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The Doi Moi dilemma: Balancing economic growth and social justice in Vietnam

Thế tiến thoái lưỡng nan của Đổi mới: Cân bằng tăng trưởng kinh tế và công bằng xã hội ở Việt Nam

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Abstract


This study examines the interplay between economic growth and social progress and justice in Vietnam during the *Doi Moi* (Renovation) era, beginning in 1986. It aims to critically assess how Vietnam has attempted to harmonize economic and social objectives over nearly four decades of transformation. Employing a qualitative methodology grounded in thematic and content analysis of the Communist Party of Vietnam documents, national statistics, and academic literature, the study reveals that Vietnam has achieved notable economic milestones—such as rapid GDP growth, poverty reduction, and rising human development indicators. Simultaneously, the country has expanded social services and advanced education and healthcare access. However, significant challenges persist, including income inequality, regional disparities, unsustainable economic practices, corruption, and limited access to social services for migrants and ethnic minorities. These findings suggest that while Vietnam has made commendable progress, the practical realization of social justice often lags behind policy intent. The study recommends strategic reforms in governance, economic restructuring, and social protection systems, emphasizing that sustainable and inclusive development requires a more integrated and accountable approach to balancing economic and social priorities.

Keywords: *Doi Moi* (Renovation), economic growth, policy reform, social justice, sustainable development, Vietnam.

Tóm Tắt

Nghiên cứu này xem xét mối quan hệ tương tác giữa tăng trưởng kinh tế và tiến bộ xã hội và công lý ở Việt Nam trong thời kỳ Đổi mới, bắt đầu từ năm 1986. Nghiên cứu nhằm mục đích đánh giá một cách phê phán cách Việt Nam đã nỗ lực hài hòa các mục tiêu kinh tế và xã hội trong gần bốn thập kỷ chuyển đổi. Sử dụng phương pháp định tính dựa trên phân tích chủ đề và nội dung các văn bản của Đảng Cộng Sản Việt Nam, số liệu thống kê quốc gia và tài liệu học thuật, nghiên cứu cho thấy Việt Nam đã đạt được những cột mốc kinh tế đáng chú ý - chẳng hạn như tăng trưởng GDP nhanh chóng, giảm nghèo và các chỉ số phát triển con người tăng lên. Đồng thời, đất nước đã mở rộng các dịch vụ xã hội và nâng cao khả năng tiếp cận giáo dục và chăm sóc sức khỏe. Tuy nhiên, vẫn còn những thách thức đáng kể, bao gồm bất bình đẳng thu nhập, chênh lệch giữa các vùng, các hoạt động kinh tế không bền vững, tham nhũng và khả năng tiếp cận hạn chế các dịch vụ xã hội đối với người di cư và các dân tộc thiểu số. Những phát hiện này cho thấy rằng mặc dù Việt Nam đã đạt được những tiến bộ đáng khen ngợi, nhưng việc hiện thực hóa công lý xã hội thường chậm hơn so với mục tiêu chính sách. Nghiên cứu khuyến nghị các cải cách chiến lược trong quản trị, tái cấu trúc kinh tế và hệ thống bảo trợ xã hội, nhấn mạnh rằng phát triển bền vững và toàn diện đòi hỏi một cách tiếp cận tích hợp và có trách nhiệm hơn để cân bằng các ưu tiên kinh tế và xã hội.

Từ khóa: Đổi Mới, tăng trưởng kinh tế, cải cách chính sách, công bằng xã hội, phát triển bền vững, Việt Nam.

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Introduction

Since initiating the *Doi Moi* reforms in 1986, Vietnam has experienced remarkable economic growth, lifting millions out of poverty and positioning itself as one of Southeast Asia's most dynamic economies. However, this progress has come with growing disparities. In 2018, the GINI coefficient reached 0.425 in some regions, underscoring a stark imbalance in income distribution (Oxfam in Vietnam, 2018). This contrast between economic achievement and social inequality highlights a central strategic challenge for Vietnam: how to sustain high growth while ensuring that its benefits are equitably shared across society. This study delves into this critical issue, examining the persistent tension between economic expansion and the realization of social justice in Vietnam.

