

VOCATIONAL TRAINING FOR WORKERS: A SOLUTION TO PROMOTE SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT

PhD. Nguyen Thanh Thao*

Abstract: *This article provides a comprehensive analysis of the current situation, root causes, and proposed solutions to improve the effectiveness of vocational training for workers, particularly in rural areas of Vietnam, in the context of economic restructuring toward sustainability and deeper international integration. The article identifies key shortcomings such as weak linkages between vocational institutions and enterprises, inconsistent training quality, inadequate infrastructure, and limited societal awareness of the role of vocational education. Accordingly, it proposes several core solutions: shifting the training mindset toward employment orientation, enhancing tripartite cooperation among the State, vocational institutions, and enterprises, integrating digital technology, strengthening the capacity of instructors, and prioritizing investment in disadvantaged areas. Vocational training for workers should be regarded as a long-term strategy to develop a comprehensive human resource base, ensure social security, and reduce regional disparities.*

• Keywords: Vocational training; labor; rural areas; sustainable development; public policy.

Date of receipt: 08th Aug., 2025

Date of delivery revision: 02th Oct., 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.71374/jfar.v25.i6.04>

Date of receipt revision: 10th Oct., 2025

Date of approval: 20th Nov., 2025

1. Introduction

In Vietnam's ongoing process of industrialization and modernization, high-quality human resources are a critical determinant of national competitiveness and sustainable economic growth. As the country enters a new development phase driven by digital transformation, innovation, and productivity demands, improving workforce quality particularly in rural areas has become increasingly essential. Although rural workers make up roughly 65% of the national labor force (GSO, 2022), many remain concentrated in traditional agriculture, with limited vocational skills, low technical qualifications, and weak adaptability to labor-market shifts.

These constraints pose significant challenges for rural socio-economic development, contributing to low productivity, unstable incomes, and persistent poverty, while widening the gap between rural and urban regions. At the same time, the structural shift toward industry and services and the growing need for skilled labor further highlight rural workers' disadvantages when they lack appropriate vocational training (MOLISA, 2023).

Against this backdrop, vocational training for rural workers is not merely a short-term social intervention but a strategic, long-term approach to fostering sustainable development, reducing poverty, restructuring the rural economy, and building a more capable and equitable human resource base for Vietnam's future.

2. Current situation of vocational training for rural workers in Vietnam

2.1. Policies and strategic orientation

In the context of global integration and economic restructuring, the Communist Party and the Government of Vietnam identify human resource development particularly in rural areas as a strategic priority essential for new rural construction and sustainable development. To enhance national competitiveness and improve livelihoods, the Government has issued a series of major programs and policies, most notably the "Vocational Training for Rural Workers until 2020" Project under Decision No. 1956/QĐ-TTg (2009). As the first nationwide initiative dedicated to rural labor, Project 1956 sought to expand vocational skills, support sustainable livelihoods, and help workers adapt to a rapidly changing labor market.

Beyond technical training, the project incorporated career guidance, soft skills, and basic entrepreneurship education, contributing to a mindset of self-reliance and job creation within rural communities. According to MOLISA (2023), more than VND 11,000 billion in central funding was allocated during 2010-2020, underscoring strong governmental commitment. The project also established priority mechanisms such as tuition waivers, financial support, and localized or mobile training to ensure equitable access for vulnerable groups including women, the poor, ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities, and unemployed rural youth.

* Academy of Finance

Vocational training has since been integrated into national target programs on new rural development, sustainable poverty reduction, and ethnic minority advancement, creating positive spillovers for local socio-economic growth. Despite remaining implementation challenges, current policies reflect a long-term vision, a people-centered approach, and a strong orientation toward comprehensive human development in the new era.

2.2. Scale and structure of vocational training fields

Between 2016 and 2022, vocational training for rural workers expanded markedly, with over 5.2 million participants enrolled in programs under Project 1956 and related initiatives (GDVET, 2023). Around 70% pursued non-agricultural occupations such as garment technology, mechanics, electronics, household electricity, motorcycle repair, construction machinery operation, hospitality, tourism, and modern commerce demonstrating a clear shift from traditional production to higher value-added sectors aligned with industrialization and urban development. The remaining 30% received training in agriculture-related fields, including organic farming, bio-secure livestock breeding, aquaculture, seed production, and agricultural processing, highlighting the continued role of vocational training in supporting sustainable agricultural modernization.

