Original Article

Impacts of Social Assistance on Child Well-Being in Vietnam: The Mediating Role of Household Welfare

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Abstract: As individuals' living standards increase, the needs for the well-being of individuals are becoming more complicated, especially among children. Even though multidimensional methods for researching child well-being in Vietnam have made some progress, analyses of single dimensions of child well-being remain common. The research analyzes the relationship between social assistance, household welfare and child well-being on both objective and subjective aspects by applying Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) through the secondary data collected from the Vietnam Sustainable Development Goal Indicators for Children and Women survey in the period 2020-2021 by the General Statistics Office (GSO) and the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) of Vietnam. The research results emphasize the mediating role of household welfare as high social assistance increases household welfare, thereby improving child well-being in Vietnam. Based on the research results, the research proposes several recommendations for the management and improvement of social assistance programs, thereby improving child well-being in Vietnam.

Keywords: Asset, child well-being, household welfare, social assistance, Vietnam.

1. Introduction

Children are an important capital source for the long-term and sustainable development of the country (Clark et al., 2020). Therefore, governments take great effort in improving children's well-being levels, which is shown by the increasing number of policies among this group (Qi et al., 2022). However, these policies are not uniform across countries as

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child well-being is a multidimensional concept (Cho & Yu, 2020). Moreover, child well-being can be varied by the changes in children's environment as well as their mindset and behavior across their lives (Minkkinen, 2013). Therefore, recent research has offered more multidimensional approaches, notably the assessment of analyzing child well-being on both objective and subjective aspects (Cho & Yu, 2020). Specifically, objective well-being often refers to the full satisfaction of external environmental factors: materiality, immunity rate, risky behaviors, living environment, etc. (Western & Tomaszewski, 2016). On the other hand, subjective well-being emphasizes the intangible factors of an individual's internal perception: life satisfaction and perception of a better life in the future (Dinisman & Ben-Arieh, 2016). However, while the trend of assessing child well-being has become very common in developed countries (Heshmati, 2008), the number of studies about this subject in developing countries is limited and only focuses on singular aspects. In the effort of examining child well-being, UNICEF - the leading organization in the promotion and protection of children's rights in 190 countries around the world - has produced a comprehensive system of child well-being, which consist of five dimensions in the objective aspect: (i) material well-being; (ii) health and safety; (iii) educational well-being; (iv) behaviors and risks; (v) housing and environment, and only one dimension in the subjective aspect: (vi) subjective well-being (Pickett & Wilkinson, 2015).

Social assistance is emphasized as an effective government tool which has successfully addressed several dimensions of child well-being (UNICEF, 2009). Research by Adato and Bassett (2009) states that education-oriented social assistance programs increase the number of children enrolled in school. Children have better height and weight indexes when receiving social assistance from their community (Sanfilippo et al., 2012). Additionally, research by Lloyd-Sherlock et al. (2012) clarifies the extent to which the child's life satisfaction

improves when receiving this assistance. Meanwhile, when analyzing child well-being, studies often look at its correlations with economic indicators, notably household welfare (Qi et al., 2022). For example, Brooks-Gunn (1997) emphasizes the importance of increasing household welfare to reduce common health problems among children such as underweight, asthma, and physical impairment. Therefore, with the goal of increasing household welfare, governments have been devoting their attention to the development of policies on social assistance, especially for disadvantaged groups of households (Burns et al., 2005).

However, the picture covering the relationship of all the three above variables has not been fully examined by scholars. Therefore, the authors hope to fill the research gap by analyzing the impacts of social assistance on the overall well-being of children, as well as assessing the mediating role of household welfare in the relationship. This research proposes the need to assess a more comprehensive index to measure child well-being, as well as the use of the asset index to measure household welfare, as assets cannot easily change in a short time (Filmer & Pritchett, 2001). This research proposal is suitable within the context of Vietnam - a country with a low average income - therefore putting much effort into improving the living standard of its citizens.

