



► ILO Brief

December 2025

Building an inclusive future: Social protection as a catalyst for disability empowerment in Viet Nam¹

Key points

- ▶ Viet Nam stands out among lower-middle-income countries for its strong progress in disability-inclusive social protection, achieving broad coverage through coordinated social assistance, social insurance, and health insurance measures, based on a community-based disability determination system aligned with international best practices.
- ▶ Despite remarkable progress in both coverage and benefit levels, disability-related extra costs continue to pose challenges to the inclusion and empowerment of persons with disabilities.
- ▶ Improving benefit adequacy (especially for persons with severe disabilities) and expanding coverage (in particular for persons with mild disabilities) should continue to be considered as key priorities going forward.
- ▶ Further strengthening the link between social protection and employment policies will be essential to support labour force participation, inclusion, and economic empowerment of persons with disabilities through decent work.

► Introduction

Social protection systems play a critical role in supporting disability inclusion and, in turn, have important implications for wider social and economic development. Persons with disabilities face a range of disability-related costs in areas such as transportation, assistive devices, health care and reduced access to employment. Social protection systems, both through cash and in-kind benefits, provide support to persons with disabilities and their families to cover these costs, and thus help prevent

poverty and social exclusion. Social protection and employment services can also play an important role in supporting persons with disabilities to participate in the labour market.

Viet Nam has made significant efforts to strengthen social protection for persons with disabilities in recent years, but continuous improvements are required to fill remaining gaps in coverage and adequacy, and ensure the system is fit for the future.

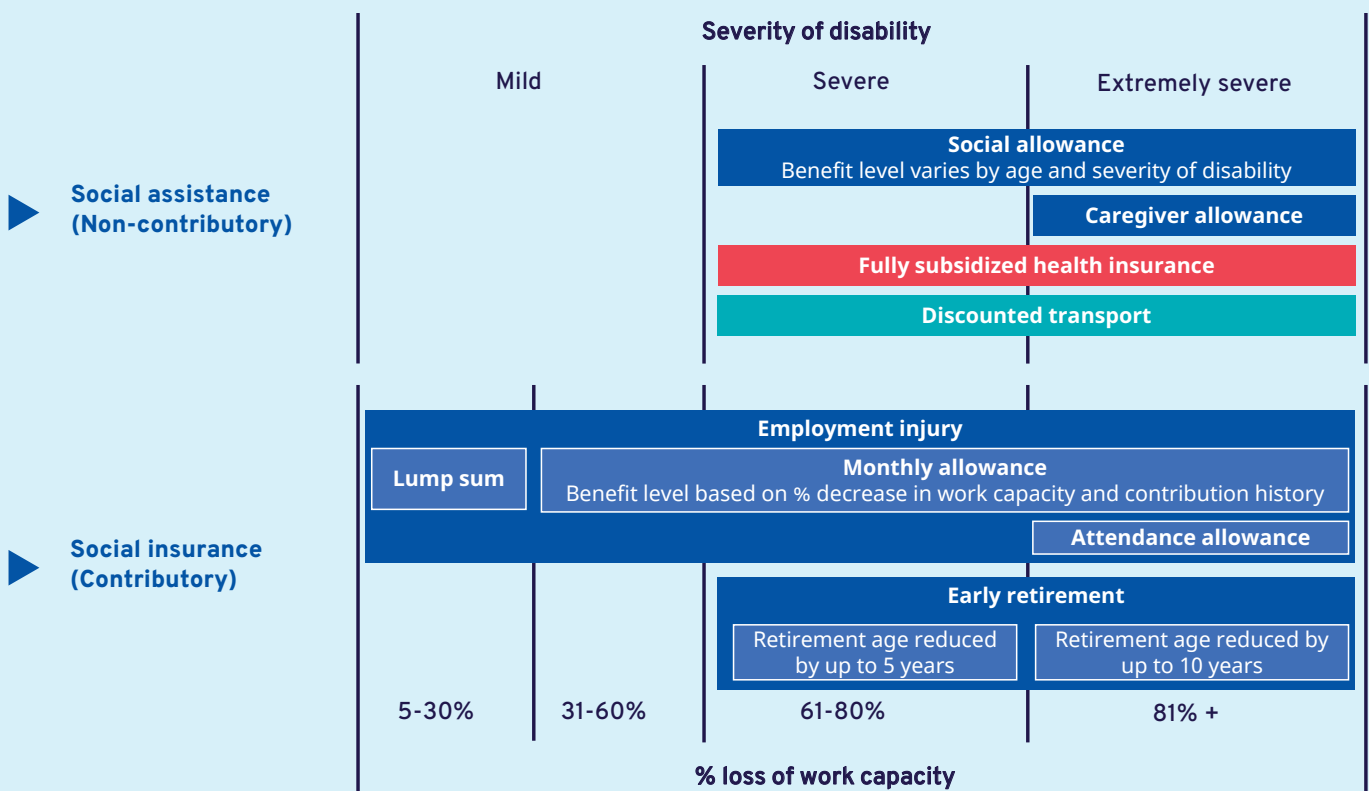
¹ This brief summarises findings of the report “Building an inclusive future: Social protection as a catalyst for disability empowerment in Viet Nam.” which provides the first comprehensive assessment of social protection for persons with disabilities in Viet Nam