Training structures vary by region, shaped by local economic characteristics and provincial development orientations. Delta and peri-urban areas increasingly prioritize non-agricultural training, whereas mountainous, island, or agriculture-dependent provinces focus more on agricultural skills. Recent years have also seen a rise in training in logistics, e-commerce, and community-based tourism, reflecting evolving labor market demands in modern rural contexts.

The Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (2023) notes a gradual shift from low-value traditional occupations toward skill-intensive, high-application fields offering stronger employability, entrepreneurship opportunities, and compatibility with digital transformation. This transition underscores the adaptability of the vocational education system and affirms the growing importance of vocational training in enhancing the competitiveness of rural workers amid a dynamic and rapidly changing labor market.

2.3. Effective local vocational training models

Recent years have seen the emergence of effective vocational training models closely tied to local economic development, marking a shift from supply-driven training to a “training for employment”

approach. Several provinces have developed programs tailored to local strengths and labor market needs.

Dong Thap has applied a value chain-based model that combines classroom learning with hands-on training at cooperatives and links directly to product distribution networks. The model is particularly effective in VietGAP/GlobalGAP vegetable, short-term crop, and fruit production, enabling trainees to apply modern techniques and pursue household-based entrepreneurship immediately after training.

Quang Ninh has leveraged its tourism potential by offering training in community tour guiding, traditional food processing, and souvenir production, supported by modules on communication, marketing, and online sales. These programs are jointly implemented by local vocational centers, enterprises, and provincial authorities, ensuring clear employment pathways.

According to MOLISA (2023), these localized training models achieve post-training employment rates of 75-85%, significantly higher than the national average of about 65%. Many trainees have also become small-scale entrepreneurs or been recruited directly by partner enterprises (Nguyen & Tran, 2022). These outcomes demonstrate that when vocational training is aligned with local development strategies and involves multi-stakeholder collaboration, it enhances skills, encourages entrepreneurship, and strengthens rural labor adaptability in a rapidly evolving economy.

2.4. Challenges in disadvantaged areas

Although some localities have successfully aligned vocational training with local economic needs, many poor, remote, and socio-economically disadvantaged regions continue to face substantial constraints in program implementation. According to the General Directorate of Vocational Education and Training (2023), post-training employment rates in these areas remain low around 55-60%, well below the national average. Training courses are often organized based on planned quotas rather than market assessments, resulting in graduates who struggle to find suitable employment or work outside their trained occupations.

A key reason is the limited capacity of district-level vocational institutions, which frequently lack adequate infrastructure, standardized practice equipment, and qualified instructors particularly those able to provide mobile or flexible training suitable for rural residents. Centralized training delivery at district centers also poses travel and accommodation barriers for learners in remote communes, reducing participation even when financial support is offered.

The scarcity of enterprises in disadvantaged regions further weakens training effectiveness. With most businesses located in urban or industrial zones,

mechanisms such as enterprise-based training orders, internships, or post-training job placement are virtually absent. MOLISA (2023) reports that 38% of trainees in disadvantaged regions cannot apply their acquired skills or must shift to unrelated employment.

Regional disparities in investment also reinforce inequalities. Several northern mountainous provinces and Central Highlands districts still lack standard vocational training centers, and only a few have implemented livelihood-linked training models. This contributes to higher risks of post-training poverty relapse. Without targeted investment and stronger coordination among state agencies, enterprises, and social organizations, the gap in vocational training quality and outcomes between developed and disadvantaged regions will continue to widen undermining both educational equity and the efficient use of public resources.

2.5. Quality of training content and curriculum

The quality of training content and curricula remains a critical bottleneck in improving vocational training for rural workers. Many programs have not kept pace with rapid technological change and evolving occupational structures, with curricula still developed using traditional, infrequently updated approaches. As a result, training content is often outdated, overly theoretical, and insufficiently aligned with employer needs limiting learners' practical competencies at a time when the labor market increasingly values soft skills, digital literacy, and independent problem-solving.

MOLISA (2023) reports that 30-35% of vocational graduates work in jobs unrelated to their training, reflecting a persistent mismatch between training design and real-world demand, as well as inefficiencies in public investment. A survey by the Institute of Labour Science and Social Affairs (2022) across 12 provinces further shows that more than 40% of institutions use curricula older than five years, and only 27% involve businesses in program development contributing to significant skills gaps in fast-growing sectors such as high-tech agriculture, precision engineering, logistics, IT, and rural digital services.

In the context of national digital transformation and the transition toward a green economy, vocational programs must integrate new competencies such as smart equipment operation, agricultural management software, e-commerce for farm products, low-emission farming techniques, and sustainable agribusiness start-up skills. However, many institutions lack qualified instructors, updated materials, and flexible financing mechanisms to implement such modernization.

