Inclusive Policy-Working with Minority Ethnic Young People for Decent Work

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Introduction

Young people are one of the most significant assets in policy making. They contribute insight from the perspective of those affected by a policy or policy change, and as our future community and business leaders. Despite this, the involvement of young people in policy making remains relatively rare in many countries, including Vietnam. Although Vietnam is one of the world's fastest growing economies, young people experience relatively low wages, job insecurity, job informality and poor working conditions.

Policy involvement can raise the awareness and motivation of those involved in policy making, but is challenging because of long-standing marginalisation that can make people feel they do not have a voice worthy of consideration by government and other policy makers. Even creative and participatory methods need to be adapted to help young people feel able to share their voice with those who are older and more powerful in society.

This policy briefing outlines how the creative, participatory method of appreciative inquiry can be used to enable policy makers to work successfully with younger people in the context of policies to expand 'Decent Work'. 'Decent Work' is a particular category of work which is described by the International Labour Organization as work which is

> productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men.[1]

Participation of minority ethnic young people in policy making related to Decent Work is critical because of the complex distribution of governmental policy working across the fields of education, work, and culture. Young people offer rich, first-hand insight into the efficacy of policy which in turn should enable all parts of society to contribute economically and socially.

Specifically, the briefing pinpoints the preparation needs of younger people, especially those who typically are disadvantaged in economic, educational or other social terms, to engage in such participatory methods, as well as the adaptations needed to enable them to participate and contribute to policy activities.

This policy briefing draws from a study examining the empowerment of minority ethnic young people (aged 18-25) to re-vision Decent Work in Vietnam with policy makers, employers, and university leaders (see *overview of study* below). This particular brief draws from appreciative inquiry groups which aimed to explore new ways of working and the strategies the project needed to develop to enable the young people to feel they were able to share their voice and contribute (see *context of study* below).

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1   International Labour Organization (2022) *Decent Work*. Accessed 23/1/22. Available at https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/decent-work/lang--en/index.htm

The policy briefing outlines practical ways to facilitate an inclusive approach to engaging minority ethnic young people in dialogue with policy makers and other stakeholders at national or local governmental levels. Whilst the recommendations in this report are directly relevant to national and local governmental policy makers across the policy fields of education and work in Vietnam and similar developing countries, the underlying principles may have a wider resonance and applicability to policy makers across other geographic contexts with similar characteristics. For example, the rising occurrence of informal and unstable work opportunities which do not provide sufficient wage 'to live' has been noted for over two decades in the UK and US. Similarly, although the project focuses on policy-working related to Decent Work, the principles have a wider applicability to other policy fields. We invite all national and local government and non-governmental policy makers to consider the practical value of the recommendations and principles within this brief.

Overview of study

Our study involved exploring social practices across geographic regions of Vietnam through surveys (*n*=1275), interviews (*n*=117), and appreciative inquiry groups (*n*=90) with young people (aged 18-25) and policy and practice stakeholders related to their recruitment (e.g. employers, employment agencies, and policy makers) (more information can be found online: www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/projects/youth-futures-empowering-ethnic-minority-youth-vietnam-vision-decent-work). This forms part of a series of three briefings, Policy Levers for Empowering Decent Work, Policy Interventions for Minority Ethnic Young People and Decent Work, and Inclusive Policy-Working with Minority Ethnic Young People for Decent Work.

Context of study

Vietnam has an aging population (a median age of 30.5 in 2015) and one of the few countries with continued GDP growth during 2020-2022 (ranging from 2.95% to 7.15% per annum since 2016). Minority groups represent 15% of the population, but there are over 54 ethnicities in this 15%. Most minority ethnic people are employed in farming (75.1%), and formal contracts outside of farming are fairly uncommon (8.1%) compared to the majority group (25.4%). Self-employment and unpaid work (within the family) are common, reflecting other growing Asian economies such as Bangladesh, Cambodia and Nepal that are becoming increasingly engaged in international trade. Vietnam, like other fast-growing economies in Asia, has experienced high graduate unemployment as high as 27% in 2014. Graduate employability figures are difficult to establish but available figures indicate employment levels as low as 30% in some institutions. (Sources and further information: Demombynes & Testaverde, 2018; Tong, 2019; Statista, 2022).

