

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY FOR FIELDWORK

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Introduction

Along with the industrialisation in Vietnam, characterised by the leading role of foreign direct investment sector (or so-called FDI-led growth), the working class in Vietnam is increasing remarkably, particularly in parallel with the boom of industrial zone construction nationwide. Although this development brings the decreasing rate of unemployment, it is creating concerns of social affairs relating to industrial workers such as migration, infrastructures, and social security. Recent researches indicate that industrial workers not only face difficulties at work but also outside the factory's fence. Long working time, resulted from the overtime work mechanism, and temporary accommodation, characterized by dormitory regime, make them hard to reproduce their labour. While trade union can function somehow inside the factories, very few actors can meet the workers' needs or provide effective supports to workers in their daily life outside. Recognising this gap, the new generation of free trade agreements requires the facilitation of participation of civil society in the monitoring of the implementation of agreements by supporting workers in improving their conditions. Among the efforts, the project "Empowering Civil Society and Workers" (ECOW), co-financed by the European Union, has its aim to enhance the capacity of CSO's internal governance, accountability and legitimacy through strengthening capacity of networking, research and evident-based advocacy. A better network of labour-related CSOs and better CSOs' self-governance are expected to strengthen the role of CSOs in supporting workers, particularly by joint actions, and compensate the gap that trade union cannot work outside the factory.

1. Objectives of the booklet and potential users.

The following booklet offers some basic methodological and method guidelines to monitor and understand the industrial workers' working and living conditions through social research. According to Clough and Nutbrown, "at its simplest this distinction [between methods and methodology] can be seen in terms of *methods* being some of the ingredients of research, whilst *methodology* provides the *reasons* for using a particular research recipe"¹. Thus methods (the ingredients) are the various tools of a research and methodology is about: why using that mix of tools; starting from which assumptions; to respond to which questions; with which objectives. In general terms, methodology is about the ultimate meaning of a research.

The research methodology/methods proposed in this booklet specifically focus on workers employed in enterprises located in industrial parks with foreign linkages (mainly FDI enterprises), with special reference to internal migrant workers.

Basing on some major findings of the fieldwork activities conducted in Vietnam's Northern provinces under EWTU and SWORR project² (co-financed by the European Union), the booklet suggests a double-sided approach to social research:

- On the one end, it takes into consideration the need of a comprehensive social research design, aimed to produce broad-based, theoretically informed, innovative research about industrial workers (especially internal migrants) in Vietnam. From this point of view, the potential users of the booklet are social researchers and practitioners, particularly in CSOs and research and teaching institutions. This kind of research is particularly suited for the production of policy-oriented analyses, enabled to contribute to the on-going Vietnamese debate and advocacy on industrial policy, industrial relations and poverty reduction in Vietnam.
- On the other end, the methodology proposed takes into consideration more pragmatic and immediate research needs, such as: 1. Understanding major workers' concerns at the work place (as they emerge); 2. Meet, while

¹ Peter Clough and Cathy Nutbrown (2007), *A Student's Guide to Methodology*, Sage Publications, London.

² Empowerment of Workers and Trade Union in Vietnam (EWTU), 2009 – 2011
Strengthening Workers' rights and Representation (SWORR), 2012-2015.

researching, workers' need to be educated about their rights (regarding, for example, workloads, discipline at work, salary deductions, firing mechanisms). From this point of view, social research on workers' conditions is also conceived as a tool to inform workers, while potential users of the booklet are, among the others, practitioners from CSOs. Furthermore, this kind of research can be used by practitioners for better intervention and advocacy or by trade unionists working at the legal information centres for better consultancy.

Remarks

To use the booklet effectively, the user needs to have a general background on social research and ability to communicate with and access to industrial workers, including internal migrant industrial workers. It is important to be familiar with the Vietnamese Labour Law and other labour-related legal documents.

In addition, the users are recommended to have basic knowledge of economics, international trade, industrial relations, global supply chains, corporate social responsibility, transformations of labour both in Vietnam and at global level.

2. The research design

In the last decades, Vietnam's development consensus has been characterized by a pro-FDIs stance, linking the growth of export-oriented industry financed by foreign investments to work formalization, social inclusion and urbanity, including for internal migrants moving from poor rural areas to industrial regions in search for a better job and better living conditions. However, Vietnamese debate is now suggesting that Vietnam may remain trapped into low-quality/low-wage productions (and low rights at work), thus creating more space for a deeper reflection about Vietnam's industrialization path. The proposed research design aims to support such debate though promoting labour informed analysis of Vietnamese on-going development trajectory, focusing on both industrial workers' working and living conditions and on the specific labour regimes promoted by international capital, including major implications for policies.