► Scope and coverage of the social protection system

The social protection system in Viet Nam includes a variety of measures to support persons with disabilities via social assistance², social insurance and health

insurance. These are visualised in Figure 1 in relation to assessed severity of disability.

► Figure 1: Consolidated scope of main disability-related social protection benefits relative to severity of disability

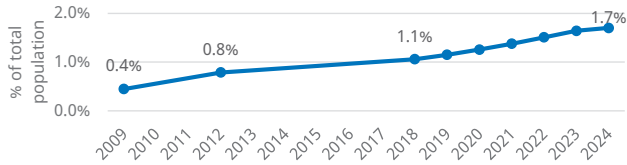


The country has made significant progress in covering persons with severe and extremely severe disabilities with social protection. Coverage of disability social assistance allowances has more than tripled over the last 15 years, and 1.7 million people now receive such allowances (1.7 per cent of the population), alongside fully subsidised health insurance (Figure 2). Available data suggests that the majority of persons with severe disabilities are covered by these arrangements, while the level of coverage also compares favourably to other middle-income countries.

This has been supported by moves to a more accessible and inclusive disability determination system and the removal of a means-testing requirement since 2010. A further 600,000 people receive incapacity-related early-retirement benefits under the social insurance system, although these are mainly former public servants close to retirement age.

² The report uses the term “social assistance” to refer to non-contributory benefits, whether or not they are means tested, in order to align with the language used in national policy discussions.

► **Figure 2: Recipients of disability social assistance allowances as a share of the total population (2009-2024)**



Source: Data for 2009 and 2012 is from Banks et al. (2018). Data for 2018 to 2022 is from MOLISA and ILO (2023). 2023 and 2024 is from analysis of social assistance administrative data for October 2023 and November 2024.

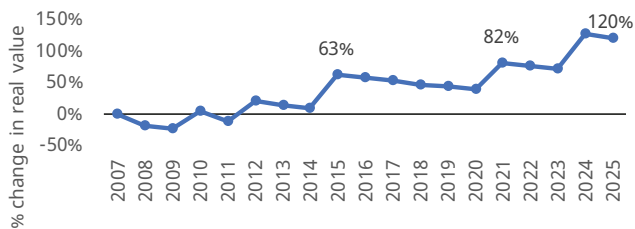
Those with mild disability, however, receive relatively limited support. Social protection support for persons with mild disabilities appears to be limited to public transport discounts in some localities, as well as employment support (see below). Meanwhile, in practice, few persons with mild disabilities go through the disability determination process and receive a certificate. This gap is important as – while those with mild disabilities may have comparatively lower support needs – they may still face important costs that provide a barrier to their participation on an equal basis with others, including in employment.

► Benefit adequacy

People with disabilities receive some of the highest social assistance benefits available in Viet Nam, and the purchasing power of these benefits has been on the rise. The coefficient for social assistance allowances for persons with disabilities is higher than many other groups, and is increased for extremely severe disability, as well as for children and older persons. This is a positive recognition of the higher disability-related costs faced by some groups of persons with disabilities. The real value of disability-related social assistance allowances has more than doubled since 2007 (Figure 3). Employment injury benefits are also determined according to the assessed loss of work capacity, recognising the link between disability severity and costs. Subsidised health insurance and provision of caregiver allowances also recognise particular extra costs faced by persons with disabilities.

