

Digitalisation, Health, and Participation

A BRIEF ON VIETNAM

Country Context

Vietnam has made significant progress in developing its digital sector, recognising its potential for economic growth and development.¹

According to the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) assessment of national digital policy, legal and governance frameworks for the digital transformation, Vietnam achieved an overall score of 57%, higher than the Asia-Pacific region and the global average (respectively 46% and 50%) in 2023. The Vietnamese government has implemented various initiatives to promote digital transformation and expand ICT infrastructure, leading to improved internet penetration, mobile phone usage, and the expansion of e-commerce platforms. Nonetheless, Vietnam faces key challenges that threaten the effective implementation of their digital agenda. These include issues relating to digital governance, and the participation of young adults from diverse background. While the government has introduced laws and regulations to safeguard digital information and combat cyber threats, critics have argued that these regulations are too broad in scope and fail to address challenges that relate to specific populations.

The government of Vietnam has responded to the need to expand connectivity with commensurate investments in telecommunications infrastructure, aimed primarily at addressing the digital divide between rural and urban areas. This has encouraged active participation by citizens, associations, and businesses in Vietnam's digital transformation. Accordingly, Vietnam's digital transformation can be said to be collaborative, drawing on the adoption of digital technologies by citizens and the leveraging of digital platforms by businesses and associations for growth and development, although concerns about human right abuses have been raised as well. This brief provides an analysis of the current context of digitalisation in Vietnam and how it shapes the digital access to health for young adults and marginalised populations: This brief will address the following topical issues:

- (i) Multiple digital divides
- (ii) Young adult experiences from previous research
- (iii) Digital health governance

Based on this, we offer policy recommendations and share plans for future research.

¹ International Telecommunications Union (ITU) (2023). Digital policy action areas for a connected ASEAN. <https://www.itu.int/hub/zh-hans/publication/d-pref-asean-01-2023/>

² Ibid, ITU (2023).

³ Open Development Vietnam (2023). Vietnam digital transformation agenda. Web page: <https://vietnam.opendevdevelopmentmekong.net/topics/vietnam-digital-transformation-agenda/>

⁴ ITU (2023). Digital policy action areas for a connected ASEAN.

⁵ Open Development Vietnam (2023). Vietnam digital transformation agenda.

⁶ Open Gov (2022). Vietnam looking to improve telecommunications infrastructure, digital content services. Web page: <https://opengovasia.com/2022/03/10/vietnam-looking-to-improve-telecommunications-infrastructure-digital-content-services/>

⁷ ITU (2023). Digital policy action areas for a connected ASEAN.

⁸ Amnesty International (2023). Vietnam 2023. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/asia-and-the-pacific/south-east-asia-and-the-pacific/vietnam/>

Multiple digital divides

Vietnam is one of four countries to have achieved gender parity in digital skills according to UNICEF (2023).⁹

However, some remote areas face challenges with digital infrastructure and connectivity, such as limited access to high-speed internet and limited broadband availability in rural and remote islands. Access to 4G/5G services and smartphones remains a challenge, possibly due to technological challenges and digital literacy. Consequently, implementing cohesive policies in respect of digital literacy programmes is crucial to the bridging of digital divides.¹⁰

Globally
there were

**259
million**

more men ♂



than women ♀
online in 2023

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⁹ UNICEF (2023). Bridging the digital divide: challenges and an urgent call for action for equitable digital skills development. Web page: <https://vneconomy.vn/vietnam-bridging-gender-digital-divide.htm#:~:text=The%20report%20revealed%20that%20Vietnam,analyzed%20have%20achieved%20gender%20parity.>

¹⁰ ITU (2023). *Digital policy action areas for a connected ASEAN*.

Impact on Young Adults: Findings from our previous research

The Digital Health and Rights Project Consortium (DHRPC) conducted a study between 2021 and 2022 to explore the impact of the digital transformation of health for diverse young adults in Bangladesh, Colombia, Ghana, Kenya and Vietnam.¹¹

The study found significant benefits and risks for young adults who utilised mobile phones to access health information and support. The study employed a transnational participatory action research approach led by young adults based in national Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and universities in each country. In Vietnam, led by the Vietnam Network of People Living with HIV (VNP+), researchers conducted 6 focus group discussions (one in Ho Chi Minh City and five in Hanoi) with a total of 47 participants. In addition, researchers conducted 15 Key Informant Interviews with United Nations (UN) officials, community leaders, and officials of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs). This was complemented by digital ethnography, including participant observation in chat groups of young adults, social media accounts and websites.