Key points

1 Inclusive policy making means enriching decision making with localised knowledge. Access to and participation in Decent Work is largely localised.

2 Participatory policy making is not just about making sure a diverse group of people are *present*. It is also about enabling them to *participate*, which needs careful preparation and planning.

3 Validate individual contributions prior to, during, and after participatory policy making activity.

4 Make minority ethnic cultures visible as part of the participatory process. This helps frame diversity as something to be celebrated.

5 Build knowledge and skill in contributing. This may take time to do with individuals, but the rewards of upskilling extend over each individual's lifetime as well as enrich policies which impact millions.

6 Adjust appreciative inquiry representation and processes to outweigh power imbalances, so that minority ethnic young people do not feel overwhelmed by powerful stakeholders.

7 Prepare policy makers and other stakeholder groups so they feel confident in interacting with particular groups. This might include briefings, ground rules statements and/or short development courses.

8 Networking helps minority ethnic young people feel part of something bigger and acquire a sense of a wider movement. This should make existing minority ethnic role models visible and create new ones.

Point 1

Inclusive policy making means enriching decision making with localised knowledge. Access to and participation in Decent Work is largely localised.

Decent Work is highly localised, reflecting the different employment and living contexts across a nation. This means policy needs to combine national priorities and local knowledge of populations, labour markets and associated challenges, to be more inclusive.

In Vietnam, for example, coastal fishing and agricultural businesses and employment opportunities in these sectors are likely to suffer from climate change effects which might not be relevant to urban businesses. Elsewhere, highly seasonal employment in tourism has an impact on the stability of work and income.

Creative and participatory methods have been widely used to collate and utilise this local knowledge, but can be fraught with issues, such as conflicting views and perspectives, language and communication issues, and imbalances of power.

Appreciative inquiry is an approach which can be adapted to address these issues. It focuses on affirmative steps such as (1) what is the best of what we already have, what is working well? (2) what might be the ideal? And (3) what needs to change to reach and sustain that ideal?

As such, it works with positive dialogue and sharing rather than typical problem solving which focuses on clearly specifying the problem or issue to be fixed.

In our study in Vietnam, we used a form of appreciative inquiry to enable dialogue and a re-visioning of Decent Work with policy makers, employers and minority ethnic young people. The findings from this study have informed our GCRF Policy Briefings. By using these methods, so far, policy-working is changing in two main ways: (1) new networks have been created between local, national and non-governmental establishments and higher education institutions and employers to collaborate on tackling Decent Work across policy and practice fields, and (2) new higher education institution policies are emerging to encourage the proactive network development and employability skills across educational, community and work contexts. This demonstrates the particular complexities of Decent Work and improving it.

Point 2

Participatory policy making is not just about making sure diverse groups of people are *present*. It is also about enabling them to *participate*. This takes careful preparation and planning.

In participatory policy making, it is important to include representation from as wide a range of people from the locality as possible so that local knowledge can be pooled and used to enrich decision making.

However, successful participation depends on three major assumptions about those present: that they feel confident and willing to contribute; that they have the skills to raise issues in ways which others would understand or listen to; that others in the space are able to hear and act on the information generated. Each of these assumptions needs careful planning up front.

It might take months (or in some cases years) for some groups to even consider being involved in such events. In Vietnam, for example, research indicates that because of the variability of governance and the implementation of law and policy, there is often a lack of trust in institutions. There may also be risks that participation in an activity might be seen to lead to civil unrest.

Building trust is, therefore, an important task to plan in order to encourage participants to join in. In our project, trust was generated through working with and talking to policy makers, employers, and the minority ethnic young people themselves. Ways of doing this included consistently inviting the young people to planning meetings, as well as proactively encouraging and supporting them to get involved (the points outlined below pinpoint other specific activities to plan for).

Point 3

Validate individual contributions prior to, during, and after participatory policy making activity.

Validating and valuing contributions is about recognising that a person's experience is *their reality*, from *their* position and life circumstances. It is a way that practitioners can make participants feel that they belong in the event.

Validation firstly entails creating opportunities to invite discussion of these experiences in ways which are sensitive to the needs of participants. This might be by allocating time for each individual and inviting them to share their story at an event.

It is also about appreciating that they have offered that story, ensuring a level of empathy so that the participant *feels heard*. Common strategies include simply saying *"thank you for sharing"*, through to recognising *"that must have been hard for you to share"*.