2.1 Major areas of investigation.

Given the above framework, firms with foreign linkages are chosen as a major area of investigation and special attention is paid to internal migrant workers, particularly female ones, as according to the literature they represent the bulk of workers employed in new industrial areas (up to 70% in some sectors such as electronics or garments)³ and the most vulnerable segments of Vietnamese emerging workforce.

2.2. Problematizing major mainstream categories and identifying relevant research questions.

In order to contribute to the debate mentioned above, the research critically discusses basic mainstream categories, identifying specific research questions with relevant policy implications.

For example:

- What are (internal migrant) workers' working and living conditions?
- What lies beyond the notion of 'formal work' (that is: work covered by social insurance, health insurance and unemployment insurance, by Vietnamese standards), in terms of work stability, enforcement of workers' rights, workers' representation?
- Does the generation of 'formal work' in new industrial areas permanently drives poor/rural migrants out of poverty?
- Does the generation of 'formal work' in new industrial areas supports wider process of rural (poor) people's urbanization?
- Is it true that individual (migrant) workers can search for a better job thus improving their conditions? Or are the current conditions temporary or permanent?

3. Building a relevant research canvass

The research looks at both the productive and reproductive factors – including the role played by domestic spatial and institutional arrangements – helping to determine the characteristics of the workforce in new industrial areas. Special attention is paid to the way such factors interconnect. Alternatively, mid-range

³ See Do Ta Khanh and Pietro Masina (2017), "Công nghiệp hóa và lao động ở Việt Nam" (Industrialisation and Labour in Vietnam), Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi.

research objectives can be identified, focusing either on ‘productive’ or on ‘reproductive’ issues. In what follows, a list of sub-topics is proposed to take in consideration for each of the main research topic suggested (production/reproduction).

Production, main sub-topics:

- Life at the factory: general info and main concerns raised by workers.
- How workers got to know the current job and employers’ main recruitment strategies.
- System of work contracts.
- Management of workloads.
- Wage structure.
- System of rules and discipline at the factory and links with the structure of wages.
- Main factors determining workers ‘exit’ from industrial work.
- Workers’ awareness of their rights.
- The role of trade unions in enforcing workers’ rights at the factory level.
- The relationship between workers and trade unions and civil society organisations (workers’ perspectives).
- Workers’ understanding of their future.

Special attention is paid to identify whether specific devices are at work enabling the employers to lower the length of contracts, to increase the workloads, to control workers’ behaviour, to keep wages low, to easily fire workers, to bypass workers’ rights.

Reproduction, main sub-topics (especially relevant for migrant workers):

- Life in dormitories, general conditions and main concerns raised by workers.
- Workers’ background and how they got to know about the current living place.
- Main living costs at the industrial zone.
- Workers’ access to social services given the working of the ho-khau system.

- Main problems related to workers' settlement at the industrial zone (both spatial, institutional and cost constraints).
- Differences between single workers and workers with families (especially with children).
- Workers' relationship with the places of origin.
- Workers' relationship with the 'city'.
- Workers' understanding of their future perspectives.

Special attention is paid to the way spatial (dormitory regimes) arrangements contribute to raise workers' vulnerability and precariousness.

4. Operationalizing the research

The research follows a case-study approach, instead of focusing on producing statistically significant data. This allows, indeed, to analyse in-depth specific dynamics as they emerge out of a rapidly changing – and partially still unknown – social and industrial environment such as the Vietnamese one. A case-study approach can make use of an ad hoc mix of qualitative and quantitative research tools, along with the collection of relevant background information. The most appropriate research sequencing could be as follows:

4.1. Site selection and background info:

- The industrial area/specific factories to be investigated are selected based on their relevance to the objectives of the research. Special attention is given to highly globalized economic sectors (for example garments and electronics). Researches focusing on more than one industrial sector can be of particular use as they allow comparisons between economic sectors. Other criteria of selection could be the national relevance of specific parks/companies, their size, the particularly high level of strikes, or general characteristics that make them particularly illustrative of specific dynamics at work ('hot spots').
- Background info is collected about the sector under investigation, including main economic and employment trends at national and regional level.
- Background info is collected on specific industrial areas and firms under investigation, including production volumes, value chains, main export

markets, type of contracts prevailing, number of migrant and local workers, etc.

