



Policy Discussion

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A Brief History of Minimum Wages in Viet Nam

In Vietnam, the concept of "minimum wage" was mentioned for the first time in the Decree No. 29-SL (March 12, 1947). Accordingly, the minimum wage, which was defined as "*the amount determined by the government for a non-professional worker who lives alone to cover their daily cost of living in a given area*", was considered a base from which wage levels for different workers would be constructed. This concept, basically, has the fundamental characteristics and properties of the minimum wage as understood today.

Ordinance No. 188-SL (May 29, 1948) led to the establishment of a new regime of public servants and a general wage scale for different classes and ranks. Although the minimum wage was not specified to calculate wage, Article 5 clearly stated that "*If the above salaries and allowances of civil servants is less than 220 VND/month, they will be paid 220 VND/month.*" The level of 220 VND/month could be considered as the minimum wage level for a civil servant. Decree No. 270-TTg (May 31, 1958) stipulating the wage system for business and administrative areas. According to Article 3, the lowest paid was 27,300 VND/month.

From 1960 to 1985, under the centrally planning economic mechanism, all labor-related issues were regulated by the government and implemented by administrative orders. For the governmental sector, wage rates for each type of job, payment period, type of payment, wage adjustment and other related issues were all regulated by the government through the wage system and totally dependent on the state budget. During this period, although minimum wage was not mentioned in legal documents, the starting wage level for employees with the lowest job requirements of each economic sector were often considered as the minimum wage for each sector.

During the next period from 1985 to 1992, with the transformation from a central planning economy to a socialist-oriented market economy, it was necessary to put forward a legal framework which limits the behavior of individuals and organizations participating in legal economic activities. The government decided to abolish the old regime in which payment in kind was used, and switch to a new regime in which payment in cash would be used on the distribution principle, eliminating the system of budget subsidies, ensuring the consistency of wage system in the whole country, stabilizing and gradually improving the lives of workers, employees and the armed forces.

Decree No. 235/ND-HĐBT (September 18, 1985) specified the minimum wage at the level of 220 VND/month for those unskilled labors, working under normal conditions in regions with the lowest cost of living. For areas with higher living costs or in case prices change, allowances would be added to wages.

Since the comprehensive reform “*Doi Moi*” 1986, the cost of living has been rapidly increasing. As a result, the real wages witnessed a rapid decrease, negatively affecting the living standards of labors. In September 1987, the Viet Nam’s Council of Ministers decided to adjust the wages (including the minimum wage) with different increases for different groups, including production and business sectors; civil servants, commune officials; and armed forces (Decision No. 147/HĐBT). By April 1988, a coefficient was applied uniformly to all above-mentioned groups, while allowances were to be applied in the following months.

On December 28, 1988, the Council of Ministers passed the Decision No. 202/HĐBT on wages of production and business workers and employees of public sector and partnership; as well as Decision No. 203/HĐBT on wages of employees in administrative and public services, armed forces and social beneficiaries, raising the minimum wage to 22,500 VND/month. Thus, during this period, the production area was separated from the administrative and public service area when it comes to minimum wage. However, a same level of minimum wage was applied for the two areas.

In 1987, the Law on Foreign Investment was enacted, forming a new economic sector – the foreign-invested enterprises. It was necessary to have a separate minimum wage level for workers in this sector as they tended to be under greater stress, and have higher levels of profession. Decision No. 356-LĐTBXH/QĐ (August 29, 1990) set the minimum wage of 50 USD/month for laborers doing the simplest jobs under normal working conditions in foreign-invested enterprises. Applying the same level of minimum wage for foreign-invested companies along the country, regardless of regions and industry, however, exposed many weaknesses. Under these circumstances, Decision No. 356-LĐTBXH/QĐ (May 5, 1992) clearly stated the minimum wage for workers in foreign-invested enterprises to be from 30 to 35 USD/month, depending on each locality and characteristics of each sector.