Validating in such ways is fundamentally about basing interactions on mutual recognition. By this, we mean accepting that each human is of value to society, despite them being from a different background or looking, sounding or acting differently to others.

Validation is, therefore, a driving principle in communications and in the design of participatory events throughout each stage:

- Enabling the young people to influence the design of an activity, before it is delivered.

- Designing the activity in a way which validates different perspectives (see the remaining points).

- Following the activity with communications to show how participants' time, energy, and creativity has been progressed or used for the benefit of others.

Point 4

Make minority ethnic cultures visible as part of the participatory process. This helps frame diversity as something to be celebrated.

In addition to validation at the individual level, validation should also be expressed at a group level, or through culture. Ways of representing culture differences include through stories, customs and traditions, language and dress, and each can be made visible in participatory processes as a form of validation.

In our own participatory project, for example, we invited minority ethnic young people to reflect on how they make their ethnicities visible. As a result, they created stories about their own cultural heritage and events which were then shared as part of project blogs, social media networks, and most impressively, as key notes and opening speeches at participatory events (more details can be found on the project website https://reworkvn.wordpress.com/).

This aligns with learning from other participatory work, such as the 'poverty truth commission' model which involves people with lived experience taking collaborative action with stakeholders to improve circumstances (see for example West Cheshire Poverty Truth, 2020).

Here, enabling people to share their story – for example, related to finding work or how they are treated at work – is a fundamental part of empowerment and developing the empathy of others including governmental/non-governmental policy makers, employers and university leaders.

In terms of policy-working with and for minority ethnic people, both empowerment and empathy are critical elements in integrating intercultural awareness and sensitivity in policy formulation and policy work more broadly.

Point 5

Build knowledge and skill in contributing. This may take time to do with individuals, but the rewards of upskilling extend over each individual's lifetime as well as enrich policies which impact millions.

Some individuals and groups may have significant confidence and esteem issues which prevent them from speaking out. For example, we have seen this among younger women who are expected to do exactly as their family instructs or be silent.

When experienced over a lifetime, it is unreasonable to *expect* that such young women will feel able or willing to speak up. This is especially the case if speaking up is at odds with the view of others, including older men. Being silent should not be mistaken for having nothing to say. Ways of encouraging the more silent to speak need careful thought.

It is important to create safe opportunities for minority ethnic young people to practise participating and build knowledge and skills in collaboration and participation. Specifically, this practice could include speaking out in meetings, sharing and discussing ideas, chairing a meeting, making formal presentations, as well as sharing and receiving feedback from a range of people.

Practice may initially be with close or similar participants and opened up to others as individuals and groups develop trust. In our study, we encouraged minority ethnic young women in particular to take these roles, given the prevalence of gender discrimination in Vietnam. In other contexts, other people might be particularly encouraged (e.g. people with disabilities or who identify as LGBTQIA+).

Involvement in these sorts of activities with others perceived to be similar can help build confidence and motivation. When practised with people who are perceived to be culturally different, but with positive views, these activities can stretch confidence, esteem, and motivation even further. This in turn can increase the visibility of the positive behaviour in formerly un- or under-represented groups.

Point 6

Adjust appreciative inquiry representation and processes to outweigh power imbalances, so that minority ethnic young people do not feel overwhelmed by powerful stakeholders.

In addition to the points above, adjustments may still need to be made to the process so people feel able to speak in front of (or alongside) powerful stakeholders. In our study into Decent Work in Vietnam, for example, minority ethnic young people were physically seated next to policy makers or employers. Some younger people perceived that these people could influence negatively (and possibly positively) their future at home and at work, so we managed power imbalances by:

- Ensuring that each of the tables at the participatory event was made up of predominantly minority ethnic young people. The powerful stakeholders, however, were 'floating'. By this, we mean that the policy makers and employers were not fixed to a single table, but could join multiple conversations and groups during the participatory event. This meant that each of the participants was able to experience more of the diversity in the room, and alleviated the pressure of stakeholders on particular individuals or groups.

- Each appreciative inquiry question invited the young people to respond first, through jotting drawings or words on their own, and then second, through group discussion. This avoided the possibility of particular individuals dominating the dialogue.

- Each table had a 'facilitator' to gently invite and encourage comments from each person.