This issue is global in scope but particularly pressing in the context of Vietnam's transitional economy. Despite decades of reform, uneven development, income inequality, and unequal access to quality education and healthcare remain significant hurdles (Diez, 2016; OECD, 2014; Oxfam in Vietnam, 2018). Without effectively addressing these disparities, economic growth alone may fall short of realizing the inclusive, equitable society envisioned by the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) and by Ho Chi Minh himself—who emphasized human liberation and comprehensive human development as core to Vietnam's revolutionary trajectory (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2024).

Since the launch of *Doi Moi*, the CPV has continuously reaffirmed its commitment to building “a prosperous people, a strong country, a democratic, just, and civilized society” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2021, p. 112). This vision reflects a deliberate attempt to harmonize market-oriented reforms with socialist principles of justice and equity. Vietnam's development path, therefore, is shaped not only by Marxist-Leninist ideology but also by enduring traditional values, including Confucian principles of virtuous governance, moral leadership, and humanistic education (Nguyen, 2023; Pham et al., 2023; Tran, 2024).

The CPV's aspirations are further underscored by its goal of transforming Vietnam into a high-income, socialist-oriented nation by 2045, as articulated during the 13th National Party Congress (Guzikova et al., 2018; Pradhan, 2021). Achieving this ambitious vision requires Vietnam to not only maintain rapid economic growth but also to deepen its commitment to ethical governance, inclusive development, and social justice (Nguyen et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2021).

While Vietnam has made substantial gains—such as reducing poverty, boosting GDP, and expanding access to basic services (General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2023)—formidable challenges persist. These include entrenched income inequality, regional disparities, and underdeveloped institutions of civic responsibility and ethical governance (Le & Nguyen, 2023). Moreover, globalization presents a double-edged sword: it offers economic opportunities while also generating cultural frictions that may undermine traditional values and social cohesion (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2021).

Against this backdrop, this study explores how Vietnam's economic growth strategy has shaped the pursuit of social justice since the inception of *Doi Moi*. It investigates both the notable achievements and the limitations that characterize Vietnam's efforts to align economic development with social equity. Furthermore, it seeks to identify the policy reforms and strategic directions necessary to bridge the gap between growth and justice, ensuring that progress remains inclusive and sustainable.

To address these questions, the paper proceeds in four parts. First, a *Literature Review* outlines theoretical and empirical perspectives on the relationship between economic growth, equity, and sustainability, drawing on both Vietnamese and international scholarship. Second, the *Methodology* section details the qualitative research approach, including content and thematic analysis of CPV documents, national statistics, and academic sources. Third, the *Results and Discussion* section examines the evolving Party discourse and practical outcomes of policy implementation, highlighting achievements, ongoing challenges, and proposed reforms. Finally, the *Conclusion* reflects on the broader implications of Vietnam's experience and outlines pathways for future policy and research.

Literature Review

Theoretical Frameworks

The interplay between economic growth and social justice in Vietnam has been a focal point of both academic and policy discourse since the launch of the *Doi Moi* (Renovation) reforms in 1986. These reforms initiated Vietnam's transition toward a socialist-oriented market economy, raising questions about how to reconcile market dynamics with socialist ideals.

A central theoretical contribution comes from N. T. Tran (2010), who provides a foundational analysis of the period 2010–2020. He outlines strategic measures such as institutional realignment and inclusive policymaking to balance economic growth with social fairness. Tran's integration of abstract theory with practical policy solutions offers a roadmap for aligning development with equity.

T. T. M. Tran (2024) takes a philosophical approach, revisiting the ideological foundations of Vietnam's development model. Her work traces Ho Chi Minh's synthesis of Confucian values and Marxist-Leninist principles, emphasizing ethical leadership and people-centered governance as enduring features of Vietnam's socio-political ethos. These theoretical frameworks collectively inform the normative basis of Vietnam's developmental aspirations.