On May 23, 1995, the government issued Decree No. 25-CP and Decree No. 26-CP, temporarily regulating the new wage system of administrative and public service officials, armed forces; and of enterprises respectively. A same minimum wage level of 120,000 VND/month was applied to both areas.

The Labor Code 1994 provided a full and comprehensive understandings of minimum wage. Accordingly, the minimum wage was set according to the cost of living, ensuring that workers who do the most basic work in normal working conditions can compensate their working capacity, and partly reproducing the labor power, and are used as a basis for calculating the salaries for different types of labor. The general minimum wage, the regional minimum wage and the minimum wage for each sector are determined by the government in each period after consulting with the Viet Nam General Confederation of Labor and representatives of the employers. The minimum wage will be adjusted to ensure that real wages when the cost of living

risers (i.e. when real wages of workers decrease) can still afford the basic living demand of labors and their families.

Decree No. 197/CP (December 31, 1994) and then the Circular No. 11- LĐTĐXH/TT (May 3, 1995) were issued in order to concretize and guide the implementation of the provisions on wages, minimum wages for Vietnamese laborers working in foreign-invested enterprises, foreign agencies and organizations in Viet Nam. Herewith, the minimum wage was 35 USD/month for foreign-invested enterprises based in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, and 30 USD/month for enterprises based in other localities or unskilled labor-intensive enterprises in the fields of agriculture, forestry and aquaculture. For other economic sectors which had kept to the agreement on higher minimum wage, that level would be continuously implemented unless a new decision was to be made.

After a period of implementing the 1993 minimum wage policy, the minimum wage appeared not to meet the basic needs of workers. Under this circumstance, on January 21, 1997, the government issued Decree No. 06/CP on the settlement of wages and benefits for public servants, administrative and public service officials, those in retirement, armed forces and other social beneficiaries. The minimum wage was raised from 120,000 VND/month to 144,000 VND/month.

On December 15, 1999, the government continued to adjust the minimum wage for people who get paid from the state budget, from 144,000 VND/month to 180,000 VND/month (Decree No. 175/1999/ND-CP). From December 15, 2000, the minimum wage for both business sector, and administrative and public service sector was adjusted to 210,000 VND/month (Decree No. 77/2000/ND-CP).

Over time, with the rapid economic development, the government had to adjust the minimum wage policies several times to meet the basic needs, improving the life quality of workers and their families. However, while the minimum wage was officially regulated by regions since 1995, the regional minimum wage was only applied to employees working in foreign-invested enterprises, foreign agencies and organizations in Viet Nam. Meanwhile, the minimum wage for domestic enterprises was not differentiated by regions until 2006.

Minimum Wage System in Viet Nam

National Minimum Wage and Regional Minimum Wage

The current minimum wage system was first introduced in 2006 and has been transformed from the one under which rates are set up according to four broadly defined regions and economic sectors (namely general government employees, domestic enterprises, and foreign enterprises) to a new one where rates are only differentiated by four regions since the end of 2011, as a result of the stipulation of Vietnam's World Trade Organization accession agreement for a gradual alignment of minimum wage levels between domestic firms and foreign-owned companies (Schmillen and Packard, 2016). For the general government sector, however, a separate rate still applies for employees of this sector nationwide – the *general minimum wage*.

General minimum wage (hereinafter referred to as *base salary*) is applied to the government officials and public servants, people who receive salaries, allowances, and employees working in the government bodies, public service organizations of the Communist Party and the State, state-budget funded social-political organizations and agencies at the central, provincial, district, and commune levels, and the armed forces.