Nevertheless, there are still significant steps that need to be taken towards a set of social protection benefits that adequately provide income security and cover disability-related extra costs. Despite increases in social assistance benefit levels in recent years, they fall short of relevant national and international poverty-lines and wage-related benchmarks. The benefits are also below average compared to other middle-income countries with non-contributory disability benefits in place. Employment injury and occupational disease benefits – under the social insurance system – also fall short of benchmarks set by international labour standards, being linked to a fixed reference salary, rather than previous earnings.

► **Figure 3: Per cent change in real value minimum social assistance allowance benefit for persons with disabilities, 2007-2025**



Note: Authors’ calculations based on historical benefit levels and data on consumer prices from IMF (2024)

► I enjoy a higher rate, but in general it is not enough to cover my food, water and electricity during the month

► **Male, 36 Ha Giang, Visual impairment**

Gaps in the health insurance benefit package result in significant costs for some persons with disabilities, and limit the potential impact of social protection cash benefits. While virtually all persons with disabilities are covered by health insurance, many still report significant health expenditures due to gaps in the health insurance benefit package. Addressing these gaps – both for general and disability-related goods and services – would have a particular impact on persons with disabilities.

Frankly speaking, it’s a very small amount. I’m still healthy so it is OK to me, but for persons with disabilities in difficult circumstances, that money is not enough for them at all

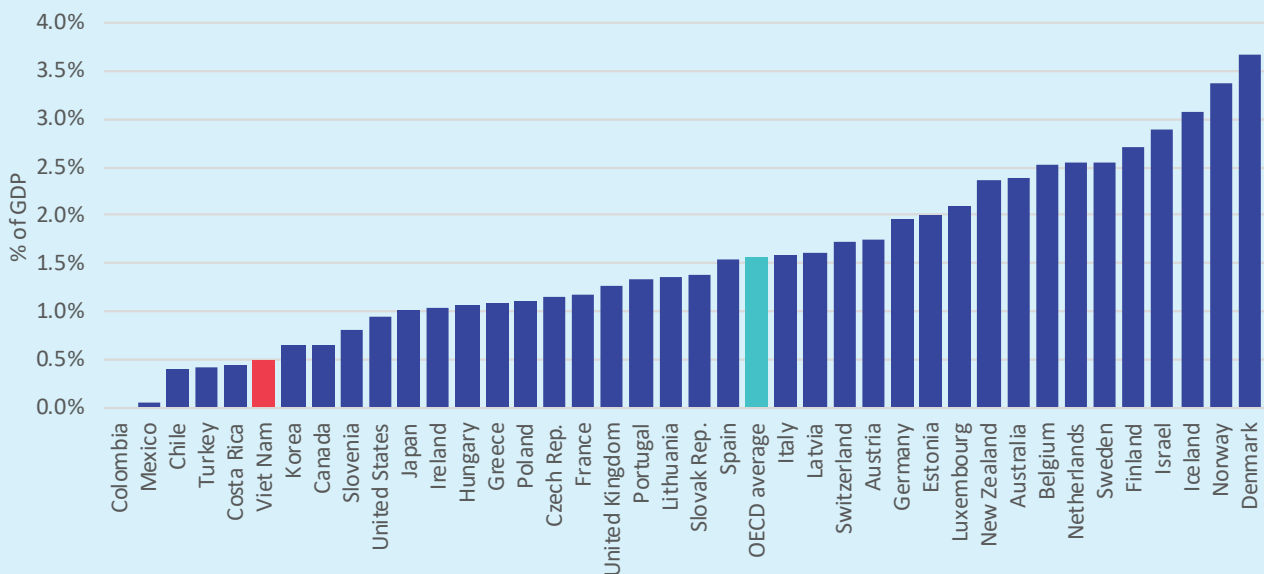
► Male, 56 Soc Trang, Mobility impairment

► Financing

While investment in social protection for persons with disabilities has been growing, expenditure remains relatively modest. With disability-focused social protection expenditure at around 0.2 per cent of GDP, Viet Nam is among a number of middle-income countries that have made meaningful investment. However, this falls below higher performers among

middle-income countries (found at around 0.5 per cent of GDP) and well below levels of expenditure in OECD countries (1.5 per cent of GDP) (Figure4). Addressing the limits of the social protection system to support people with disabilities cannot be achieved without greater investment.

