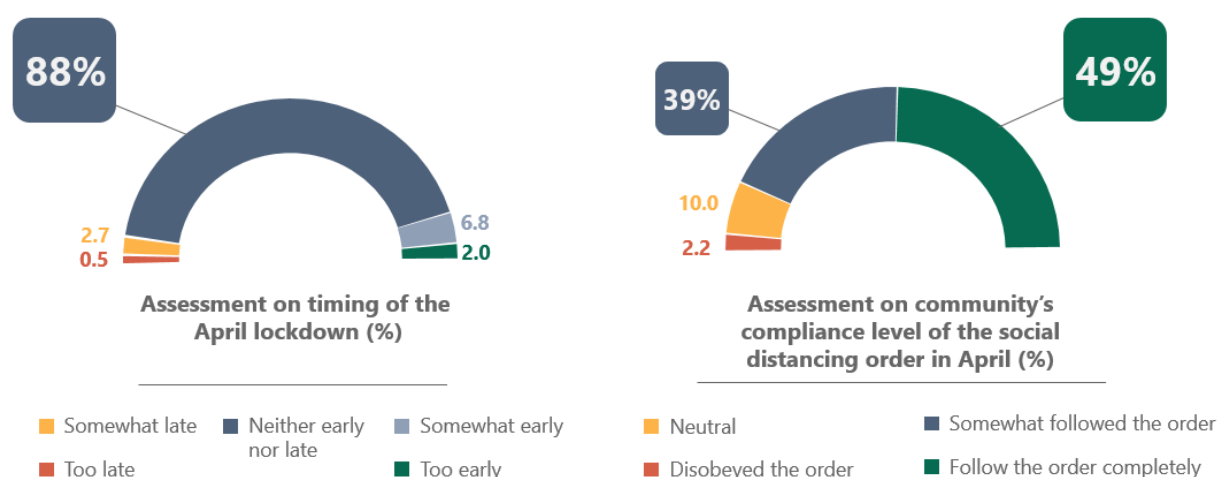
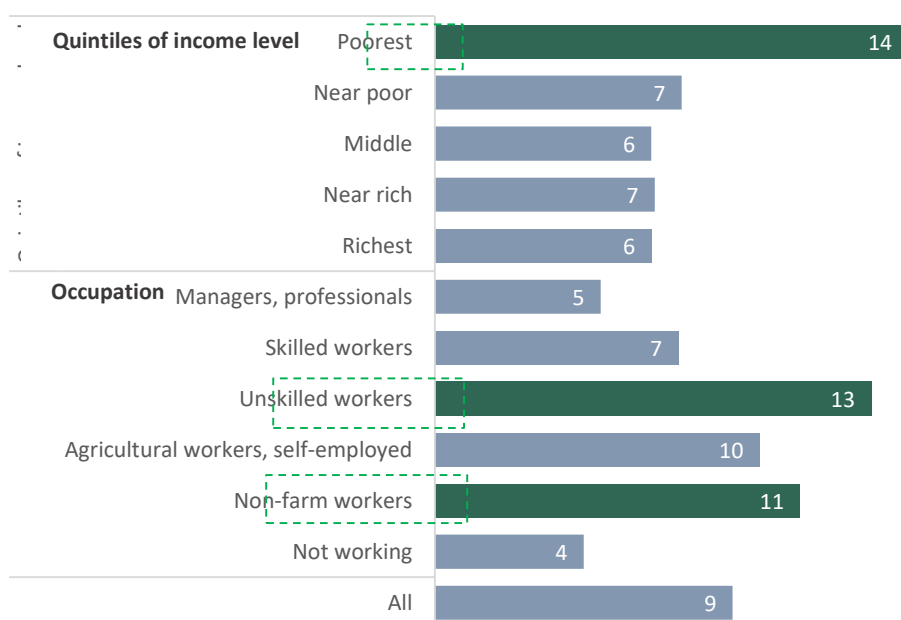


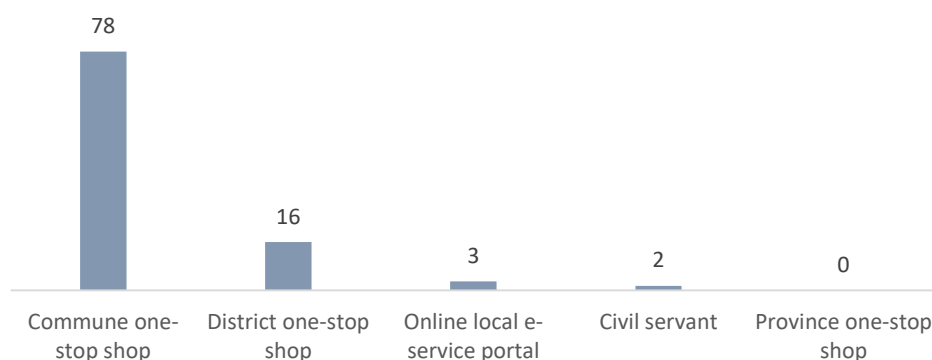
Figure 6. Proportion of respondents thinking that the April lockdown was put in place early or too early (%)



A possibly direct effect of the national lockdown is on citizens' access to public administration services. In particular, only 10 percent of respondents reported to have used these services in April, substantially lower than corresponding figure of 40 percent in August 2019.³⁵ Most of these people (94 percent) had administrative procedure experience through district and commune one-stop shops (Figure 7). A mere 3 percent of the respondents reported to use e-government portals for administrative procedures. With a growing number of businesses and citizens working online due to COVID-19, the GoV should consider e-government initiative as one of top priorities in the new decade.