Economic Growth and Social Equity

Vietnam's rapid economic growth has coincided with persistent inequalities in income distribution, regional development, and social service access. A growing body of literature examines these issues within the broader context of Vietnam's transition economy.

Le and Nguyen (2023) provide a recent and comprehensive analysis of social justice under *Doi Moi*. They argue that justice must be a precondition—not merely a by-product—of economic growth. Their study documents advances such as near-universal health insurance and rights-based social assistance, while also highlighting enduring challenges including regional disparities and exclusion of marginalized groups. Their proposals emphasize labor market reform, macroeconomic coordination, and international cooperation.

Oxfam in Vietnam, 2018, from an international perspective, Malesky and London (2014) acknowledge Vietnam's dramatic transformation but express concern about the long-term inclusivity of this growth. Similarly, Diez (2016) praises Vietnam's poverty reduction and economic expansion while cautioning that structural issues, such as corruption and unequal access to services, continue to undermine social equity.

Oxfam in Vietnam (2018) reports further contextualize these trends, noting that inequality has increased, with the GINI coefficient reaching 0.425 in some regions. These findings stress the need for economic policies that actively counterbalance market-driven disparities.

Governance and Institutional Factors

Governance quality and institutional reform are central to Vietnam's development trajectory. Several scholars emphasize the state's role in shaping equitable and sustainable outcomes, particularly in the context of corruption and policy implementation.

Diez (2016) identifies corruption as a critical barrier to inclusive development, noting that it impairs both economic efficiency and social justice. This concern is echoed by Vu and Cao (2024), who explore Vietnam's anti-corruption efforts under *Doi Moi*. They argue that while symbolic measures exist, many reforms lack structural depth. Cultural norms such as gift-giving further complicate reform implementation, signaling a need for more systemic approaches.

Pradhan (2021) evaluates Vietnam's performance during the 2016–2021 period, calling for a calibrated development strategy that sustains economic momentum without sacrificing human welfare. He stresses that the success of such a strategy hinges on the quality of governance and institutional capacity.

Sustainable Development and Environmental Justice

The concept of sustainable development has gained increasing prominence in Vietnamese and international analyses of post-*Doi Moi* growth. A central theme in this literature is the need to integrate environmental sustainability and social justice into economic planning.

Guzikova et al. (2018) introduce the “sustainable development triangle,” linking economic growth, social equity, and environmental stewardship. Their comparative framework aligns with Vietnam’s stated development principles, reinforcing that sustainability requires balance across all three dimensions.

Fan et al. (2020) explore the Formosa Ha Tinh Steel disaster as a case study in environmental injustice. They argue that state-subsidized industrialization prioritized economic output over ecological and social well-being. Their emphasis on transnational justice networks and civil society activism underscores the rising influence of non-state actors in promoting sustainable development.

D. H. Nguyen et al. (2025) provide empirical support for integrating environmental and economic goals through green finance. Their spatial econometric study across all 63 provinces finds that green credit positively correlates with sustainable development outcomes. They advocate for clearer regulatory frameworks and expanded access to green finance, especially in underserved regions.

Can and Dang (2024) assess Vietnam’s shifting growth paradigm, noting that traditional drivers—such as low-cost labor and foreign direct investment—are losing traction. They propose a new growth model based on green development, innovation, and inclusive services, consistent with Vietnam’s 2021–2030 development strategy.

Research Gaps

This body of literature presents a robust, multidimensional understanding of Vietnam’s development under *Doi Moi*. The works reviewed span theoretical, empirical, and normative domains, revealing the complex interdependence of growth, equity, governance, and sustainability. Vietnamese scholars often emphasize the CPV’s central role in maintaining balance between market liberalization and socialist values, while international voices highlight institutional quality and policy implementation.

However, notable gaps remain. Environmental justice, though addressed in works like Fan et al. (2020) and D. H. Nguyen et al. (2025), is still insufficiently integrated into mainstream economic policy analysis. Furthermore, while many studies highlight policy innovation, practical implementation continues to lag, particularly in marginalized areas.