► Figure 4: Incapacity-related public social expenditure (minus sickness) according to SOCX classification, per cent of GDP



Sources: OECD (2023) and estimate for Viet Nam based on available expenditure data

Well-designed investments in disability inclusive social protection should not simply be seen as a cost, but can make positive contributions to the economy and the fiscal outlook. Two notable dimensions to this are:

- By supporting participation of persons with disabilities and those who care for them in

employment, social protection can increase the contribution of persons with disabilities to the national economy – through increased labour supply – and also to social insurance and the tax system.

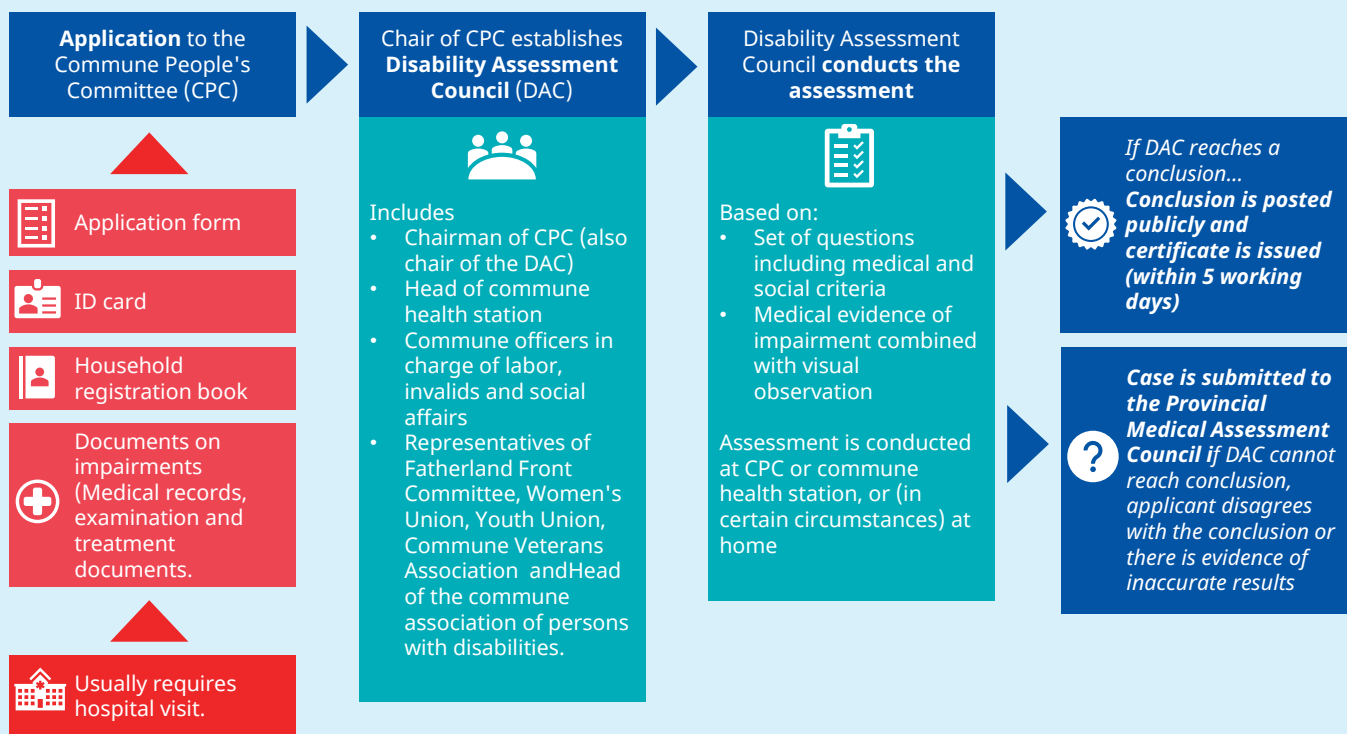
- Carefully designed disability benefits can also support transition to a more sustainable pension system, including increases in retirement age.

► Operational aspects

There is scope to build on the strong features of the disability determination system to improve its accessibility, fairness and consistency. The main disability determination system (for social assistance allowance and health insurance coverage) has many strong features by international standards. The determination has evolved to move beyond a purely medical approach used in many countries and – being led at the community level – supports accessibility for persons with disabilities (Figure 5). Many persons with

disabilities reported being satisfied with the system, having navigated it with ease. Nevertheless, remaining issues included awareness of the system, seeming inconsistency in implementation in different locations and potential issues with the criteria for some forms of disability. There is thus space for continued refinement of the disability determination approach, while ensuring adequate resourcing, guidance and capacity building at the commune level.