Young adults in Vietnam reported that they relied on search engines (Google), social media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Tiktok, Instagram), and social chat apps (Zalo) for health information and advice. We found that the low-cost barrier to accessing social media created a fertile ground for innovation, as numerous grassroots initiatives were just fingertips away on mobile phones. We found several grassroots initiatives that addressed the demand of young adults for safe access to health information, especially during Covid-19 restrictions. These initiatives ranged from large-scale social media accounts with hundreds of young followers, to smaller-scale community-led chat groups for marginalised communities.¹² Young researchers in chat groups documented how group members helped peers living with HIV or with hepatitis B or C to get early access to the Covid-19 vaccine; delivered food to those in need; and pooled funds to help a peer who had returned home in the last stages of AIDS.

Moreover, civil society activists reported holding online sessions to answer questions on cybersex, while supporting young people to connect intimately and safely during Covid-19 restrictions. In addition, HIV peer outreach workers in our study described using Facebook and WhatsApp groups to provide psychosocial support, treatment adherence advice, and coordination of medical and financial aid during Covid-19 restrictions.¹³ While participants expressed enthusiasm about the use of their mobile devices online to access health information and support, concerns about risks and harms were also pervasive. These harms related primarily to health misinformation in Vietnam.¹⁴

Additionally, Officials (UN and CSO Officers) in Vietnam raised concerns about weak

¹¹ DHRPC, Davis, S.L.M (2022). Towards digital justice: participatory action research in global digital health. *BMJ Global Health* 2022;7:e009351.

¹² DHRPC (2022). Digital health and human rights of young adults in Ghana, Kenya, and Vietnam: final project report. Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Global Health Centre: Geneva. Available at: https://repository.graduateinstitute.ch/record/3005912_ga-2.99187678.1735834843.1682602161-345088509.1672743223

¹³ DHRPC (2022). Digital health and human rights of young adults in Ghana, Kenya, and Vietnam.

¹⁴ Ibid, DHRPC (2022).

coordination and implementation of data protection legislation and policies, while young adults were mostly excluded from digital policy formulation and implementation.¹⁵ We found information on digital governance challenging to obtain, while scholarly and policy analysis of digital health governance was weak.¹⁶ Accordingly, young adults were eager to contribute and called for a seat at the table in consultations and policy discussions. In some instances, we found that UN partners, such as UNAIDS, were engaging in innovative collaborations with key populations to pilot and develop digital platforms for health.

If young people use [an app], let them give their opinion. Learn from the experience of previous health applications that “died” because they did not meet the needs of [key populations] and no one used it.

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The study’s findings informed the expansion of digital health literacy interventions in Vietnam. VNP+ participated in national meetings with health authorities, PEPFAR, Centre for Disease Control (CDC), and international organisations to discuss funding priorities for the HIV response. In these meetings, VNP+ shared insights from the study, emphasising the need for digital health literacy training for young key populations. Accordingly, PEPFAR and the CDC approved a grant for VNP+ to develop and pilot digital literacy training in 2023. Furthermore, VNP+ was invited to present the research findings at national health forums organised by international agencies.



¹⁵ DHRPC (2022). *Digital health and human rights of young adults in Ghana, Kenya, and Vietnam*.

¹⁶ Lam, J. et. al. (2018). Mobile health Initiatives in Vietnam: scoping study. *JMIR mHealth and uHealth*, (6:4): e106. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5941098/>

Digital health governance in Vietnam: An overview

The legal and policy framework on Vietnam's digital transformation is quite expansive.

Key legal and policy instruments include: (i) the Law on Telecommunications; (ii) the Law on Spectrum Management; (iii) the *Law on ICT*; (iv) the *Law on Electronic Transactions*; (v) the *Law on the ICT Industry*; and (vi) the *Law on Tax Collection*. These instruments provide a unified framework for the running of the ICT sector. In the ITU's (2023) assessment of digital governance space in Southeast Asia, Vietnam scored higher than its regional neighbours in the designated benchmarks: (i) Legal Instruments for ICT/Telecom Markets (87%); (ii) good governance (64%); (iii) Legal instruments for digital markets (57%); (iv) development of digital skills (50%) and (v) collaborative governance (44%). In addition, Vietnam has passed the Law on Cybersecurity, which imposes data localisation and local office requirements on local and offshore enterprises, in an effort to prevent cyber-attacks. However, the law has been criticised as being too broad and vague, with concerns raised about its potential

impact on the freedom of speech and privacy.¹⁷ In addition, the National Portal for Data Protection (NPDP) was launched in 2023. The NPDP brings; (i) the law on cybersecurity; (ii) the Decree 53 (2022); and (iii) the personal data protection decree (2023) together in one common place.¹⁸

While Vietnam's legal and policy framework on digitalisation looks expansive, there are legitimate concerns about the arbitrary power of some of these laws and the extent to which they undermine individual rights.¹⁹ Additionally, the lack of specific decrees and guidelines to inform Digital Health Technologies (DHT) implementation remains a concern, as developing and publishing guidelines on the use of DHTs sets the standard for quality use of DHTs and informs best practice for technology developers and health care professionals.²⁰ Additionally, having such policies would strengthen the governance of health-related data, as data security is a key concern for end users of DHTs.²¹ In our previous studies, we have found these issues to be significant source of concern to young adults, key populations, and people living with HIV.