When training fails to reflect labor market needs, learners face reduced employment opportunities, and

businesses bear additional retraining costs creating a negative cycle that erodes confidence in the long-term effectiveness of the vocational education system.

2.6. Gender and access to training

Gender inequality in access to vocational education remains a persistent barrier affecting the overall effectiveness of rural training policies. Despite Vietnam's legal commitment to equal educational opportunities, women especially in rural areas continue to participate less in technical and non-traditional fields. UN Women (2021) reports that only 32% of female trainees enroll in highly technical occupations such as industrial electricity, mechanics, IT, or construction, while most remain concentrated in lower-income service-oriented sectors like garment making, beauty care, childcare, and food processing.

This disparity is driven by gender-stereotyped career choices, rigid training schedules incompatible with women's household and caregiving responsibilities, and the limited availability of programs tailored to women's needs particularly those of ethnic minority women. MOLISA (2022) shows that only 38% of rural women join livelihood-support training, nearly 20 percentage points lower than men in the same age group.

Rural youth, who generally possess greater digital adaptability and entrepreneurial aspirations, are also not sufficiently prioritized. Many vocational programs remain generic and do not differentiate by gender, age, information access, or learning readiness. International evidence indicates that when women and youth receive equitable and appropriate access to vocational training, they enhance not only their own productivity but also generate broader community benefits through improved learning behavior, consumption patterns, and participation in local value chains.

The underutilization of women and rural youth thus represents a significant limitation in rural human resource development. This calls for stronger gender mainstreaming and targeted support across all stages of vocational education from curriculum design and program delivery to post-training assistance.

2.7. Social perceptions and attitudes toward vocational training

A major intangible barrier to the effectiveness of vocational training in rural areas is the enduring mindset of "valuing academic degrees over vocational skills." This perception strongest among rural families leads many parents and students to prioritize university pathways, even though many graduates struggle to secure stable or relevant employment. A GDVET (2023) survey shows that 61% of secondary students receive no family encouragement to pursue vocational

training, and about 45% of parents still view vocational qualifications as inferior to university degrees.

Consequently, many rural vocational institutions fail to meet enrollment targets, forcing programs to shrink or close despite incentives such as tuition exemptions, scholarships, or job placement guarantees. In some cases, students enroll only to obtain certificates, rather than genuine interest in skilled occupations. These outdated perceptions are also found among local officials, educators, and employers limiting recognition of vocational education as a legitimate source of skilled labor.

This mindset persists even as the economy shows rising demand for technically skilled workers. Rural areas constitute nearly 65% of the population (GSO, 2022), yet vocational enrollment accounts for only 10-12% of high school graduates annually far below labor market needs (World Bank, 2021). The result is a significant underutilization of rural labor potential.

Such perceptions also weaken local training policies and reduce the attractiveness of enterprise-linked or entrepreneurship-oriented models. Without strong communication strategies, career counseling, and sustained awareness-raising efforts, vocational training is unlikely to achieve its intended impact, regardless of policy design or resource allocation.

3. Underlying causes of existing limitations

Despite notable progress, vocational training for rural workers in Vietnam continues to face significant quantitative and qualitative constraints, rooted in systemic issues ranging from policy gaps to implementation weaknesses and persistent societal biases.

A key limitation is the lack of regional coordination and strategic alignment. Many localities develop training programs in a fragmented, administrative manner rather than based on labor market assessments. The Institute of Labour Science and Social Affairs (2022) indicates that up to 40% of district-level programs are not informed by labor market surveys, resulting in poor alignment between training content and employment opportunities.

Human resource capacity within vocational institutions also remains inadequate. Commune- and district-level centers often lack qualified instructors and maintain outdated facilities that do not meet practical training requirements. According to GDVET (2023), only 37% of district-level vocational and continuing education centers possess practice workshops meeting national standards.

Policy support is likewise fragmented and short-term. Subsidies for learners and institutions lack

continuity, while limited and often delayed funding reduces the incentive for centers to upgrade curricula or invest in modern equipment. These financial and administrative bottlenecks impede effective training delivery.

Equally important is the weak coordination among local authorities, training institutions, and enterprises. Although demand-driven and enterprise-linked models are widely promoted, actual collaboration remains limited. The World Bank (2021) reports that only about 25% of Vietnamese enterprises partner with vocational institutions far below the ASEAN middle-income average of 40% leading to weak curriculum relevance and low graduate absorption.