► Figure 5: Disability determination process



▶ In the past it was very difficult to get approval for the social assistance allowance, later it became easier... The first time when I applied, assessors said that they knew my family had some cows and pigs, that meant I was rich and thus ineligible. After that, a Decree was issued which better guarantees the rights of people with disabilities. I applied the second time and was successful. I have been enjoying the allowance since 2014

▶ **Male, 44** Da Nang, Visual impairment

There is need for vigilance to the specific situation of persons with disabilities as Viet Nam seeks to enhance benefit payment systems. The social assistance system is in a process of transition away from manual payment at the commune level, to payment either via bank transfer or through post offices. For many persons with disabilities, these new modalities have been an improvement, however, in some cases this presented new issues in terms of accessibility.

▶ It does not cost much, but it is hard to go back and forth many times

▶ **Female, 41** Da Nang, Mobility impairment

▶ Linkage to employment

Persons with disabilities are significantly less likely to be in employment than those without. Persons with disabilities in the labour force are also far more likely to be found in self-employment. Nevertheless, qualitative discussions highlighted that many persons with disabilities are in employment or wish to engage in paid work. What often stands between persons with disabilities engaging in productive employment are various barriers including limited accessibility (including travel and infrastructure), stigma and other factors.

The design of existing social protection benefits in Viet Nam is generally supportive of employment. One weakness of disability benefits across the world is that they are only provided based on assessed incapacity to work. By contrast, social assistance allowances in Viet Nam are not directly assessed based on work capacity, and recipients are permitted to engage in paid employment.

Viet Nam has a number of measures (legal and practical) in place to support employment of persons with disabilities, but the extent of support provided appears to be uneven. Viet Nam has

relatively well-developed systems of vocational training and employment support to many other middle-income countries, and this has been strengthened by the 2025 Employment Law. There is evidence that some persons with disabilities are using these services. Nevertheless, usage appears to be lower than those without disabilities, and people with disabilities report various limitations to the support provided.

With the right support, many more persons with disabilities could engage in employment, and specifically wage employment. While persons with the very highest support needs may not be in a position to engage in paid work, many persons with disabilities can do so if provided with adequate support. A particular focus should be to support participation of persons with disabilities in wage employment. This is the part of the labour market best able to provide decent work, but also the one with the lowest participation of persons with disabilities, while being an area where government has stronger tools to support greater participation of persons with disabilities.

▶ Policy options

Based on the analysis in the report, several potential policy options available to strengthen social protection for persons with disabilities emerged:

Social assistance

- Increase social assistance allowance benefit levels towards relevant poverty and wage-related benchmarks.
- More frequently adjust social assistance allowance benefit levels to keep pace with price inflation.
- Consider the introduction of cash benefits for some categories of persons with mild disabilities.
- Strengthen provision of in-kind benefits including formal care and support services and subsidised public transport.

Social insurance

- Bring labour accident and occupational disease (LOAD) benefits in line with international standards, while pursuing efforts to increase the coverage of these benefits.
- Consider strengthening provision of invalidity benefits in order to increase protection of persons with disabilities in working age.

Health insurance

- Review the health insurance benefit package to increase coverage of some of the largest cost drivers for persons with disabilities.
- Expand the entitlement to fully subsidised health insurance to all persons with mild disabilities.
- Remove the obligation for persons with severe and extremely severe disabilities to contribute to health insurance if in waged employment.

Operational considerations

- Invest in commune level capacity to strengthen the disability determination process.
- Continue to refine the assessment criteria to ensure the assessment adequately captures different types of disability.
- Support certification of persons with mild disabilities alongside expansion of benefit entitlements (described above).
- Ensure multiple payment options are accessible for persons with disabilities.

Measures to support productive employment

- Expand labour market policies and measures to increase labour force participation and promote productive employment and decent work for persons with disabilities.
- Consider approaches to improve incentives for recruitment of persons with disabilities in waged employment and to mobilise resources to support persons with disabilities in accessing employment opportunities.

Other system level considerations

- Continue efforts to build an effective multi-tier pension system.
- Further strengthen the participation of a wider range of stakeholders in the strengthening of disability related aspects of the social protection systems, including workers' and employers' representatives, as well as organisations of persons with disabilities.



A member of the Ha Giang Association of Persons with Disabilities on her adaptive tricycle



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