Building upon this literature, the current study investigates how contemporary Vietnamese policy frameworks operationalize the integration of economic and social goals. It examines whether recent instruments reflect the values espoused by both policy-oriented scholars like Le and Nguyen (2023) and foundational ideologues such as Ho Chi Minh, as interpreted by T. T. M. Tran (2024). In doing so, it contributes to ongoing debates on how Vietnam can pursue high-quality, inclusive development while remaining anchored in its ethical and ideological traditions.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in document analysis to explore the complex interplay between economic growth and social justice in Vietnam’s development trajectory since the *Doi Moi* reform of 1986. The qualitative approach was chosen for its suitability in capturing the nuanced and context-specific processes underpinning Vietnam’s socio-economic transformation. It allows for the critical interpretation of textual data, facilitating the identification of both overt and latent policy trends and ideological undercurrents. This design aligns with the study’s objective to evaluate both the conceptual framing and practical implementation of Vietnam’s economic and social development strategies.

The research does not involve human participants but instead focuses on an extensive review and interpretation of secondary data sources. These include official Party documents from the 6th to the 13th Congresses of the Communist Party of Vietnam (1986, 1991, 1996, 2001, 2011, 2016, 2021), statistical data from the General Statistics Office of Vietnam (2019, 2023), and national development strategies.

Additional materials comprise academic articles, government reports, international development assessments (e.g., OECD (2014); Oxfam in Vietnam (2018)), and recent scholarly works by both Vietnamese and foreign researchers. Selection criteria for these materials prioritized relevance to the *Doi Moi* period, the credibility of the sources, and the extent to which they addressed the intersection of economic growth and social equity.

The primary tools used in the research are qualitative data analysis techniques, particularly thematic coding and content analysis. NVivo software was used to support the coding process and facilitate thematic clustering across large volumes of text. This ensured consistency and rigor in identifying recurrent themes such as state intervention, poverty reduction, income inequality, environmental sustainability, and public sector reform. These thematic clusters were cross-referenced with economic indicators such as GDP growth rates, GINI coefficients, and Human Development Index (HDI) data to triangulate insights and ensure analytical coherence.

The research procedure followed a systematic process. First, a comprehensive body of relevant literature and policy documents was collected. Second, the texts were read closely to extract themes and policy shifts over time. Third, a comparative analysis was conducted to map the evolution of Party perspectives and their translation into concrete policy measures. Lastly, this evidence was synthesized to evaluate the gap between policy intentions and practical outcomes, as well as the implications for Vietnam's sustainable development.

In terms of data analysis, the study utilized interpretative methods grounded in political economy and social justice theory. Key metrics such as poverty rates, HDI rankings, and labor force data were analyzed in conjunction with qualitative findings to assess the alignment between economic growth and social progress. This triangulation ensured a robust, multidimensional understanding of Vietnam's development path, enabling conclusions that are both analytically rich and grounded in empirical data.

As the research did not involve human or animal subjects, formal ethical approval was not required. However, all sources used were publicly available and properly cited, ensuring adherence to academic integrity standards. Moreover, the study was conducted in alignment with ethical norms in qualitative research, particularly regarding the respectful representation of diverse perspectives and the avoidance of ideological bias.

Results and Discussion

Evolving Party Perspectives on Economic Growth and Social Justice Since *Doi Moi*

Before 1986, under challenging conditions due to socio-economic crises, many objectives related to social progress could not be achieved. With strong determination for innovation, the 6th Party Congress elevated social issues to the level of "social policy," equating them with economic policy, and affirmed: "The level of economic development is the material condition to implement social policy, but social objectives are the goals of economic activities" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 1986, p. 86). By the 7th Party Congress (1991), the Party considered effective social policy implementation not only as a goal but also as a "driving force for economic development" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 1991, p. 73). The 8th Party Congress (1996) introduced a new understanding of this relationship: "Economic growth must be closely linked to social progress and justice at every step and throughout the development process. Justice must be reflected both in the rational distribution of production materials and in the distribution of production outcomes, ensuring conditions for everyone to have opportunities for personal development and the effective use of their capacities" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 1996, p. 113). This means each step of economic growth must be immediately linked to advancements in social progress and justice, and conversely, each step forward in social progress and justice must generate motivation for economic growth.