Table 1. General Minimum Wage (Base Salary), 1995-2017

Decree	In-force Date	Base Salary	Growth Rate (%)
05/CP	01/01/1995	120.000	
06/CP	01/01/1997	144.000	20,0
175/1999/NĐ-CP	01/01/2000	180.000	25,0
77/2000/NĐ-CP	01/01/2001	210.000	16,7
03/2003/NĐ-CP	01/01/2003	290.000	38,1
118/2005/NĐ-CP	01/10/2005	350.000	20,7
94/2006/NĐ-CP	01/10/2006	450.000	28,6
166/2007/NĐ-CP	01/01/2008	540.000	20,0
33/2009/NĐ-CP	01/05/2009	650.000	20,4
28/2010/NĐ-CP	01/05/2010	730.000	12,3
22/2011/NĐ-CP	01/05/2011	830.000	13,7
31/2012/NĐ-CP	01/05/2012	1.050.000	26,5
66/2013/NĐ-CP	01/07/2013	1.150.000	9,5
47/2016/NĐ-CP	01/05/2016	1.210.000	5,2
27/2016/QH14	01/07/2017	1.300.000	7,4

Source: The Authors

Regional minimum wage is applied to employees working in enterprises, cooperatives, farms, households, individuals and institutions and organizations that use employees under labor contract in accordance with the provisions of the Labor Code.¹

¹ The four regions are defined in the Appendices of corresponding decree.

Table 2. Regional Minimum Wage, 2009-2017

Decree	Sign Date	In-force Date	Region I	Region II	Region III	Region IV
110/2008/NĐ-CP	10/10/2008	01/01/2009	800,000	740,000	690,000	650,000
111/2008/NĐ-CP	10/10/2008		1,200,000 ^a	1,080,000 ^a	950,000 ^a	920,000 ^a
97/2009/NĐ-CP	30/10/2009	01/01/2010	980,000	880,000	810,000	730,000
98/2009/NĐ-CP	30/10/2009		1,340,000 ^a	1,190,000 ^a	1,040,000 ^a	1,000,000 ^a
108/2010/NĐ-CP	29/10/2010	01/01/2011	1,350,000	1,200,000	1,050,000	830,000
107/2010/NĐ-CP	29/10/2010		1,550,000 ^a	1,350,000 ^a	1,170,000 ^a	1,100,000 ^a
70/2011/NĐ-CP	22/08/2011	01/10/2011 ^b	2,000,000	1,780,000	1,550,000	1,400,000
103/2012/NĐ-CP	04/12/2012	01/01/2013	2,350,000	2,100,000	1,800,000	1,650,000
182/2013/NĐ-CP	14/11/2013	31/12/2013	2,700,000	2,400,000	2,100,000	1,900,000
103/2014/NĐ-CP	11/11/2014	01/01/2015	3,100,000	2,750,000	2,400,000	2,150,000
122/2015/NĐ-CP	14/11/2015	01/01/2016	3,500,000	3,100,000	2,700,000	2,400,000
153/2016/NĐ-CP	14/11/2016	01/01/2017	3,750,000	3,320,000	2,900,000	2,580,000

Note: ^a Minimum wage is applied to foreign-invested enterprises in each region.

^b Since October 1, 2011, minimum wage has been only differentiated by region. In each region, the minimum wage is the same for both domestic and foreign-invested enterprises.

Source: The Authors

According to Article 91 of Labor Code 2012, minimum wage is determined for the month, day or hour. In practice, however, monthly minimum wage have been almost exclusively focused.

Basically, the government makes necessary adjustment to the minimum wages when there is changes in economic growth, consumer price index, and labor supply and demand. The adjustment, however, also depends on the payment capacity of the state budget as well as of the enterprises. As of now, the adjustment of general minimum wage is quite different from regional minimum wage. On one hand, general minimum wage adjustment depends on national budget since workers' wage in the general government sector is set based on the general minimum wages. On the other hand, the regional minimum wage adjustment is based on the recommendation of the National Wages Council, which is come up with by negotiation and agreement of three parties: (1) the Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs, (2) the employee representative at the central level (Viet Nam General Confederation of Labor), and (3) representatives of the employers in the central level (Viet Nam Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Viet Nam Cooperative Alliance, etc.).²