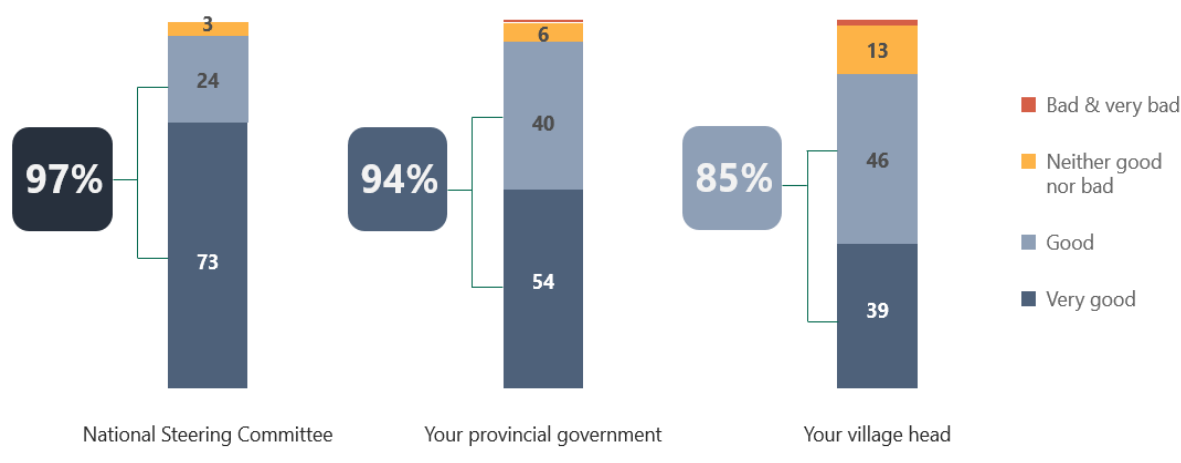
³⁵ The figure was released in the 2019 PAPI survey.

Figure 7. Proportion of respondents using public administration services in April (%)



Although the national lockdown in April was considered timely and strictly adhered to, a majority of respondents thought that it should not be reapplied in the current context when COVID-19 has been well contained. Specifically, one-fifth of the sample were supportive of implementing national lockdown; meanwhile, 77 percent of respondents said that the order should be imposed at local levels only, such as in communities (46 percent), communes (14 percent) and provinces (17 percent) where the epidemic occurs. The finding is consistent between sub-groups, implying that respondents' view on social distancing order is not affected by their demographic characteristics.

Figure 8. Performance rating of governmental bodies in handling the COVID-19 pandemic (%)



In addition to social distancing order, respondents were also asked to assess government responses as a whole. Figure 8 presents a high satisfaction of the respondents with government performance in handling COVID-19. Specifically, up to 96 percent of respondents rated the performance of the National Steering Committee as good or very good. However, the proportion of respondents having the same rating is lower when coming to local authorities. To

be specific, approximately 54 percent of respondents considered performance of provincial governments very good while the figure was only 39 percent for the village heads.

The research team also use regression analysis to further examine relationship between respondents' characteristics and their assessment on government responses to COVID-19 based on principal analysis method as mentioned in Appendix 2. Regression results in Appendix 3 shows that respondents living in urban areas and those with higher education levels are more likely to support government responses. In addition, respondents having positive experiences with governance and public administration seem to endorse government responses more strongly. Possibly, provinces with better governance and public administration have better responses to COVID-19 and receive more trust from local people. Most strikingly, a positive effect of receiving aid package on the respondents' support level is also spotted.³⁶ To be specific, respondents in households having received cash from the package show greater support to the government responses.

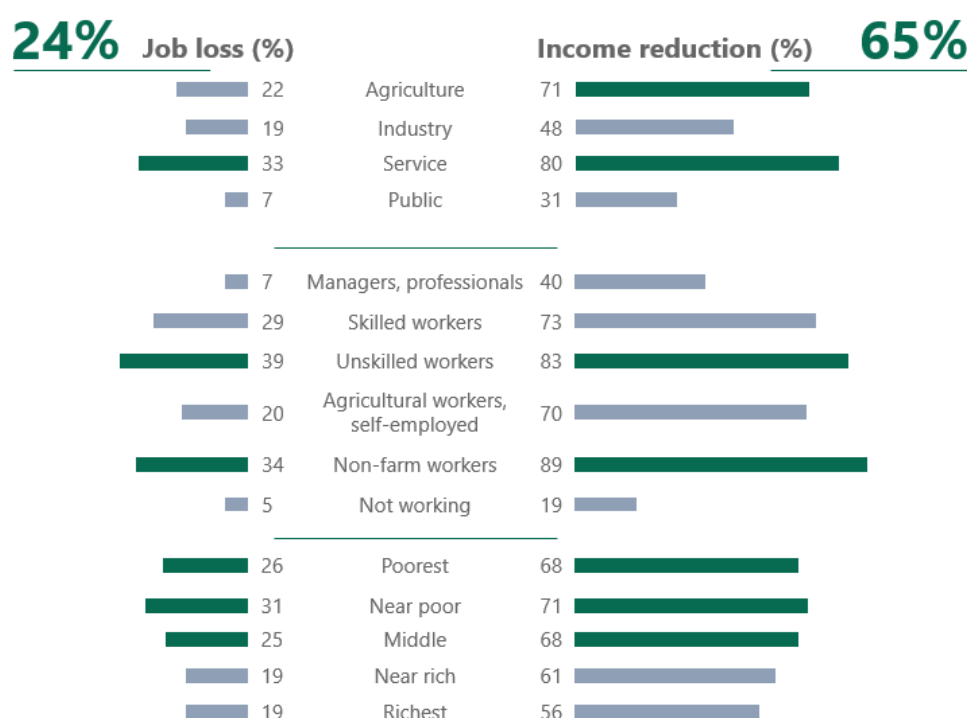
3.3. Economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic

Measures applied to contain COVID-19 by the GoV as well as other countries' government are affecting Viet Nam's economy. Several studies have documented impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economy in Viet Nam (e.g. General Statistics Office of Viet Nam, 2020; ILO, 2020; Yang et al., 2020; and Dang and Nguyen, 2020). In our survey, 24 percent of respondents reported job losses due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Job loss varies substantially by sectors and occupations as displayed in Figure 9.

Respondents who work in the service sector were most affected, while those working in the public sector are least affected. The proportion of respondents working in the service sector reporting job loss is 33 percent. Because of border closure and lockdowns, important service industries such as transportation and tourism are heavily affected. Unskilled workers and those working for non-farm business households were also strongly affected, as 39 percent of respondents who are unskilled workers reported job losses. On the other hands, only 7 percent of managers reported job losses.

³⁶ The aid package and respondents' assessment on it will be discussed later.

Figure 9. Proportion of job loss and income reduction due to COVID-19 (%)



It should be noted that 5 percent of the respondents who were unemployed in 2019 reported job losses in the 2020 COVID survey. These people were unemployed at the time of interview for the 2019 PAPI survey who might have found a job before COVID-19 hit Viet Nam and lost their new found job due to COVID-19 by September 2020.³⁷

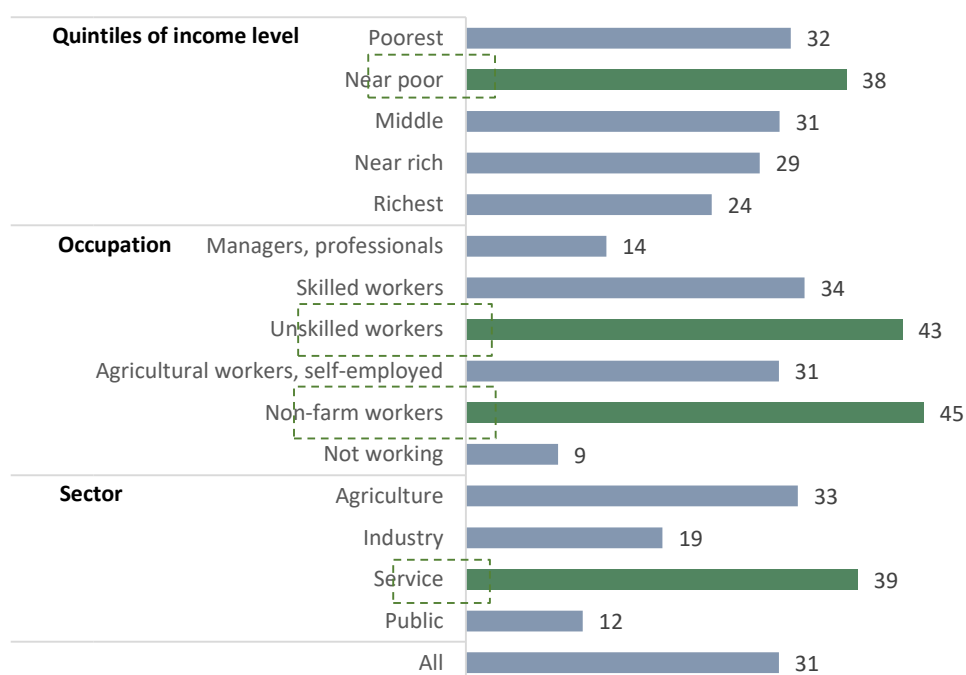
The impact of COVID-19 on employment is also heterogeneous among people of different income level. To examine the correlation between income level and job loss, we classified respondents by quintiles of their income level reported in the 2019 PAPI surveys. Analysis results show that respondents in the low-quintile income group were more likely to lose jobs than those in the high-quintile group. The near-poorest (or those in the second-quintile group) were most affected by COVID-19, as 31 percent of the respondents in this group experienced job losses. The second quintile group includes a large proportion of unskilled workers, who were also among those that were most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

A consequence of any job loss is a reduction in income. A recent survey conducted by the World Bank suggested that 70 percent of households experienced an episode of income reduction since February, mostly due to job losses (Yang et al., 2020). According to UN Women (2020), the greatest decline in household income due to COVID-19 was recorded in April 2020. Household income declined by over 70 percent in April 2020 and 49 percent in May 2020, compared to December 2019.