At the 9th Party Congress (2001), the Party adopted the policy of "economic growth coupled with social progress, justice, and environmental protection" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2001, p. 162), recognizing that failing to protect the environment would undermine both economic and social development goals. Additionally, living in a healthy environment is considered a criterion of social security policies. By the 10th Party Congress (2006), the Party emphasized that achieving GDP targets should align with Human Development Index (HDI) targets. Distribution of benefits should be based on capital contributions and other resources to production and business, rather than merely on "labor days" as before Renovation. The

11th Party Congress document set specific targets for social progress: “By 2020, the Human Development Index (HDI) will reach the world’s upper-middle group... average life expectancy will reach 75 years; the poverty rate will reduce annually by an average of 1.5-2%; social welfare, social security, and public healthcare will be guaranteed” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2011, pp. 104-110).

By the 12th Party Congress (2016), the Party identified socio-economic development as the central task, placing social issues equally with economic issues. Most recently, the 13th Party Congress documents parallel economic objectives (Vietnam to surpass lower-middle-income status by 2025, become an upper-middle-income country by 2030, and a high-income country by 2045) with tasks such as “effectively implementing social policies, ensuring social security and welfare, human security, creating substantial transformations in social development management, implementing social progress and justice, and improving the quality of life and happiness of the people” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2021, p. 47). Overall, the close integration of economic growth with social progress and justice has been a consistent ideology of the Communist Party of Vietnam throughout the Renovation period. It is identified as one of the ten major relationships reflecting the law of socialist development in Vietnam.

Evaluation of Practical Implementation Outcomes

Notable Achievements in Economic and Social Development

Regarding economic growth, by realizing state policies and laws in the economic sector, Vietnam achieved an average annual GDP growth rate of 7.6% during the period 1991-2000 (higher than the global growth rate of 3.2% and the average growth rate of developing countries at 6%). Thanks to this relatively high growth rate, Vietnam had largely emerged from its socio-economic crisis by 1996. Between 2001 and 2010, Vietnam’s average annual GDP growth rate was 7.26% (compared to the global growth rate of 3.28% and the developing countries’ rate of 5.56%). By 2010, Vietnam had moved out of the group of least developed countries into the category of lower-middle-income developing nations. Recently, with GDP growth rates of 7.47% (2018), 7.36% (2019), 2.87% (2020), 2.56% (2021), 8.02% (2022) (General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2023, p. 10), and 5.05% in 2023, Vietnam ranks among the fastest-growing economies in the region and the world. Consequently, per capita GDP in Vietnam has consistently increased: from \$2,570 in 2018; \$2,714 in 2019; \$3,561 in 2020; \$3,717 in 2021; \$4,109 in 2022; to \$4,284 in 2023. Although income levels remain modest, a low inflation rate (3.25% in 2023) ensures relatively high purchasing power, maintaining a stable quality of life for most citizens.

Parallel to economic achievements, Vietnam has also made significant progress in social justice and development. Since the 8th Party Congress (1996), the Communist Party of Vietnam has clearly identified “social justice” as a defining characteristic of socialism in Vietnam, setting it as an essential goal. In economics, the state has recognized a multi-sector economy with various forms of ownership and implemented diverse distribution methods. In education, universal lower-secondary education was achieved by 2010, and policies supporting disadvantaged and poor students have provided educational opportunities for youth. Welfare efforts for those who have contributed significantly to the nation have continually improved, and social welfare funds have consistently expanded. Notably, Vietnam has effectively implemented poverty reduction programs. By 2008, Vietnam had achieved most Millennium Development Goals set for 2015. Since 2016, Vietnam has adopted a multidimensional poverty reduction approach aligned with global trends. According to documents from the 13th Party Congress, the multidimensional poverty rate in 2020 was below 3% (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2021, p. 65). Reflecting these notable achievements, an international researcher commented: “Viet Nam achieved sustained growth over the past decade accompanied by impressive progress in poverty reduction. These achievements are largely attributed to the *Doi Moi* economic reform process, initiated in 1986, which launched a series of structural transformations that encouraged private sector development and foreign investment, moving towards a decentralised and market-oriented economy. Sustained economic growth improved the overall living standards of the majority of the population in terms of income and health status, with many Vietnamese entering the middle class” (OECD, 2014, p. 43). To promote sustainable poverty reduction, the state has made considerable efforts in job creation. The unemployment rate decreased from 6.9% in 2001 to 2.29% in 2016, further reducing to 2.22% in 2017, 2.19% in 2018, and 2.17% in 2019. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and global supply chain disruptions increased unemployment rates to 2.48% in 2020, 3.20% in 2021, and 2.34% in 2022 (General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2023, p. 17).