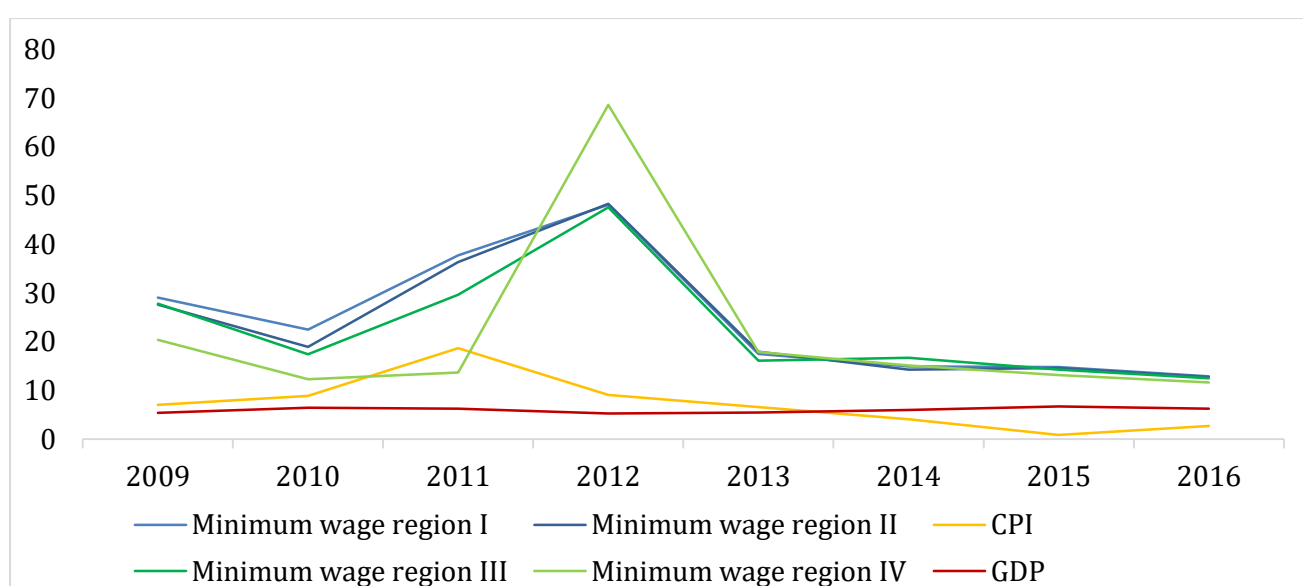
² The National Wages Council was founded in 2003 in accordance with the Decision 1055/QĐ-TTg of the Prime Minister with the objective of making consultation with the government regarding the minimum wage adjustment (See more at Article 3 and Article 4, Decree No. 49/2013/NĐ-CP). The Council consists of 15 members, of which: 05 are representatives of the Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs, 05 are representatives of the Viet nam General Conferderation of Labor, and 05 representatives of the employers in the central level (See more at Article 5, Decree No. 49/2013/NĐ-CP).

Comments on the Minimum Wage System and Minimum Wage Policies

The growth rate of general and regional minimum wage has been relatively high

Over the past two decades, the general minimum wage grew at an average rate of nearly 19%. This figure, however, has been slow down in recent years to the level of less than 10% (See Table 1). Regarding regional minimum wage, the growth rate of minimum wage over the 2009-2016 period was much higher than that of consumer price index and economic growth. Accordingly, minimum wage grew at the level of 20% in four regions (Region I: 24.69%; Region II: 23.85%; Region III: 22.75%; Region IV: 21.61%). The growth rate of regional minimum wage was, on average, 4 and 3 times higher than that of GDP and CPI, respectively.