³⁷ We classified respondents using their pre-COVID-19 employment statuses in 2019 from the 2019 PAPI survey.

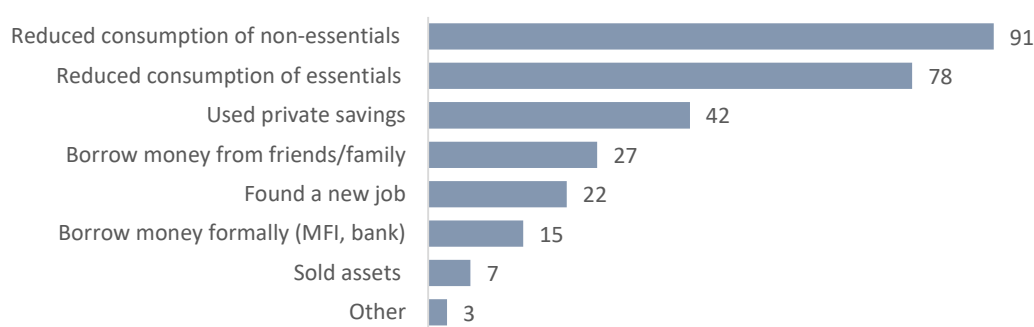
Findings from our survey show that 65 percent of the respondents experienced income losses due to COVID-19. On average, respondents experienced an income reduction by around 31 percent (Figure 10). Those who worked in the service sector were more likely to lose income. Unskilled workers and those working for household businesses are more affected by COVID-19 than other types of laborers. The near-poor respondents (those in the second income quintile) were most affected with an income reduction by 38 percent, while the richest (those in the fifth income quintile) experienced an income reduction by 24 percent.

Figure 10. Magnitude of income reduction due to COVID-19 (%)



The survey also asked whether respondents and their households had to reduce consumption, to use savings, to borrow from other sources, or to use other ways to respond to income reduction. A direct effect of income reduction is a decline in consumption. Figure 11 shows that 91 percent of the households had to reduce non-essential goods because of income losses and 78 percent of the households had to reduce necessity goods. The proportion of respondents who said they or their family members found other jobs to cope with income loss is 22 percent. More seriously, 7 percent of respondents said that their households sold assets to cope with COVID-19.

Figure 11. Coping strategies following income reduction (%)



3.4. Assessment of the aid package

In April 2020, the GoV released a cash relief package of VND 62 trillion to mitigate the adverse impacts of COVID-19 on those most affected.³⁸ The unprecedented aid package is expected to support more than 20 million beneficiaries and considered instrumental in ensuring social security so that “no one is left behind” amid COVID-19. As of 22 August, VND 11.98 trillion has been disbursed to 12.06 million people and 13,725 household businesses.³⁹ This section will present awareness of all respondents about the package before examining opinions and experiences of those receiving the support.

Table 1. Social protection measures adopted in the aid package

| No | Beneficiary groups | Monthly allowance | Application period |
|----|---|-------------------------|--|
| 1 | Employee subjects to suspension of performance of labor contract or unpaid leave due to COVID-19 | VND 1,800,000/person | - Be paid monthly - Can be up to a maximum of three months starting from April 01, 2020 |
| 2 | Employee subjects to termination of labor contract but not eligible for unemployment allowance | VND 1,000,000/person | - Be paid monthly - Can be up to a maximum of three months starting from April 01, 2020 |
| 3 | Household business that earns an annual revenue of under VND 100 million/year and has to suspend business operation from April 01, 2020 | VND 1,000,000/household | - Be paid monthly - Can be up to a maximum of three months starting from April 01, 2020 |
| 4 | Person with meritorious services to the revolution who is receiving monthly benefits | VND 500,000/person | - Be paid in a lump sum - Applicable for 3 months, from April to June 2020 |
| 5 | Social protection beneficiary who is receiving monthly benefits | VND 500,000/person | - Be paid in a lump sum - Applicable for 3 months, from April to June 2020 |
| 6 | Poor or near-poor household according to the national poverty standards by December 31, 2019 | VND 250,000/person | - Be paid in a lump sum - Applicable for 3 months, from April to June 2020 |

As shown in Figure 12, although 87 percent of the respondents had heard about the package, information access varied across the sub-groups. Indeed, people with higher living standards have better access to this information. Kinh respondents, people in higher income

³⁸ <http://english.molisa.gov.vn/Pages/Document/Detail.aspx?id=39439>. Accessed on 30 December 2020.

³⁹ <http://hanoitimes.vn/vietnam-labor-ministry-proposes-second-covid-19-credit-package-worth-us800-million-313941.html>. Accessed on 30 December 2020.

quintile and those living in urban areas were more likely to hear about the package than their counterparts. In addition, 98 percent of respondents who had received post-secondary education knew about the package, 20 percentage points higher than this figure of those with less than primary education.

The proportion of respondents reported that their households had received cash support from the aid package is 21 percent.⁴⁰ Using poverty status classified in the PAPI 2019 survey, the research team found that 64 percent of poor households received support, implying that 36 percent of poor households were not beneficiaries⁴¹. According to Yang et al. (2020), not all eligible households and people applied for the aid support; thus, there might be some that did not receive the cash. Furthermore, whether the package was distributed appropriately or not also depends on operation of local governments in screening and compiling list of beneficiaries in their provinces⁴².