In pursuing social objectives, the Vietnamese government has ensured the provision of essential public services, developed a diversified social security system, and significantly expanded insurance schemes to support people in times of risk. The government has also formulated a national strategy to enhance public health. To ensure universal access to healthcare, the state provides universal health insurance and subsidizes health insurance premiums for the poor; children under six years of age receive free medical care.

A crucial indicator demonstrating the implementation of social policies is the Human Development Index (HDI). According to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in Vietnam, Vietnam's HDI has steadily and continuously increased over several decades: from 0.48 in 1990 to 0.647 in 1995 and 0.715 in 2015. According to Vietnam's General Statistics Office, recent HDI values are as follows: 0.693 (2018); 0.703 (2019); 0.706 (2020); 0.726 (2021); and 0.737 (2022) (General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2023, p. 981). With these achievements, Vietnam has entered the group of countries with high HDI globally, indicating that its socio-economic development significantly supports human development, social progress, and justice.

Persistent Challenges and Structural Limitations

Despite relatively high economic growth, Vietnam's growth rate remains below its potential and is unsustainable. GDP growth in 2023 was only 5.05%, compared to 8.02% in 2022. The competitiveness of the Vietnamese economy has improved slowly. Vietnam's economic growth largely relies on extensive growth—dependent on increased capital investment and resource exploitation rather than human resource quality improvements. According to the General Statistics Office, Vietnam's GDP in 2023 reached approximately USD 430 billion, ranking 34th globally, despite being the world's 15th most populous country. The implementation of the three key focuses of economic restructuring (public investment, banking systems, state-owned enterprises) has not met expectations, resulting in modest productivity, quality, efficiency, and competitiveness.

Regarding social objectives, per capita income in Vietnam remains relatively low. Although the national poverty rate is low, "poverty reduction results are not sustainable. Poverty and near-poverty rates in remote areas, especially among ethnic minorities, remain high. In some districts and communes, it reaches up to 50%, and mechanisms to protect legitimate rights for laborers in these areas remain inadequate" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2016, p. 256). Oxfam in Vietnam (2018, p. 13) also noted that "poverty increasingly concentrates among ethnic minority groups". Despite numerous state policies addressing these issues, their effectiveness has been limited.

Another significant issue with Vietnam's growth is income inequality. According to the General Statistics Office of Vietnam, the GINI coefficient (a measure of income inequality among populations) has varied over recent years: 0.425 (2018), 0.423 (2019), 0.375 (2020), 0.374 (2021), and 0.375 (2022). However, regions with high poverty rates, such as the Northern Midlands and mountainous areas and the Central Highlands, consistently report the highest GINI coefficients (0.408 and 0.399 respectively). Significant disparities exist in income and living standards among ethnic groups, with Kinh and Hoa ethnic groups generally enjoying higher living standards. However, economic inequality is only one facet of the broader issue. Oxfam in Vietnam emphasized that "inequalities of voice and opportunity are much more worrying, especially for the poor and people in rural, mountainous and island areas." (2018, p. 14). One researcher noted, "while the richest and most privileged are able to influence policy in their favor, the poorest and most marginalized citizens are unable to make their voices heard, trapping them at the bottom of the economic and social ladder." (Nguyen, 2017, p. 9).