2. Literature review

2.1. The effect of social assistance on child well-being

Social assistance is considered a type of direct support that individuals and households receive through cash or in-kind transfers (UNICEF & GSO, 2021a). Much evidence shows the role of social assistance in several dimensions of child well-being (UNICEF, 2009), including material well-being, health and safety, educational well-being, and subjective well-being. Specifically:

In terms of material well-being, in-kind donation programs (such as clothes, books, etc.)

have been shown to improve the living condition of children by helping them meet their material needs (Hanlon & Barrientos, 2012). Meanwhile, in terms of health and safety, social assistance significantly increases children's protein intake (UNICEF, 2015), which in turn positively impacts their height and weight (Sanfilippo et al., 2012). In terms of educational well-being, donations in kind, as well as school counseling services, are proven to help households overcome barriers in terms of the cost of buying learning equipment (such as books, uniforms, office equipment, etc.) as well as the lack of educational information when accessing and using educational services (Cheema et al., 2016), therefore increasing the school participation rate in children (Adato & Bassett, 2009). Lastly, in terms of subjective well-being, it is proven that assistance programs help fulfill children's life satisfaction (Lloyd-Sherlock et al., 2012) as well as the likelihood of forming positive expectations of a good future. Accordingly, this research proposes the following hypothesis:

H1: Social assistance has a positive effect on child well-being in Vietnam.

2.2. The effect of household welfare on child well-being

Household welfare is understood as the material living standard, which is converted into money to ensure the individual a good life (Nelson, 1993). In this research, the authors chose to examine the influence of household welfare on six constructive dimensions of child well-being from the point of view of the UNICEF criteria mentioned above. Specifically:

In terms of material well-being, household welfare has a great impact on children's capability to meet basic needs (Mackenzie et al., 2014), which is especially serious as children are a vulnerable group and are largely influenced by their caregivers (Ben-Arieh et al., 2014). Therefore, the lack of economic resources within the family leads to an increase in the deprivation of children (Stephens & Leishman, 2017). In terms of health and safety, poor households that do not have enough economic resources to pay

for reproductive health services are often associated with an increased risk of low birth weight (Paneth et al., 1982). In the same vein, in terms of educational well-being, inequality in household finances has a large impact on children's ability to complete schooling (Filmer & Pritchett, 2001). Specifically, low-income households often choose to make full use of the available human resources in the family, which leads to an increase in the child labor participation rate instead of enrollment in school (Cockburn & Dostie, 2007). Meanwhile, in terms of behaviors and risks, growing up in a family with poor circumstances increases the likelihood of children having witnessed or being dragged into violent behaviors that promote negative manifestations such as depression and autism as well as a tendency to reproduce bad behaviors they have experienced (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997). In terms of housing and environment, when household welfare improves, families tend to change their residence to a better living environment as well as consider improving the building materials used for their house (Stephens & Leishman, 2017). Finally, in terms of subjective well-being, the increase in households owning assets is proven to have a positive effect on the contribution to the psychological formation and positive perceptions of children, such as independence, self-esteem, and future orientation (Pfeffer & Hällsten, 2012). Accordingly, this research proposes the following hypothesis:

H2: Household welfare has a positive effect on child well-being in Vietnam.

2.3. The effect of social assistance on household welfare

Research has stated the essential role of social assistance in improving welfare through cash transfers, in-kind support and social services (Barrientos, 2019). In terms of cash transfers, cash transfer programs are considered effective tools to help improve families' income by providing them with another source of income, especially for those with difficult circumstances (Amarante & Brun, 2018).

Moreover, by giving households money, recipients can put the money they receive to work to generate further income (Amarante & Brun, 2018). Meanwhile, in terms of in-kind support, in-kind donation programs such as dairy cows, goats, and poultry are proven to increase food consumption in households. Finally, in terms of social services, programs such as financial service support help create favorable conditions for households, especially disadvantaged families, as this would give them the capability of managing their financial resources (Mujeri, 2015). Moreover, these programs also help farming households secure their income in the face of economic and environmental shocks (such as seasonal fluctuations and natural disasters) (Deaton, 1992). Accordingly, this research proposes the following hypothesis:

H3: Social assistance has a positive effect on household welfare in Vietnam.

2.4. The mediating role of household welfare in the supportive relationship between social assistance and child well-being

Cahyadi et al. (2020) have provided empirical evidence demonstrating the mediating role of household welfare in the impacts of social assistance on child well-being. Specifically, cash transfer programs by the government increase the welfare of households by providing them with income, thereby reducing the rate of malnutrition, stunting and school attendance among children. Moreover, the authors have also pointed out in the above section that social assistance positively affects household welfare as well as household welfare having a positive impact on children's overall happiness. Accordingly, this research proposes the following hypothesis:

H4: Household welfare plays a mediating role in the relationship between social assistance and child well-being in Vietnam.