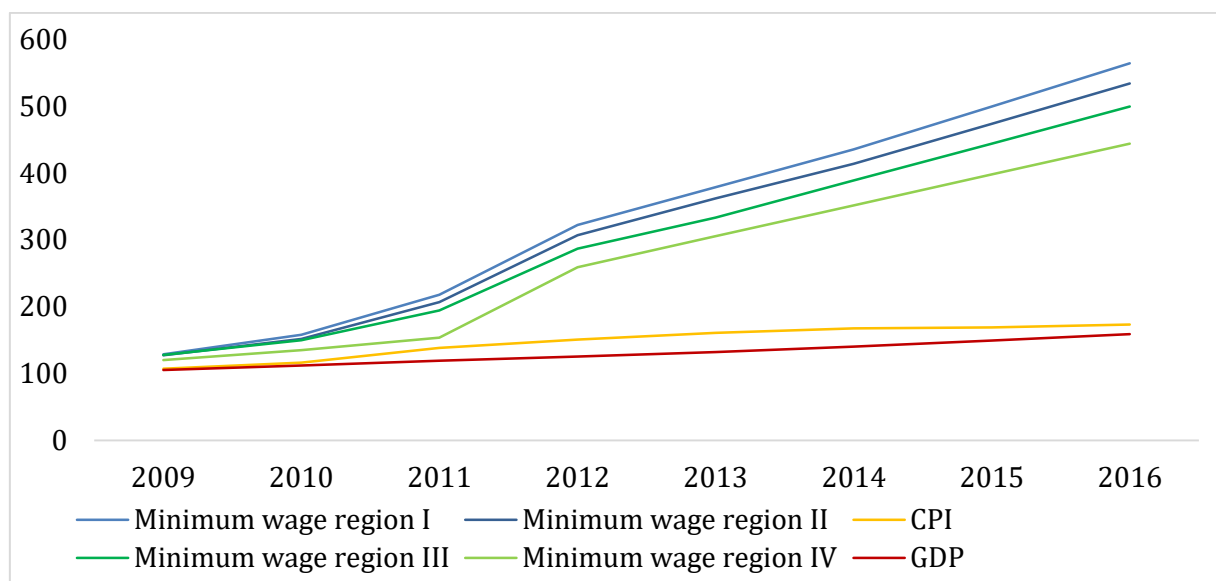
Figure 1. Growth Rate of Regional Minimum Wage, CPI, and GDP (%)



Notes: GDP data was compiled from General Statistics of Viet Nam. CPI data was compiled from International Monetary Fund (except for 2016, General Statistics Office of Viet Nam). Before October 2011, regional minimum wage was applied to domestic enterprises.

Source: The Authors

Figure 2. Growth Pattern of Regional Minimum Wage, CPI, and GDP (2008=100)



Notes: GDP data was compiled from General Statistics of Viet Nam. CPI data was compiled from International Monetary Fund (except for 2016, General Statistics Office of Viet Nam). Before October 2011, regional minimum wage was applied to domestic enterprises.