Figure 12. Experiences with the aid package (%)

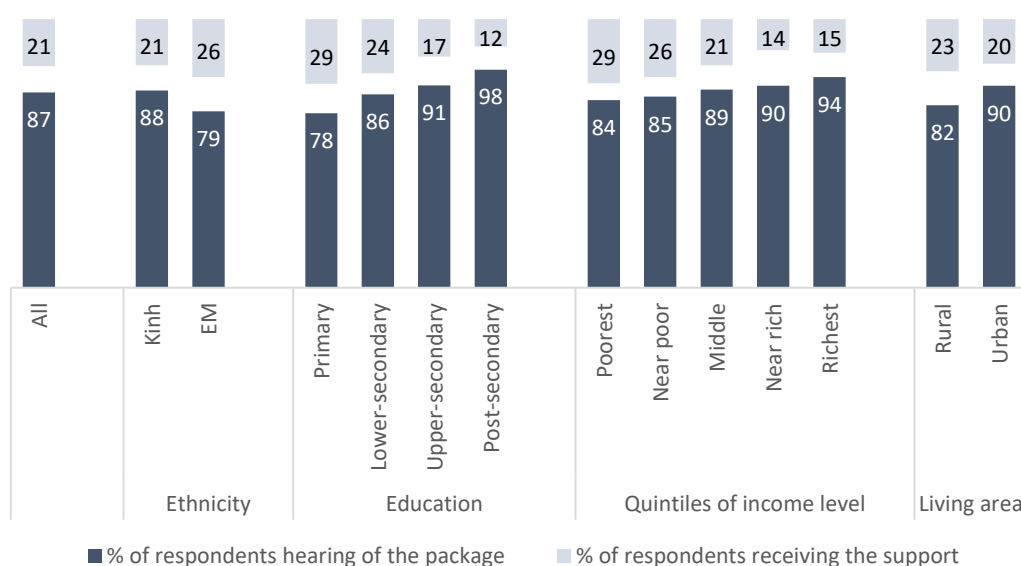


Figure 12 revealed that the package at a certain level targeted at vulnerable groups as more vulnerable households had a higher possibility of being supported. Specifically, the proportion of households in the poorest income quintile receiving the support doubled that of the richest group, 29 percent compared to 15 percent. This pattern reappears when comparing recipient figures between households of respondents with primary and post-secondary education. In addition, households of EM respondents and households residing in rural areas

⁴⁰ The figure is somehow similar to the proportion of poor households estimated in Vietnam Household Living Standard Survey.

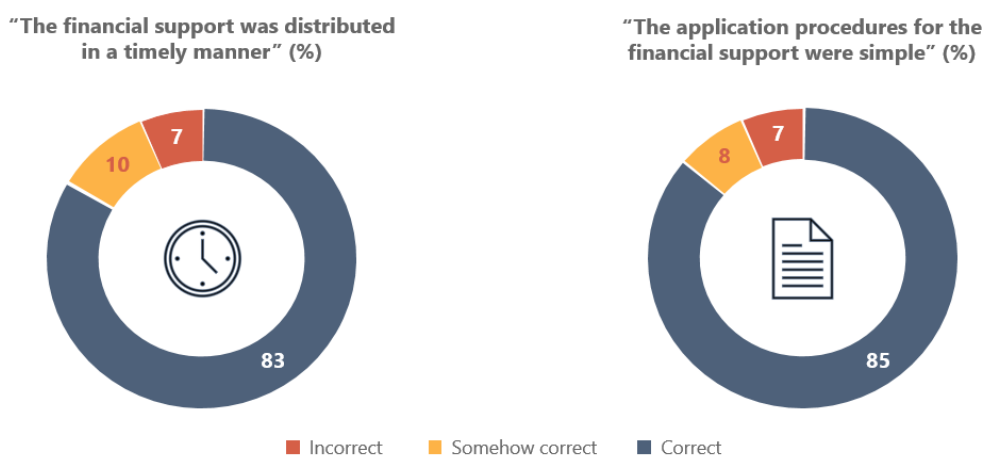
⁴¹ Please note that these poor households are classified by the local authorities.

⁴² <https://www.tienphong.vn/kinh-te/goi-ho-tro-go-62-nghin-ty-chi-sai-lam-that-thoat-ngan-sach-1755788.tpo>. Accessed on 30 December 2020.

were more likely to receive aid than their counterparts although the discrepancies were quite moderate, at 5 and 3 percentage points respectively.

The proportion of recipients claimed that their households had received correct cash amount as per policy, in the Government’s Resolution No. 42/NQ-CP dated on 09 April 09 2020, is 88 percent. Meanwhile, only 4 percent of the recipients thought that their households had not received the correct amount of the cash support.

Figure 13. Assessment of the aid package



Moreover, recipients’ assessment on the package is measured via their agreement with two statements regarding to timing and application procedure of the package (Figure 13).⁴³ Accordingly, most of them agreed that the cash support was distributed in a timely fashion (83 percent) and the application procedures were simple (85 percent). As the number of receivers in this survey is small, the research team do not present and analyze the data by their demographic characteristics.