3. Methodology and data

3.1. Data sources

The research uses data from the survey measuring Viet Nam Sustainable Development Goal indicators on Children and Women (SDGCW) 2020-2021, which is part of the Round 6 Global Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey Programme (MICS 6) conducted by the GSO and UNICEF. The survey consisted of 6 questionnaires, which are: (1) Household questionnaire; (2) Water quality testing; (3) Individual women aged 15-49; (4) Individual men aged 15-49; (5) Children aged under 5; (6) Children aged 5-17. The design process of the survey sample includes the determination of sample frame, sample size, clustering, listing households in the cluster, steps of sampling and stratification and weighting, all of which are conducted by GSO and UNICEF (2021a). Briefly describing this process: first, the survey uses the clusters from The 2019 Vietnam Population and Housing Census, then households are randomly selected from the list of households in each cluster. In total, the sample includes 14,000 households across 700 clusters, each of which has 20 households with different characteristics (including areas, economic regions and major ethnic groups). Thereby, with the advantages of the given data set, the authors examine the research relationship within the scope of 700 clusters to provide accurate estimates for indicators reflecting the status of children and women at the national level.

3.2. Measures

3.2.1. Measuring child well-being index (CWI)

This research uses the child well-being index (CWI) to measure the well-being of children in Vietnam, as this is an effective index for linking the levels and trends of different constitutive dimensions of well-being (Nardo et al., 2008). Specifically, the CWI is constructed similarly to the human development index (HDI) built by Noorbakhsh (1988). Therefore, all the constituting dimensions are given equal weight.

The indices related to the child well-being measurement are written as:

$$CWI = \sum_{j=1}^{J} \sum_{m=1}^{M} \omega_{jm} \left\{ \frac{X_{jmi} - X_{jm}^{min}}{X_{jm}^{max} - X_{jm}^{min}} \right\} \quad (1)$$

or:

$$CWI = \sum_{j=1}^{J} \sum_{m=1}^{M} \omega_{jm} \left\{ \frac{X_{jm}^{max} - X_{jmi}}{X_{jm}^{max} - X_{jm}^{min}} \right\} \quad (2)$$

Where: *i* indicate cluster number; *m* and *j* are within and between component variables; *CWI*: child well-being index; X_{jmi}: the value of X-variable in cluster *i*; X_{jm}^{min}: the minimum value of X-variable; X_{jm}^{max}: the maximum value of X-variable; ω_{jm}: the weight attached to each contributing X-variable within a component.

Formula (1) is suitable for indicators with an expected positive effect on child wellbeing. Meanwhile, in cases where the indicators are expected to have a negative impact on well-being, the corresponding formula is written as (2).

3.2.2. Measuring asset index

Filmer & Pritchett (2001) suggest using a composite index based on durable assets owned by family members. This approach has gained popularity over the past decade, especially in developing countries such as Thailand, Indonesia and Vietnam (Deutsch et al., 2020). Therefore, inheriting previous research, the authors continue to use the asset index to measure household welfare through formula (3), which is written as:

$$A_p = \sum_{n=1}^{N} f_n \frac{a *_{np} - a *_n}{s *_n} \quad (3)$$

Where: A_p: asset index for each household ($p = 1,..., N$); f_n: the scoring factor for each durable asset of household ($n = 1,..., N$); $a *_{np}$: the *n*th asset of the *p*th household ($n, p = 1,..., N$); $a *_n$: the mean of the *n*th asset of household ($n = 1,..., N$); $s *_n$: the standard deviation of *n*th asset of household ($n = 1,..., N$).

In addition, to overcome the relatively inaccurate result when assuming all assets have the same contribution to the composite asset index (Filmer & Pritchett, 2001), the authors calculate the weight (f_n) of each type of asset through the Principal Component Analysis (PCA) technique developed by Hotelling (1933). Following GSO and UNICEF (2021a), a total of 25 durable types of assets are selected to measure the asset index, in which there are 7 types of assets (washing machines, agricultural land, microwaves, motorcycles or scooters, tractors, boat with motor, animal-drawn cart) are used as the principal components. From there, the authors estimate the weights of the above 7 types of assets and add to the result in formula (3) to calculate the asset index of households.