Point 7

Prepare policy makers and other stakeholder groups so they feel confident in interacting with particular groups. This might include briefings, ground rules statements, and/or short development courses.

Our experience has been that stakeholders such as policy makers and employers can be very supportive of participatory approaches. This is especially the case when they are passionate about supporting and including minority ethnic people or young people.

Their involvement is crucial in developing the empowerment and empathy discussed above. However, our experience is that the subtleties of policy maker and employer behaviour in participatory events can overpower young people leading to them remaining silent. This appears to be entirely unintentional, but nonetheless can be felt by others.

Examples of behaviour which may be well-intentioned, but which can have unintentional effects include:

- Looking and interacting with your own phone or laptop while others are speaking (implying that something else is more important)
- Using all the allotted time to sharing policy or practice, own experience of work, or talking over others (implying that you are more important)
- Questioning or suggesting that a person's experience of finding work or treatment at work is uncommon or untrue (invalidating a person's lived experience).

Example of alternative positive behaviours include:

- Giving attention to those speaking or waiting to speak.
- Proactively inviting others who have not yet spoken or who have a different perspective to speak.
- Acknowledging, but not judging, differences in what has been said.

Short pre-meeting briefings, the development of ground rules statements, and/or short development courses might support *all stakeholders involved* to optimally contribute to participatory policy making.

Point 8

Networking helps minority ethnic young people feel part of something bigger and get a sense of a wider movement. This should make existing minority ethnic role models visible, and create new ones.

Vietnam is ethnolinguistically complex as there are 54 minority groups with perceptions of varying perceived ethnicities and associated language and religion.[2] There are some minority groups with less than 10,000 people (further details are available here www.vietnamembassy.org.uk/population.html), which means that the likelihood of role models who give a societal frame of reference – and hope for a different future – are often lacking for many groups.

We have learnt that some minority ethnic young people were very eager to meet others like them, to feel that they are not alone, and that people who are similar to themselves can access what they consider to be good jobs and change their employment conditions.

Through participatory processes, therefore, it is useful to connect disparate communities to create a greater sense of belonging, and in doing so, create alternative role models. Providing opportunities for members of some of the smallest minority groups to lead, host, or give key note introductions at these events is key in achieving this aim.

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2   We would like to note that these are the terms emerging from the perceptions explored in our and others' research, and we note that race and colour, as with sex and gender, are not interchangeable.

Conclusion

This policy briefing outlines ways to build on the inclusivity of participatory approaches to policy making in helping to tackle global challenges such as Decent Work. It recognises that local knowledge of opportunities and issues is critical to working towards Decent Work, given that it is highly complex and influenced by local factors.

A critical point of this policy briefing is that policy making and policy makers need to be able to combine this local knowledge and national priorities to inform a wide range of policy-working across the spheres of education and work. Combining knowledge and priorities in this way helps to shape labour demand (as well as supply), workplace policies and practices which link to employment terms and conditions such as pay and stability of contracts, and broader cultural practices related to equality, diversity and inclusion at work.

This is not just about achieving *representation* at participatory events, but about careful planning and preparation to *enable a diversity of people to speak – and others to be ready to hear*. Validation of what individuals experience and say - at different points of the process - is a critical enabler. This includes making diverse cultures visible in the process. It should also involve celebrating them.

For those with a long history of marginalisation and discrimination, it must involve building knowledge, skill and confidence in articulating their feelings or speaking with others. This investment however, is not just for the policy event, but is an investment in individuals' futures, and in the futures of those communities that are inspired as a result. Creating new role models for some of the smallest minorities can inspire generations.

Practical adjustments to participatory approaches can help to rebalance power imbalances so that each individual is able to express their perspective without being overwhelmed by the dominant voices of others. Stakeholder preparation and briefing about how subtle behaviours impact others is invaluable.

Participatory policy work which integrates these strategies and practicalities will help re-vision policy making so more can benefit from it.

As Decent Work can mean improving pay and working conditions to afford more realistic living conditions, it will enhance the ability of some of the most marginalised in society to move out of poverty and hunger, and enjoy a greater sense of life satisfaction.

Above: Young people in Central Vietnam working with policy-makers and employers to re-vision Decent Work through Appreciative Inquiry workshops.

Acknowledgements

Further reading

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