Another notable issue is the increased migration from rural to urban areas due to diminishing agricultural land, lack of employment, and low-income opportunities in rural areas. According to the 2019 national census, of Vietnam's 88.4 million residents aged five and older, approximately 6.5 million people, or 7.3%, had migrated (General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2019, p. 100). These statistics exclude short-term or seasonal migrants not captured in national data. Vietnam has yet to develop specific and consistent policies to regulate migration, and government attention to spontaneous migrants remains inadequate. Current household registration policies restrict migrants' citizenship rights. Excluded from local planning processes, "many migrants remain impoverished and struggle to access social services. Often, migrants are women with limited knowledge about their rights, working under poor conditions with low wages, or eventually becoming trafficking victims or engaging in prostitution" (Diez, 2016). The disparity in social welfare benefits between locals and migrants contradicts Vietnam's objective of building a fair and

equitable society. Furthermore, insufficient compensation for farmers whose land is allocated to industrial or infrastructure projects highlights shortcomings in implementing social justice.

Corruption remains Vietnam's most pressing issue. Transparency International (TI) reports show Vietnam's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) as 36/100 in 2020, 39/100 in 2021, 42/100 in 2022, and 41/100 in 2023, reflecting a decline compared to 2022 and ranking Vietnam 83rd out of 180 countries globally. Public sector corruption in Vietnam remains severe. The existence of "backyard enterprises" owned by government officials raises concerns about crony capitalism. A researcher argued, "crony capitalism remains a prominent feature of Vietnam's economy" (Diez, 2016). Evidence supporting this includes numerous cases where prosecuting illegal activities involving businesspeople results in related corruption charges against public officials.

Some Solutions to Enhance the Relationship Between Economic Growth and Social Progress and Justice in Vietnam

To better address this crucial relationship and foster sustainable development, Vietnam needs to implement a comprehensive set of solutions.

Firstly, it is essential to raise awareness throughout the entire political system, particularly among leadership and management officials and policymakers responsible for policy planning and oversight, regarding the necessity of linking economic and social objectives. There must be firm opposition to the pursuit of profit at all costs or populist policies that attempt to resolve social issues beyond the economic capabilities, as any imbalance leads to negative outcomes.

Secondly, a comprehensive long-term strategy is required to address this relationship systematically. Ultimately, linking economic goals with social objectives is aimed at establishing a sustainable development model, which must be a consistent and long-term strategy. Therefore, a comprehensive strategy should guide actors in choosing appropriate actions proactively. While allocating greater investment to key economic regions to drive national economic growth is necessary, attention must also be paid to remote areas and regions inhabited by ethnic minorities.

Thirdly, the process of restructuring the economy should be accelerated, shifting gradually from an extensive growth model to one increasingly focused on intensive development. Changing the economic model fundamentally involves enhancing the "cultural content" of the economy, which means improving human resource quality, refining production processes, and applying science and technology to create high-value-added products. This enriched material wealth serves as the foundation for achieving social justice, providing workers with appropriate income to enhance their material and spiritual lives.

Fourthly, institutional improvements and the refinement of the legal framework must be enhanced. In the immediate term, the policies of the 13th Party Congress regarding the tight integration between economic growth and the implementation of social progress and justice should be institutionalized into state policies and laws. It is necessary to eliminate gaps in mechanisms and policies to ensure the economy operates according to objective market rules. At this stage, the state must ensure equity among different economic sectors, facilitating the formation and development of major private economic corporations. Special measures must be effectively implemented to "appropriately care for disadvantaged and vulnerable social groups" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2021, p. 135).

Fifthly, Vietnam must simultaneously enhance the state's managerial and regulatory role and actively promote the socialization of essential services. With a market economy, especially one in its early stages like Vietnam's, the "invisible hand" of the market will not automatically steer towards social progress and justice; instead, it may hinder these objectives and generate complex socio-economic issues. Thus, enhancing state regulatory capabilities is essential to mitigate negative market impacts and ensure public welfare. The 12th Party Congress documents (2016) affirmed the policy: "The state utilizes institutions, resources, regulatory tools, and distribution and redistribution policies to develop culture, implement democracy, social progress, and justice, improve all aspects of people's lives, and reduce the rich-poor gap" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2016, p. 269). However, regulation should be through appropriate taxation policies and sanctions, not through heavy-handed state intervention in the market.