3.3. Research model

The authors use Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to examine the mediating role of household welfare in the relationship between social assistance and child well-being. According to Baron and Kenny (1986), there are three impact levels of the model that need to be calculated. These are the direct impact, the indirect impact and the total impact (indirect impact + direct impact). Therefore, to estimate the research model with the median household welfare variable, the authors use an equation consisting of two regression models (4 and 5), which are written as:

$$Hhwel_i = \alpha + \beta_1 Social_i + \delta Control + \varepsilon_i \quad (4)$$

$$CWI_i = \alpha + \beta_2 Social_i + \beta_2 Hhwel_i + \delta Control + \varepsilon_i \quad (5)$$

Where: CWI_i: child well-being index in cluster *i*; $Hhwel_i$: household welfare in cluster *i*; $Social_i$: percentage of members receiving social assistance in cluster *i*; *Control*: control variables; ε_i: random error.

In addition, several control variables presenting the characteristics of each cluster are included in the model as suggested by Qi et al. (2022), Ajaero et al. (2018) and Brooks (2002), including economic regions, areas, ethnicity of household head, household living standards, household size, household head's gender, child's gender, marital status, the mean number of children per household and the mean age of children.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Descriptive statistics

In Table 1, social assistance with a range of values from 0 to 1 shows that exist clusters where no households receive the benefit of any social assistance policies. On the other hand, there are clusters where members receive many social assistance programs (a maximum value of 1). Meanwhile, household welfare has a mean value of 0.0036 and falls within approximately from -1.9002 to 2.0463. This value gap shows a large difference in material conditions between clusters. This degree of disparity is even more evident when considering child well-being (from 0.7765 to 4.4926) with a mean value of 2.8775.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of variable

Variables	Mean	Standard deviation	Smallest value	Biggest value
Social assistance	0.534	0.244	0	1
Household welfare	0.003	0.613	-1.900	2.046
Child well-being	2.878	0.668	0.777	4.493

Source: Authors' calculation.

4.2. Research results

4.2.1. The results of the overall research model

The authors perform the SEM regression model as well as the Robust standard errors method to provide a more accurate measure of the true standard error of the regression coefficient, then test the overall fit of the research model, which is described in Table 2.

Table 2: Testing the overall fit of the research model

Inspection criteria	Biggest value
Chi-Square ($\chi 2$)	0.000
SRMS	0.018
R squared (R^2)	0.767

Source: Authors' calculation.

According to Hair et al. (2010), the Chi-Square ($\chi 2$) is the result of the maximum probability statistic, in which the model is accepted when the P-value is less than 5%. Meanwhile, the SRMS (Standardized Root Mean Square Residual) shows that the difference between the actual data result and the predicted model has a P-value ranging from 0 to 1. In addition, as the P-value is closer to 0, the fitter the predicted model with the given data. Finally, as the P-value of R squared (R2) is closer to 1, the more significant the model is. Thereby, the results in Table 2 show that the criteria (1), (2) and (3) assess the suitability of the research model under the testing requirements. In conclusion, it can be concluded that the research model is appropriate.

4.2.2. Regression results and discussion

The impact of household welfare and social assistance on child well-being in Vietnam

Table 3 shows that social assistance has a positive effect on child well-being in Vietnam (H1 is accepted). Specifically, as the percentage of members receiving social assistance in the clusters increases to 1%, it improves child well-being by 0.1147 units. Supporting this view, Ribar (2014) also claims that social assistance programs aim to enhance individuals' happiness.

Sharing the same trend, Table 3 also shows that household welfare positively affects child well-being (H2 is accepted). In other words, an increase in household welfare by 1 unit improves child well-being by 0.3441 units. The reason can be that improved household welfare can help children avoid life's risks, gain positive orientations and have better opportunities for future development (Cooper & Stewart, 2021). The above results are similar to several other studies around the world. Specifically, in China, Qi et al. (2021) state that household asset (or

household welfare) has a positive effect on the constitutive dimensions that enhance the overall well-being of children in this country.

In addition, the clusters' characteristics also affect the overall well-being of children in Vietnam. In terms of household living standards, the regression results show that children living in the poorest households have the lowest child well-being. In fact, when studying child well-being, Park and Peterson (2006) suggest that children from the lower classes are described as less happy than other children, because poverty is both a direct and indirect source that reduces child well-being in many aspects. In terms of male households in the cluster, the results in Table 3 show that an increase of 1% of male-headed households in the cluster reduces child well-being by 0.209 units. In terms of the ratio of girls to boys in cluster, an increase of 1% leads to an improvement in child well-being in that cluster by 0.342 units. In terms of the mean number of children per household, the child well-being index is higher when he/she is the only child in the household. In terms of the mean age of children in cluster, when the mean age of children increases by 1 year, the child's well-being level decreases to 2.8600 units. Agreeing with this result, GSO and UNICEF (2021b) indicate that the multidimensional poverty rate among children aged 0-4 is the highest (26.4%), and tends to decrease gradually for older age groups, with the lowest multidimensional poverty rate among 11-15 year olds at 11.5% in 2018.