4. Conclusions

Using data collected from a telephone-based survey conducted in September 2020 with 1,335 respondents randomly selected from the 2019 PAPI sampled population of the Viet Nam Governance and Public Administration Performance Index (PAPI), this study provides evidence that explains the success of Viet Nam in containing COVID-19. The government responses to contain the COVID-19 outbreak have proved to be swift and effective, according to citizens surveyed. Prompt and strong dissemination of information proved to be the key to success, raising public awareness about the seriousness of COVID-19. The unprecedented media campaign, carried out by the Government intensively and extensively on various

⁴³ Statement 1: “The financial support was distributed in a timely manner”
Statement 2: “The application procedures for the financial support were simple”

channels, was so effective that almost all respondents have heard about COVID-19 at least a few days a week. Survey results show that the most effective channels for information dissemination are TV broadcasts and phone text message as they were able to reach more than 70 percent of the population.

The full transparency of information results in high public trust and confidence in the GoV's response to the pandemic. It also demonstrates the necessity of such unprecedented government interventions. This is evident in the respondents' compliance with the GoV's guidance, high consensus and strong support for policy and actions adopted by central and local government to contain the pandemic. In particular, 88 percent of respondents claimed that the national lockdown in April was issued timely. More than 90 percent of respondents said they actively protect themselves from the virus mainly by wearing face masks outdoors, frequent hand-washing and social distancing. Impressively, 96 percent of respondents rated the responses from the National Steering Committee on COVID-19 Prevention and Control as good or very good. Most importantly, 89 percent of the respondents agreed to the GoV's motto that the country should prioritize saving lives over economic growth.

Despite the Government and citizens' effort in containing the pandemic, COVID-19 still causes negative impacts on households' employment and income with 24 percent of respondents reported job loss and 65 percent of respondents experienced income reduction at some extent. Border closure and lockdowns affects service sector the most, as well as unskilled labor and those working for non-farm business. The poorest and near-poor households are also two groups that were hit hard by COVID-19. The analysis shows that this pandemic disproportionately impacts vulnerable groups, pushing them further into income poverty, as compared to their counterparts. Expecting adverse impacts of COVID-19 on those most affected, the GoV released a VND 62 trillion social protection package with cash transfers for poor and near poor households, social protection beneficiaries, people with meritorious service to the country, affected employees and household businesses. Assessment on the distribution of the social protection package is generally positive in multiple aspects such as correct amount of aid transfers, timely distribution and simple application procedures. However, there remains 13 percent of surveyed respondents who have not heard of the aid package who belong to ethnic minority groups, the poorest, the rural population and those with lower education levels. This suggests room for improvement in information dissemination where access to information is limited.

There are several policy implications from this study with the most important one highlighting the importance of good governance in building citizens' trust in government

response and specially in times of crises such as pandemics, natural disasters, among others. First, as mentioned in this report, regression analysis shows that those respondents that had more positive feedback about their provincial performance in governance and public administration through PAPI were more concerned about COVID-19 and tend to follow more closely the COVID-19 prevention measures. They were also more supportive of the government's response during the pandemic.

Second, the government should also pay particular attention to citizens' economic well-being as a negative effect on income can reduce their support of government policies. It is very important to provide subsidy and economic support to the most affected people as the regression results show that those respondents that received the cash transfer from the relief package are more likely to support the government's response to COVID-19.

Third, the analysis shows a variation in access to information on COVID-19 and the 62 trillion VND aid package. Those respondents with low education and low income are less likely to hear about COVID-19 and the aid package. It is important to provide information to less advantaged groups. Finally, in the current context, people tend to submit social distancing at the community and commune level rather than a national lockdown, since a national lockdown can have a negative effect on employment and income.

To conclude, Viet Nam's successful response to COVID-19 pandemic so far offers important lessons in terms of transparency, accountability, and social cohesion that can inform not only Viet Nam's responses but other countries in dealing with future crises. For Viet Nam, some of the good governance practices should be applied for addressing other key challenges that citizens have highlighted as top three issues of greatest concerns for citizens over the past three years, including Poverty, Environment and Corruption, according to the 2019 PAPI report.