- In the case of lack (or unreliability) of relevant statistics at national/regional level, the collection of background info relies on the information provided by key-informants such as industrial park management or factory and industrial zone level trade unionists and managers.

4.2. Fieldwork research

4.2.1. Rapid Site Appraisal

The general purpose of Rapid Site Appraisal (RSA) is to familiarize with workers' living environment and establish good relationships with local people. RSA is also useful to collect further background information, especially related to the socio-economic scenario of the locality, and to grasp the relationship between migrants and locals, and resident administrative management (relationship with local authorities). In case workers' living environments are differentiated – for example in case of differentiated dormitory regimes – both of them should be taken into account by the research. Background info will be collected through: 1. Checking the availability of second-hand data about the researched places; 2. Directly observing local life (including exchanging views and info with local people); 3. Identifying local key-informants (for example local authorities, the landlords of privately run accommodations and the managers of official dorms) and organizing interviews and discussions with them.

Transact walk is a suitable tool to be used in this activity. Transact walk means that researchers walk around the researched sites, which may be a hamlet, a village or a campus of official dorms. By taking transact walk, researchers can observe the infrastructure (road, school, cultural centre, healthcare station, market), workers' dormitories and local people's activities. On the way of transact walk, researchers can take short interviews with local people, landlords (who own privately run dorms), local authorities to acquire basic information on security, price of rents, workers' working time, and even to know local people's feelings and perceptions about workers. Through these interviews, key informants should be identified and be kept as a contact for later detailed interviews. Through interviews during transact walk, information of the targeted workers must be noted, especially the location of their

living place (dorm), this will help to contact them later for interviews (by both questionnaires or in-depth interview). In the case that workers live in official dorms, it is very important to contact the managers of the dorms to acquire their support to mobilize workers for interviews, especially for questionnaire surveys.

4.2.2. Quantitative research

Within a case-study approach, the main aim of conducting a questionnaire survey is to familiarize with a first pool of workers to start the research, collecting basic info about them and identifying those keener to be involved in in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. A basic questionnaire survey will allow, for example, identifying workers' age, their origins, their average salary, their type of work contract, their current accommodation (privately run or official dorms), and their marital status (See the Appendix for details - questionnaire). According to their specific characteristics, these workers can be relied upon for the organization of specific group discussions and in-depth interviews. For example these could involve, separately, single workers and workers married with children, workers under fixed-term and undefined-term contracts, workers living in privately run accommodations and workers living in official dorms. If workers involved in the questionnaire survey are not keen to participate in focus groups and in-depth interviews – or if the questionnaire survey does not reach workers with specific characteristics of interest for the research – they can be relied upon to reach further workers (through the snowballing process).

Remarks on the preparation and implementation of quantitative research:

The questionnaire must be tested before being delivered to workers. To do this, researchers and research assistants organise an in-office session, in which they play the role of workers to answer. The revised questionnaire then will be tested on the field with a few workers and then fine-tuned again. This is an important activity to make sure that all the questions are understandable and answerable by workers.

Mobilizing worker is the biggest challenge for researchers for two main reasons: i) in privately run dorms, workers who work in targeted industries (e.g. garment and electronics) do not often live together; ii) in official dorms, workers

working for the same industries live together, however researchers (outsiders) are not allowed to conduct the survey inside the dorm.

Considering the above challenges, researchers are suggested to use the following strategy:

- Workers in official dorms are mobilized with the help of the dorm manager who allows a representative of the research team to go inside the dorm to invite workers to meet researchers in a public place inside the campus, such as recreational centre or a café.

- Workers living in privately run dorms can be mobilized in various ways, such as coming back to the dorms marked on the map during transact walk, asking the landlords to introduce workers to the researchers, asking local officers to take researchers to each dorm to find workers or using snowball strategy to reach targeted workers.

Once researchers meet workers, there are two options of taking the interviews:

- i) As for workers living in the official dorms, as mentioned above, they are mobilized in groups in public places. Thus, they should be divided in smaller groups (preferably 3 – 4 workers) so that one or more researcher can be assigned to each group and be in charge of supervising the survey process. The questionnaires are delivered to workers to answer, and then the researcher will come one by one question together with workers.