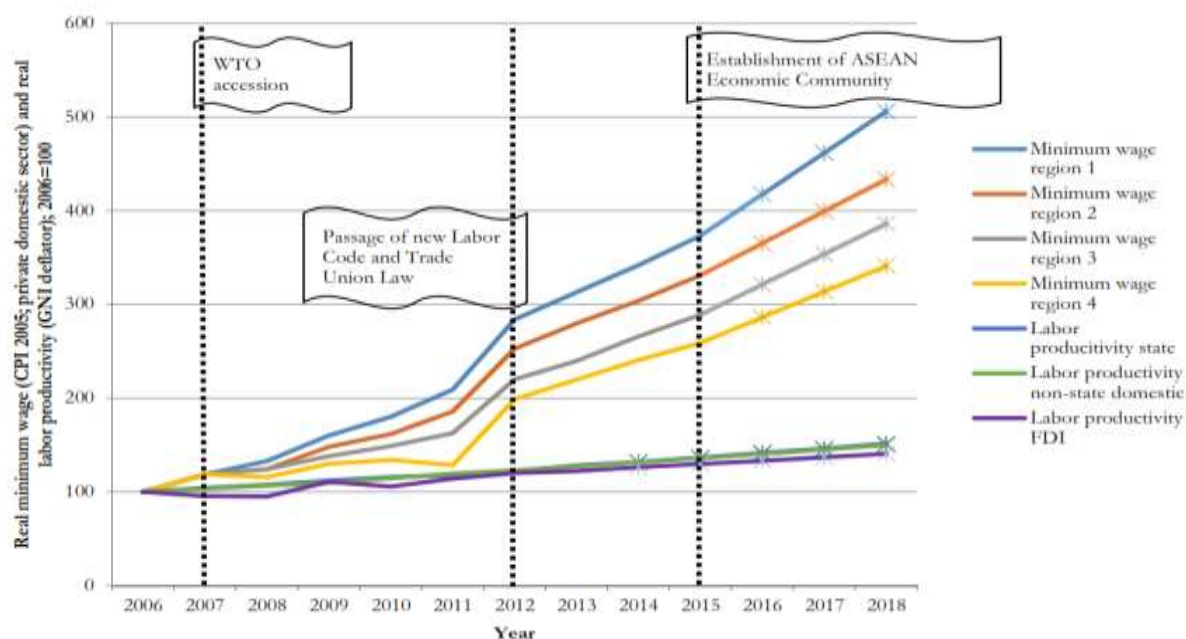
Source: The Authors

Growth rate of minimum wage has been higher than the growth rate of productivity

Before 2011, although the growth rate of regional minimum wage was higher than that of labor productivity, regional minimum wage grew abreast with productivity. However, since 2012, the gap between growth rate of regional minimum wage and labor productivity of state-owned enterprises, domestic enterprises, and foreign direct invested enterprises has widened over time. According to Schmillen and Packard (2016), unless there is a substantial increase in labor productivity, this gap will be widening in the coming years. The asynchronous increase between minimum wage and labor productivity is a threat not only to the growth of employment but also to the competitiveness of enterprises, especially for those in such labor-intensive (i.e. being sensitive to labor costs) and economically important industries as garment, footwear, manufacturing, electronics.³

Figure 3. Labor Productivity and Regional Minimum Wage Growth, 2006-2018

³ Nguyen, Cuong Viet (2013), using the Viet Nam Household Living Standards Survey 2004-2006, analyzes the impact of the 2005 minimum wage adjustment on employment of workers in the formal sector who have wages below the minimum level in Viet Nam. The study finds that this adjustment reduced the proportion of workers having a formal sector job among low-wage workers. Besides, most of the workers who lost their formal sector jobs became self-employed. Hansen et al. (2015) examine the effects of the minimum wage adjustment on earnings inequality, using the Labor Force Survey 2011-2013. They find that the adjustment led to significantly higher average wages and a decrease in wage inequality.



Notes: “*” denotes predictions. Vertical lines show three key years for Vietnam’s labor market and labor market policies.

Source: Schmillen and Packard (2016)

Minimum wage has not met the basic needs for living of laborers

In absolute term, Viet Nam’s general minimum wage has been much lower than the regional minimum wage, average and median wage. In 2013, the ratio of general minimum wage to the mean and median wage was approximately 25 percent, while this figure of regional minimum wage to the mean and median wage was 50 and 58 percent, respectively across the four regions (Schmillen and Packard, 2016).⁴

In addition, although minimum wage is expected to be a tool for assuring living standard, research has shown that, despite of a fast-paced growth, the minimum wage has not grown to such a level that allows households to reach the minimum monthly living standard. In the 2010-2011 period, when CPI witnessed a considerable increase, the regional minimum wage could afford only 47 percent of minimum living standard of a worker. In 2015, thanks to the rapid minimum wage growth rate, this figure rose to 80 percent (Institute of Labor Science and Social Affairs, 2015). A similar conclusion was also reached by the research conducted by Institute for Workers and Trade Unions (2014), part of the Viet Nam General Confederation of Labor: the current minimum wage levels outside the general government sector fall far short of the minimum monthly living standard of a laborer.