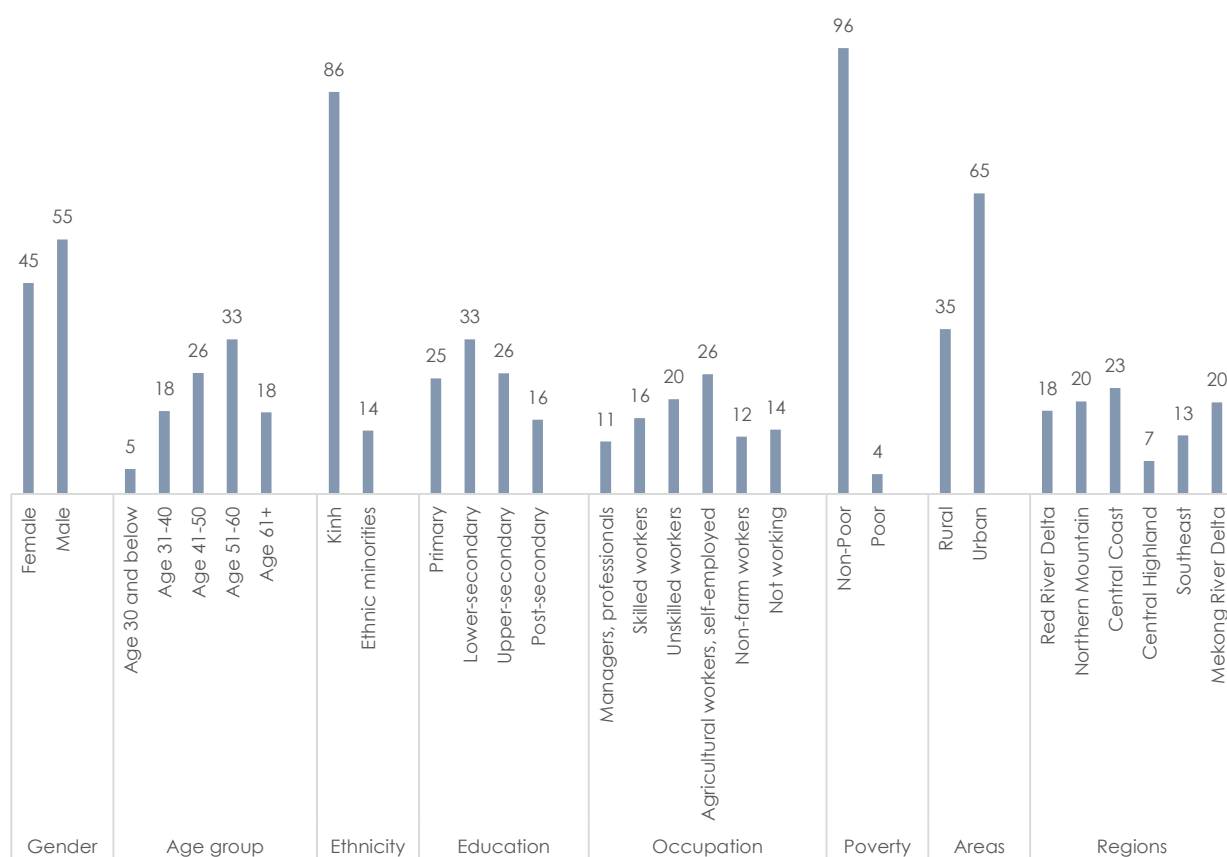
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Appendix

Appendix 1. Demographic characteristics of the respondents (%)



Appendix 2. Description on regression method

In this study, we use descriptive statistics and graph analysis to examine the distribution of individuals by their response to the COVID-19 and their assessment of the government's policies and measures to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic. We also use the following regression to explore variables associated with individuals' response and assessment:

$$y_{i,j} = \alpha + DOM_{i,j}\beta + ECO_{i,j}\gamma + SOC_{i,j}\delta + GEO_{i,j}\theta + PRO_j\pi + \varepsilon_{i,j}, \quad (1)$$

where $y_{i,j}$ is a dependent variable of interest of individual i in province j . The dependent variables include the responses of individuals to the COVID-19 pandemic as well as their assessment of government policies and measures to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic. $DOM_{i,j}$ is a vector of individual demographic characteristics including age, sex, ethnicity, and education. $ECO_{i,j}$ represents economic variables of individuals such as sector and occupation of employment, job loss and income loss due to the COVID-19 pandemic. $SOC_{i,j}$ includes variables indicating social inclusion and other non-economic characteristics of individuals such as membership of mass organization, receiving the aid package from the government, and the value of PAPI index. $GEO_{i,j}$ consists of geographic variables including urban and regional dummies. PRO_j denote province-level variables including the number of COVID-19 cases and the lockdown days in April of provinces.

A problem with selecting the dependent variables is that there are a large number of variables which can be used to measure the response and assessment of individuals to the COVID-19 pandemic and government policies and measures on the pandemic. To address this issue, we use the principal components approach of Filmer and Pritchett (2001) and Filmer and Scott (2008) to construct aggregate indexes. An aggregate index is constructed as the first principal component of a vector of sub indicators. The principal component approach defines an aggregate index in terms of the first principal component of the variables used. The aggregate index, denoted by A_i for respondent i is computed as follows:

$$A_i = \sum_p a_p \left(\frac{x_{pi} - \bar{x}_p}{s_p} \right), \quad (2)$$

where x_p denotes the sub-indicator p , and \bar{x}_p denote a mean of sub-indicators in the sample. s is a standard deviation of the sub-indicator x_p , and the p -domanian vector of weight a is chosen to maximize the sample variance of A , subject to $\sum_p a_p = 1$. The weight a is also called the vector of scores of sub-indicators, which can be estimated using principal component analysis.