- ii) As for workers living in the privately run dorms, in addition to the above strategy, researchers can interview workers individually in their room. The researcher can ask the workers and fill in the questionnaire by his/herself.

Before starting the interview, researchers must introduce themselves and the purpose of the survey, not least in order to allow the worker to familiarize with them, and ask for their consent. Is it of the utmost importance to make sure that the interview process is not influenced by any kind of external pressure (landlords, managers, local authorities etc. should not be allowed to participate in the process). In addition, workers should be encouraged to make questions of their own interest to researchers, for example about legal labour regulations. In this way, especially when practitioners conduct the survey, the research becomes also an opportunity for educating workers about their rights and providing legal assistance to them. Last but

not least, researchers should collect workers' contact, in order to be able to come back to them in the later qualitative phase of the research.

4.2.3. Qualitative research

Qualitative investigation is the most important component of a case-study approach as being proposed in this booklet. It allows exploring in depth the dynamics underpinning workers' integration into industry, including, for example, how productive and reproductive factors interconnect. Especially, it allows gathering workers' own perspectives about their conditions and needs well beyond the answers given during the questionnaire survey. With the above aim, researchers must be aware constantly that workers to be involved in qualitative research are contacted during the quantitative phase.

In what follows, some major qualitative research tools are detailed.

Focus group discussion:

The focus group is a tool to acquire information from workers through group discussion.⁴ Workers participating in the focus group discussion can be those working in the same industry (garment or electronics) or different industries (both). The participants in the discussion may be gathered as follows:

- Workers who participated in the questionnaire survey are contacted;
- Workers introduced by key informants;
- Workers in the same dormitory (who work in the targeted industries)

The focus group discussion can be organized in workers' accommodations (for those living in privately run dorms) and in public places such as café and recreational centers (for those living in official dorms). 6 – 12 workers should participate in each group.

According to the research's aims the group discussion could be focused either on productive or on reproductive issues – or on specific sub-topics – leaving anyway workers free to make their own connections.

In-depth interview

⁴ See more: Britha Mikkelsen (2005), *Methods for Development Work and Research: A New Guide for Practitioners*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, p.80

In-depth interview is aimed to gain deeper understanding of a worker's working and living conditions and his/her own views on the researched topics, with special attention to his/her specific situations.

Workers are selected for in-depth interviews based on the following criteria:

- Those who have participated in focus group discussion will be selected for in-depth interviews. They should have a special situation; have good understanding of their job, enterprise, and dormitory; or have 'little' voice in the focus group discussion.
- Those who have participated in the questionnaire survey and left their contact will be invited to the interviews.
- Those are introduced by other workers.

The topics and questions of the interview are covered by the two main topics, as mentioned above: production and reproduction.

Life history:

Life history aimed at understanding the life of workers longitudinally. Researchers will go deeper on their family situations, their social and family relationship and their life incidents, up to present.⁵ Researchers also pay attention to the shock and stress that workers have been experiencing as well as the change of job, if any, that they have made in their life.

The way to select workers for interview using life history is similar to that for in-depth interview.

Interviewing key-informants:

Key informants are identified as those who have good understanding of the community (hamlet or commune), local people and workers. They are expected to provide researchers insights of local policies affecting workers, corporate policies towards workers, lifestyle and situation of workers, and social relations of workers (including the relationship between workers and local people as well as local authority).⁶ Moreover, the interview is also an opportunity for researchers to cross check the information gained through the interviews with workers. Key informant

⁵ See more: Irene Norlund and Mike Parnwell (2003), "Methodology Guidelines", project: "Sustainable Livelihoods in Southeast Asia" (2001-2003), p.44

⁶ See more: Britha Mikkelsen (2005), *Methods for Development Work and Research: A New Guide for Practitioners*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, p.80

interview can be taken before, during or after focus group discussion and in-depth interview.

Key informants may be local authority officers (head of hamlet, secretary of Party cell of hamlet, local police), corporate trade union officers, corporate managers landlords.

Remarks on the preparation and implementation of qualitative research:

To organise group meetings and in-depth interviews, one of the most challenging things is to find the relevant location to mobilize workers and to avoid that external factors influence the interviews.