⁴ This ratio is considered appropriate according to the framework for effective minimum wage at the state and local levels proposed by Dube (2014). Accordingly, half of the local-area median wage as an important gauge for setting an appropriate level of the minimum wage.

This result, however, does not necessarily imply that a household with minimum wage worker fall below the poverty line, or in other words, belong to the group of poor households. According to Schmitten and Packard (2016), while households with one minimum wage earner and at least three additional dependents will be below the poverty line, households with at least two minimum wage earners or households with one minimum wage earner and less than three additional household members who consume all their labor earnings, are able to afford a level of consumption above the poverty line. The authors also conclude that a Viet Nam's average or representative household (a household with two working people and two dependents) belong to group of households with minimum labor earnings above the poverty line.

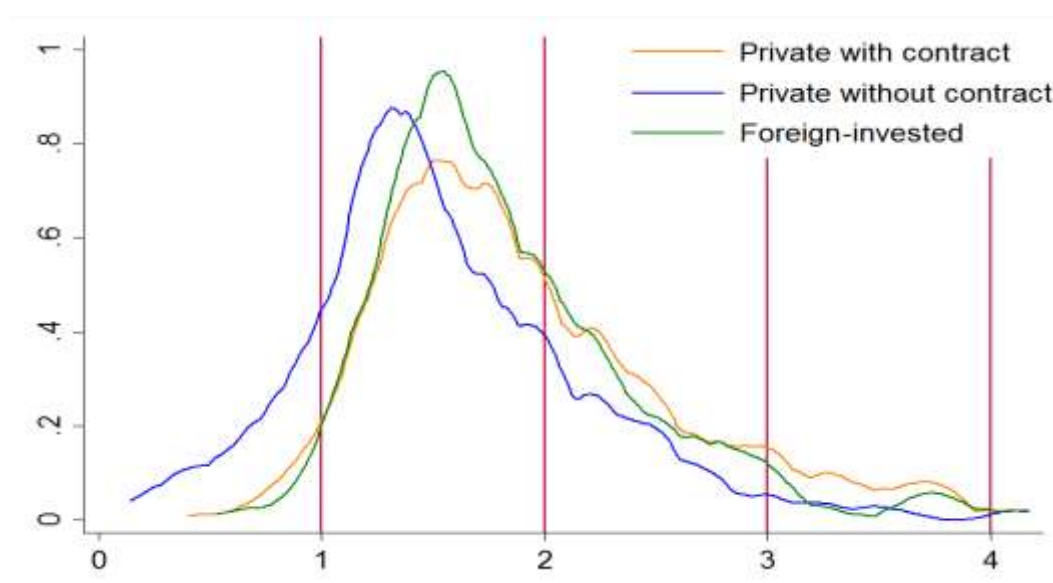
There exists evidence on minimum wage non-binding and non-compliance

To analyze the binding and enforcement of minimum wage, we illustrate the monthly wage distribution for the main job of workers, using the Epanechnikov kernel Density with bandwidth=0.1, and the Viet Nam Household Living Standards Survey 2014 data.⁵

Figure 4 suggests that the minimum wage might be binding at least among workers with an employment contract in the private sector and in the FDI sector. In both cases, there is something like a spike in the distribution of monthly earnings around the level of the minimum wage. Also for both sectors, few workers earn wages below the minimum wage so enforcement also appears high. There is not much evidence for a lighthouse effect of minimum wages on workers in the private domestic sector without a contract. A relatively large portion of these workers report wages that are lower than the minimum wage and there is no obvious spike in their wage distribution at the minimum wage level.

⁵ The kernel density has been widely used in illustrating the binding and enforcement of minimum wage (See more Cunningham, 2007; Dinardo et al., 1996; Heckman and Pagés, 2003; Schmitten and Packard, 2016).