¹⁷ Russin & Vecchi (2018). Cybersecurity in Vietnam, has anything changed? Web page: <https://www.lexology.com/library/detail.aspx?g=087ed1b5-aca4-4681-b27e-fb21572f6cda>

¹⁸ Dezan Shira & Associates (2023). Vietnam launches national portal for data protection. Web page: [https://www.vietnam-briefing.com/news/vietnam-launches-national-portal-for-data-protection.html/#:~:text=The%20Personal%20Data%20Protection%20Decree%20\(Decree%2013%2F2023%2FND.with%20respect%20to%20data%20collection.](https://www.vietnam-briefing.com/news/vietnam-launches-national-portal-for-data-protection.html/#:~:text=The%20Personal%20Data%20Protection%20Decree%20(Decree%2013%2F2023%2FND.with%20respect%20to%20data%20collection.)

¹⁹ Freedom House (2023). Freedom in the world. Web page: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/vietnam/freedom-world/2023>

²⁰ Kosowicz, L. et al (2023). Lessons for Vietnam on the use of digital technologies to support patient-centered care in low- and middle-income countries in the Asia-pacific region: scoping review. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10132046/>

²¹ Ibid, Kosowicz, L. et al (2023).

Further research: The Future of Human Rights in the Digital Age

In 2023-26, the *Future of Human Rights in the Digital Age* study will build on previous findings, using a transnational participatory approach, to explore the future of human rights in the digital age.

The new study will focus on the role played by diverse grassroots communities in LMICs in shaping the future of human rights, focusing on three thematic areas:

- (i) Digital literacy and empowerment: exploring the kinds of literacy that young people and communities need.
- (ii) Political determinants of digital health: exploring the impact of digital governance from the ground up.
- (iii) Meaningful youth participation in digital governance: investigating the right to meaningful participation in the governance of data and digital technologies.



In response to requests from our previous study participants, we intend to adopt a pedagogical approach that empowers young people to become both learners and researchers in the realm of digital governance, hence the choice of a transnational participatory research approach.

This approach elevates grassroots voices, by providing a platform to address issues that directly affect their lives.²² Accordingly, the project has established a Community Advisory Team (CAT) in Vietnam, with young adults from previous research, health advocates, and human rights advocates represented. The CAT advises on the research, leads national dissemination and advocacy plans, and participates in digital empowerment training. They also elect a representative to our global steering committee.

Policy Recommendations

- Donors should focus on interventions that prioritise right-based education on health and digital literacy training for young adults and marginalised populations.
- The United Nations and other international partners should support the Vietnamese government by sharing evidence and other practical examples of regulations to consider.
- Civil society, youth associations and communities should cooperate to advise the government on policy formulation and evaluation, with support from the government.

²² DHRPC, Davis, S.L.M (2022). Towards digital justice: participatory action research in global digital health. *BMJ Global Health* 2022;7:e009351.

Conclusion

While Vietnam has made rapid progress in the digital transformation, it faces key challenges in creating an effective ICT policy and regulatory environment.²³ Some of these challenges include keeping up with the fast pace of technological development, improving digital literacy and security, and enhancing collaborative governance in its digital transformation agenda. Addressing these challenges can foster a thriving ICT ecosystem that promotes innovation, economic growth, and digital inclusion. The current research will address these challenges from the ground-up by engaging specific stakeholders who influence and are influenced by these challenges.



²³ ITU (2023). *Digital policy action areas for a connected ASEAN*.

About the Digital Health and Rights Project

The Digital Health and Rights Project (DHRP) consortium brings together international social scientists, human rights lawyers, health advocates, and networks of people living with HIV, to conduct research and advocate for rights-based digital governance in Colombia, Ghana, Kenya, Vietnam, and globally.

warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/cim/research/digital-health-rights/consortium/

The Vietnamese Network of People Living with HIV (VNP+) is a consortium member of the DHRP and the implementing partner for the Future of Human Rights in the Digital Age Study.

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