General criteria for the preparation of fieldwork activities:

- Depending on the quantity of workers, the location for meeting can be the workers' dorm (for small groups of 5-10 people), the cultural centre of the hamlet/ward or a café/beer restaurant where workers often come (for larger groups or several small groups organized at the same time). Landlords are not allowed to attend the discussion/interview on workers' life in privately run dorms.
- Before organising group discussion, it is necessary to observe workers' living conditions and make appointments in advance, avoiding coming and working without notice.
- Researchers should choose appropriate time for discussion; the most suitable time is after the dinner for workers who do not work in the night shift.

To make the fieldwork efficient, it is necessary to have an on-site analysis for each site. It is a chance for the research team to sum up the findings gained in the field and to reach consensus among researchers. It is also very important to validate the findings to make sure that the information gained is trustable. The validation can be carried out via focus group or interviews with local authorities, corporate trade union or the employer.

In the qualitative research using participatory methodology, the interviewees/participants must be regarded as the ones who know their own situation the best. Researchers are just 'outsiders', who know unclearly the situation and only improve their perception through dialogue/discussion.

Position	Professional requirement	Tasks
Researcher	Having been equipped the participatory methodology, having skill on communication/organisation, and having knowledge and understanding of industrial workers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Guiding workers in group discussion ✓ Ensuring research timeline ✓ Ensuring the respect of methodology and research objectives
Assistant	Having knowledge of participatory methodology and having skills on communication/organisation/administration	Arranging location for the research, i.e. group discussion/in-depth interview; providing supporting tools such as image/note-taking, voice recording or interpretation, if required.

4.3. A simplified research approach for more immediate and pragmatic issues

As mentioned above, the suggested research approach is particularly useful to produce broad-based innovative researches by social researchers. However, a ‘simplified version’ can meet more pragmatic and immediate objectives such as: i) Understanding major workers’ concerns at their work place (as they emerge); ii) Meeting, while researching, workers’ needs through relevant intervention, e.g. providing education about their rights, skill training, etc.; iii) Producing relevant knowledge for participation in policy debate and advocacy activities. In this case, the main users would be practitioners from civil society organisations and industrial park/factory level trade unionists.

Thus conceived, the research should exclusively focus on working conditions and industrial relations at the factory level and should mainly make use of surveys and/or focus group discussions/in-depth interviews with workers. These should be

used not only as research tools, but also as tools to counter-inform workers about their basic rights at work.

4.4. Some general remarks on fieldwork research (both quantitative and qualitative)

The research approach proposed in this booklet is broadly inspired by the notion of participatory research. Some of its guiding principles are:

- The research teams should not go to meet workers with pre-conceived ideas about the issues they are facing. Main issues and priorities should be identified by workers themselves, to the maximum extent possible.
- All groups of workers must have their voice in the research, especially migrant workers, female workers or workers in special situations. The researchers should empower the workers to speak up their voice and solutions. The researchers will also have to respect and record workers' expectations and their proposed solutions to change/improve their lives.
- The researchers should also be aware of their role in the research. They should avoid being the masters or experts who dominate the discussion with the workers. Learning from each other or two-way learning, between the researchers and workers, is a good strategy for an action-oriented research.
- The researchers should also pay special attention to their attitude, behaviour and rapport. Most of workers are young, so they often feel shy or hesitate in contacting people from outside. They also find it hard to share their life story to 'the outsiders' as well as express their expectations. The researchers therefore have to spend time to "break the ice" or to "warm up" the discussion/interview, particularly at the beginning.
- The researchers should triangulate the results gained through discussion/interviews with workers to make sure that they are accurate as much as possible. It is very important for this type of research, action-oriented one, because the results obtained will lead to recommendations to improve the conditions of workers. The triangulation will be carried out by raising the same questions to several interviewees. The information obtained can be also validated through the discussion with the employers and trade union officers.

Last but not least, information obtained in the research will be owned not only by the researchers but also workers and other labour-related institutions. As mentioned above, the research is a two-way process, so researchers and workers must share their knowledge and learn from each other./.

Reference

Britha Mikkelsen (2005), *Methods for Development Work and Research: A New Guide for Practitioners*, Sage Publications, New Delhi.

EWTU project (2011), “PLA Guidelines: Researching Workers through Participatory Learning and Action”, a product of the research project “Empowerment of workers and trade unions in Vietnam” (2009-2011).

Irene Norlund and Mike Parnwell (2003), “Methodology Guidelines”, project: “Sustainable Livelihoods in Southeast Asia” (2001-2003).

Peter Clough and Cathy Nutbrown (2007), *A Student's Guide to Methodology*, Sage Publications, London.