Finally, deeply rooted social perceptions continue to undervalue vocational education. Many families still view university as the primary path to upward mobility, contributing to low enrollment in vocational pathways and a shortage of mid-level skilled workers, while simultaneously placing undue pressure on higher education.

4. Solutions to improve the effectiveness of vocational training for rural workers

In the context of Vietnam's pursuit of sustainable development and deep integration into the global economy, improving the effectiveness of vocational training for rural workers is not merely a social policy but a long-term strategic measure to ensure equity, job creation, and productivity growth. Achieving this goal requires the synchronized and consistent implementation of various solutions concerning institutions, training models, resource investment, and changes in societal perceptions.

First and foremost, there is a need to renew the mindset and approach to vocational training. Training programs should not be limited to equipping learners with basic skills but should aim to prepare them for sustainable employment and enhance their adaptability to the labor market. This calls for the development of training curricula based on thorough labor market assessments tailored to each region, sector, and time period. According to the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (2023), only about 42% of vocational education institutions conduct regular labor market surveys, resulting in a misalignment between training and recruitment needs.

Second, the "three-house" model Government - Schools - Enterprises needs to be institutionalized and effectively operationalized. Enterprises should play a central role in placing training orders, participating in curriculum development, and offering internship opportunities. Lessons from Germany a country renowned for its dual vocational training model

demonstrate that over 60% of training time is conducted in enterprises, enabling learners to simultaneously study, work, and adapt to real-world environments (GIZ, 2023). In Vietnam, pilot partnerships between vocational schools and garment or mechanical enterprises in provinces like Bac Ninh and Binh Duong have shown initial success and should be scaled up nationwide.

Third, digital technologies should be boldly applied to vocational training, especially in rural, remote, and disadvantaged areas where access to education remains limited. Developing open educational resources, online classes, and blended learning models can help reduce costs, expand access, and enhance flexibility for learners. Particularly for emerging fields such as smart agriculture, agricultural e-commerce, and basic digital literacy, integrating modern content is crucial to prevent rural workers from being left behind in the national digital transformation process.

Fourth, investment in training infrastructure, equipment, and instructor capacity must be treated as a pivotal factor. According to the General Directorate of Vocational Education and Training (2022), nearly 60% of district-level vocational centers lack standard practice labs, while many instructors lack hands-on technical skills and have not been trained in updated teaching methods. Policies are therefore needed to provide retraining, in-depth professional development, and rotational teaching assignments that enhance practical competencies, connect with businesses, and incorporate new technologies.

Last but not least, raising public awareness particularly among rural youth about the practical value of vocational training is essential. Vocational education must be perceived as a legitimate and promising career development path, capable of generating stable and high income, rather than being viewed as a “second-best” option. Communication campaigns should aim to inspire, showcase success stories of vocational graduates, and provide comprehensive information on labor market trends, employment opportunities, and government support mechanisms. A report by UNESCO (2022) also emphasizes that building a positive image of vocational education is a key determinant in increasing enrollment and reducing social prejudice.

5. Conclusion

Vocational training for rural workers plays a pivotal role in the process of agricultural economic restructuring, new rural development, and the promotion of social equity. It is not merely a solution for enhancing technical skills, improving labor productivity, and increasing rural incomes it also serves as a crucial driver that enables

Vietnam to achieve its sustainable development goals, narrow regional disparities, and enhance the overall quality of its national human resources. In a society increasingly governed by a modern market economy and influenced by globalization, digital transformation, and automation, equipping rural workers with practical vocational skills and adaptive capacities is a strategic and urgent requirement.

However, the current state of vocational training in rural areas reveals numerous limitations, ranging from policy design to implementation. Training programs often do not align with actual labor market needs, lack effective linkages with enterprises, suffer from inadequate teaching capacity, and remain undervalued in social perception all of which undermine the effectiveness of vocational training efforts. These challenges demand a systematic and learner-centered approach, one that is guided by labor market trends and aims for broader social impact.

Therefore, moving forward, the government must continue to refine vocational education policies toward greater flexibility, efficiency, and equity; significantly increase investment in rural training infrastructure especially in poor districts and disadvantaged communes; encourage enterprise involvement in the training process; and intensify communication efforts to shift societal attitudes about the value of vocational training. Vocational training for rural workers must no longer be viewed as a short-term administrative program, but rather as a long-term human resource development strategy one that is deeply embedded in the economic restructuring process and the broader vision of comprehensive human development in the new era.

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