We define three main variables which measure the level of concern about the COVID-19, measures to protect themselves from the COVID, and the assessment of the government response. Based on the data availability, the sub-indicators of the three aggregate indexes include:

- Aggregate index of concern about the COVID-19:
 - o Frequency of hearing about the COVID-19
 - o Perceived seriousness of the COVID-19
 - o Perception of the magnitude of the COVID's impact on the Vietnam
 - o Agreement that communities should enforce social distancing orders themselves.
 - o Support for large-scale social distancing
- Aggregate index of protective behaviours against COVID-19:
 - o Wash hands daily
 - o Use hand sanitizer
 - o Wear gloves outside
 - o Wear mask outside
 - o Study at home
 - o Work from home
 - o Reduce social experiences
 - o Social distancing
 - o Clean up living spaces
 - o Install Bluezone app
 - o Other measures
- Aggregate index of assessment of the government's response:
 - o Lockdown in April is timely.
 - o Opinion on performance of National Steering Committee
 - o Opinion on performance of provincial government
 - o Opinion on performance of village heads
 - o Opinion on the statement 'The actions of the government were done to minimize bad health outcomes'
 - o Opinion on the statement 'The actions of the government were done to minimize bad economic outcomes'
 - o Opinion on the targeting of aid package

The aggregate index is standardized to have zero mean and standard deviation of one. A higher value of the indexes means more concerns about the COVID-19 pandemic, more compliance with protective measures against the COVID-19, and positive assessment of government responses.

Appendix 3. Regression of aggregate indices

| Explanatory variables | Aggregate index of concern about the COVID-19 | | Aggregate index of behaviors of protection from the COVID-19 | | Aggregate index of assessment of the government's response | |
|---|---|----------------|--|----------------|--|----------------|
| | Coef. | Standard error | Coef. | Standard error | Coef. | Standard error |
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) |
| Male (male=1, female=0) | 0.001 | 0.060 | -0.158*** | 0.042 | 0.101* | 0.054 |
| Age | -0.036** | 0.017 | -0.005 | 0.020 | 0.043** | 0.020 |
| Age squared * 1000 | 0.291* | 0.168 | 0.034 | 0.194 | -0.446** | 0.204 |
| Ethnic minorities (yes=1, Kinh=0) | 0.089 | 0.083 | -0.160 | 0.106 | -0.015 | 0.098 |
| Primary and below | | | | | | |
| Lower-secondary | -0.003 | 0.082 | 0.099 | 0.063 | 0.080 | 0.078 |
| Upper-secondary | 0.003 | 0.084 | 0.012 | 0.076 | 0.180** | 0.073 |
| Post-secondary | -0.067 | 0.100 | 0.324*** | 0.086 | 0.272*** | 0.102 |
| Agriculture | | | | | | |
| Industry | -0.012 | 0.114 | -0.130 | 0.112 | -0.043 | 0.106 |
| Service | -0.190** | 0.096 | 0.106 | 0.089 | -0.027 | 0.102 |
| Public | -0.062 | 0.105 | 0.104 | 0.106 | -0.082 | 0.105 |
| Managers, professionals | | | | | | |
| Skilled workers | -0.043 | 0.131 | -0.035 | 0.066 | 0.029 | 0.117 |
| Unskilled workers | -0.163 | 0.152 | -0.020 | 0.103 | 0.085 | 0.117 |
| Agricultural workers, self-employed | -0.181 | 0.147 | -0.089 | 0.124 | -0.011 | 0.119 |
| Non-farm workers | 0.097 | 0.140 | -0.040 | 0.095 | 0.086 | 0.128 |
| Not working | 0.033 | 0.114 | -0.008 | 0.095 | -0.028 | 0.103 |
| Job loss (yes=1, no=0) | 0.153** | 0.072 | 0.101* | 0.056 | -0.080 | 0.064 |
| Income loss (yes=1, no=0) | 0.094 | 0.066 | 0.104** | 0.046 | -0.158** | 0.064 |
| Member of mass organization (yes=1, no=0) | -0.016 | 0.050 | -0.004 | 0.046 | 0.118* | 0.061 |
| Poor households (yes=1, no=0) | 0.041 | 0.120 | -0.237 | 0.145 | -0.078 | 0.154 |
| Receiving cash from the aid package (yes=1, no=0) | 0.065 | 0.075 | 0.077 | 0.065 | 0.227*** | 0.058 |
| PAPI index of respondents | 0.011*** | 0.004 | 0.009** | 0.004 | 0.037*** | 0.003 |
| Number of COVID cases in province | 0.041 | 0.041 | 0.134*** | 0.038 | -0.003 | 0.042 |
| Number of lockdown days in April | -0.004 | 0.006 | -0.009* | 0.005 | -0.003 | 0.005 |
| Urban dummy (urban=1, rural=0) | 0.056 | 0.062 | 0.028 | 0.055 | 0.154*** | 0.059 |
| Red River Delta | | | | | | |
| Northern Mountain | 0.118 | 0.087 | -0.052 | 0.095 | -0.074 | 0.087 |
| Central Coast | 0.120 | 0.080 | 0.108 | 0.072 | -0.055 | 0.071 |
| Central Highland | 0.002 | 0.118 | 0.615*** | 0.100 | -0.255** | 0.104 |
| Southeast | -0.136 | 0.087 | 0.420*** | 0.078 | -0.154 | 0.100 |
| Mekong River Delta | 0.074 | 0.097 | 0.564*** | 0.073 | -0.144* | 0.084 |
| Constant | 0.441 | 0.505 | -0.687 | 0.525 | -2.810*** | 0.554 |
| Observations | 1,318 | | 1,335 | | 1,335 | |
| R-squared | 0.043 | | 0.127 | | 0.119 | |

Significant levels: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

Standard errors are corrected for sampling weight and intra-cluster correlation.