Sixthly, the state must continue to expand and enhance the multi-layered social security system. Although Vietnam's social security system has increasingly demonstrated its significant role in socio-economic development and stability, further expansion is necessary. A diversified social security system will promote consensus, equality, social progress, and justice.

Seventhly, it is crucial to build an honest government and maintain zero tolerance toward corruption, "interest groups," and illegal enrichment. Corruption and illicit enrichment harm healthy economic growth and generate social injustice; thus, their elimination must be decisive. Experience shows that no institution or policy, regardless of its quality or completeness, can be effective without an honest cadre of officials and civil servants. Therefore, strengthening discipline and building mechanisms for power oversight in public service, from central to local levels, is necessary to enhance the quality of public services.

Conclusions

This study set out to investigate the evolving relationship between economic growth and social progress and justice in Vietnam under the transformative framework of the *Doi Moi* reforms initiated in 1986. The central research question focused on how effectively Vietnam has balanced these two foundational objectives over nearly four decades of transition toward a socialist-oriented market economy. The analysis reveals a complex picture: while Vietnam has recorded impressive economic achievements—marked by sustained GDP growth, increased per capita income, and deep integration into the global economy—it continues to grapple with persistent social disparities that challenge the inclusiveness and sustainability of its development model.

Empirical evidence shows that Vietnam has made significant headway in reducing poverty, expanding access to education and healthcare, and improving social welfare indicators. Its Human Development Index has risen steadily, and the multidimensional poverty rate has declined over time. Nonetheless, these gains coexist with enduring structural barriers. Rising income inequality, ethnic and regional disparities, rural and migrant marginalization, and weak institutional capacity—particularly in combating corruption—pose serious obstacles to the realization of equitable development. Despite the Communist Party of Vietnam's consistent rhetorical and strategic emphasis on social justice, the gap between policy commitments and implementation outcomes remains a defining feature of Vietnam's developmental landscape.

The broader implications of these findings underscore that economic indicators alone are insufficient for evaluating national progress. Sustainable development requires embedded mechanisms of social equity, inclusive governance, and environmental responsibility. This aligns with theoretical perspectives that view social justice not as a derivative of economic growth, but as a prerequisite for its legitimacy and long-term viability. Vietnam's experience thus provides a critical lens through which to examine the tension between state-led growth and distributive justice—serving both as a model of dynamic reform and as a cautionary example of uneven implementation.

The study also acknowledges its limitations. Its reliance on secondary data and qualitative methods, while useful for capturing conceptual depth and longitudinal trends, may not fully reflect the lived experiences or localized variations in policy effectiveness. More granular, field-based research could enhance understanding of how policies are perceived and enacted at the community level. Additionally, the study's broad scope may overlook important sector-specific dynamics that deserve closer scrutiny.

Looking forward, future research should investigate how Vietnam can better align institutional reforms, green growth strategies, and social protection mechanisms to close the persistent gap between economic advancement and social equity. In particular, the evolving roles of civil society, non-state actors, and international partnerships merit deeper exploration in shaping inclusive and participatory development. As Vietnam confronts emerging challenges such as climate change and digital transformation, integrating these dimensions into national policy frameworks will be critical for ensuring that growth remains both resilient and just.

In conclusion, this study offers a comprehensive assessment of Vietnam's post-*Doi Moi* development, highlighting both its successes and the persistent challenges in balancing economic growth with social justice. Its key contribution lies in providing a nuanced analysis of the gap between policy commitments and practical outcomes, offering valuable insights for refining development strategies not only in Vietnam but also in other transition economies striving for inclusive and sustainable growth. As Vietnam aspires to

become a high-income, socialist-oriented nation by mid-century, its experience offers critical reflections on how states can navigate the complex and evolving balance between growth and justice in an increasingly globalized and uncertain world.

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