Figure 4. Monthly earnings distribution



Notes: Wage for workers in working age (from 15 to 55 years old for women, from 15 to 60 years old for men). Data from the Viet Nam Household Living Standards Survey 2014. For foreign invested sector, only workers with labor contract are included. All monthly earnings are expressed relative to regional minimum wages. Vertical red lines depict multiples of the minimum wage.

Source: The Authors

In addition, a large number of workers in Viet Nam are working in informal sectors and do not have labor contract. This means minimum wages could not fully play its key role in ensuring a minimum standard of living of all workers.⁶

Conclusion and Policy Implications

Minimum wage has been widely used as a tool to correct labor market imperfections that can result in an unfair distribution of gains in productivity. At the same time, minimum wage is the legal guarantee of the government for laborers in all industries and sectors where there exists labor relations, ensuring the basic needs for daily life of employees. However, when set incorrectly, the provisions on minimum wages can lead to unemployment, especially for workers with low qualifications and professions, and reduce the competitiveness of enterprises. In this sense, we believe that the Government of Viet Nam should pay more attention to the following points.

⁶ According to our estimation from the Viet Nam Household Living Standards Survey 2014 data, 43.15 percent of laborer in their working age (from 15 years old to 55 years old for women, or to 60 years old for men) are wage-employed, of which, only 40.9 percent have labor contract.

First, regarding the determination and adjustment of regional minimum wages, besides the participation of three parties in the National Wages Council, it is important to have academia, who have strong knowledge of macroeconomics and are able to examine the impact of minimum wages on employment, earnings and income before/after the adjustment, participated in the negotiation. Besides, as the minimum wages are currently regulated on the monthly basis, it is necessary to set up a system in which minimum wages are set up on daily, and even hourly basis. This is to ensure that those people working on hourly or daily basis can fully enjoy their benefits.

Second, in order to ensure minimum wages can afford minimum standard of living, the general and regional minimum wages should be similar to each other. In other words, there must not be any differences between the minimum wage applied to governmental sector and the one applied to enterprises. In terms of governmental sector, the main reason why such discrepancies in the two minimum wage levels exist is the limited national budget and the cumbersome, inefficient apparatus. It is, thus, essential to have the state apparatus streamlined and to cut the unnecessary spending.

Third, while minimum wages have not fully met the minimum consumption demand of workers, the growth rate of minimum wage was much higher than that of CPI and GDP over the past years. In this sense, a new and feasible approach for labor policy is to provide a better social welfare system. Instead of increasing the minimum wage, such other types of assistance as social houses, education and health care facilities near the industrial parks and zones will not only reduce the consumption burden of workers, but also help them relieve stress, focus on working, indirectly increase the labor productivity. This will help enterprises survive and even strengthen their competitiveness in the context of globalization.

Fourth, there exists enterprises which have not been in strict compliance with minimum wage. A large number of waged employees, especially those without labor contracts could only receive the amount of salary/wage below the corresponding regional minimum wage. If the minimum wage policy is not strictly enforced, in the long term, it will be less likely to play its key role in ensuring a minimum standard of living for the entire labor force.

Despite the relatively high economic growth achieved over the last two decades, the labor productivity growth has been relatively low in Vietnam. According to Vietnam Productivity Institute (2015), the labor productivity grew at the annual rate of 3.5% during the 2006-2015 period. Furthermore, the productivity growth was lower in the manufacturing and service sectors compared to agriculture (Institute of Labor Science and Social Affairs, 2016). Further study on the relationship between minimum wages, wages and labor productivity is needed for the policy recommendations.

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Disclosure appendix

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The following author who are primarily responsible for this report, certify that the opinion on the subject or issues and/or any other views or forecasts expressed herein accurately reflect their personal views and that no part of their compensation was, is or will be directly or indirectly related to the specific recommendations or views contained in this research report: Nguyen Duc Thanh, Pham Thi Tuyet Trinh, and Nguyen Thanh Tung.

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