Table 3: Estimation results on the impact of household welfare and social assistance
on child well-being in Vietnam

Independent variable		Dependent variable
		Child well-being
		Coefficient
Social assistance		0.1147*
Household welfare		0.3441***
Control variable		**Coefficient**
Ethnicity of household head	Kinh and Hoa	0.1677**
	Tay/Thai/Muong/Nung	0.0705
	Khmer	0.1826*
	Mong	-0.0462
Household living standards (Reference: Poorest)	Poor	0.2558***
	Medium	0.3742***
	Rich	0.3673***
	Richest	0.3346**
Proportion of large-scale households in cluster		-0.0190
Proportion of male householders in cluster		-0.2089**
Ratio of girls to boys in cluster		0.3424***
Proportion of members getting married in cluster		1.5309***
Mean number children per family in cluster is 1		0.0717**
Mean age of children in cluster		-2.8600***

Note: *$p < 0.1$, **$p < 0.05$, ***$p < 0.01$.

Source: Authors' calculation.

The impact of social assistance on household welfare in Vietnam

The regression coefficient of 0.1267 and the significance level of 1% show a positive relationship between social assistance and household welfare (Table 4). The reason can be that support programs in the form of cash or in-kind give households the opportunity to improve

their income (Amarante & Brun, 2018), spend more on long-term goals (Rawlings, 2005) and improve household assets (Hidrobo et al., 2018). Agreeing with this point of view, when studying the role of social assistance in reducing poverty in Eswatini, Raju and Younger (2021) claim that social assistance programs have a positive impact on improving household welfare.

In addition, the clusters' characteristics also affect the welfare of households in Vietnam. In terms of areas, the results show that rural areas have a lower household welfare level than urban areas by 0.4281 points. In terms of the ethnicity of the household head, the Kinh or Hoa household head has the highest household welfare, while the Hmong household head has the lowest household welfare. According to GSO and CEMA (2020), in 2019 the Kinh and Hoa ethnic groups had a very low poverty rate. In contrast, the Mong ethnic group has a large population (over 1 million people), but the number of poor and near-poor households accounts for two-thirds (65.5%). In terms of the proportion of large-scale households in cluster, the results show that the clusters containing the majority of large-scale households have a higher level of household welfare than the cluster with the majority of small-scale households. The results are similar to the study of Ajaero et al (2018), which shows that the more members in the household, the greater the household welfare.

Table 4: Estimation results on the impact of social assistance on household welfare in Vietnam

Independent variable		Dependent variable
		Household welfare
		Coefficient
Social assistance		0.1267***
Control variable		**Coefficient**
Economic regions (Reference: North Central and Central Coast)	Red River Delta	0.3734***
	Northern midlands and mountains	0.3340***
	Central Highlands	0.0684
	South East	0.0875*
	Mekong River Delta	-0.0276
Areas (Reference: urban)	Rural	-0.4281***
Ethnicity of household head	Kinh and Hoa	0.8945***
	Tay/Thai/Muong/Nung	0.2299***
	Khmer	0.2959***
	Mong	-0.5437***
Proportion of large-scale households in cluster		0.1251***

Note: *p < 0.1, **p < 0.05, ***p < 0.01.

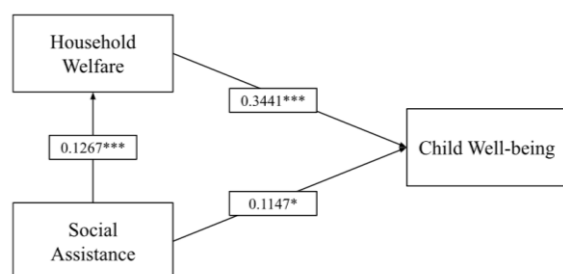*Source:* Authors' calculation.

From the regression results in Tables 3 and 4, the authors summarize the regression coefficients and the significance levels of the above relationships, which are described in Figure 1.

The mediating role of household welfare in the relationship between social assistance and child well-being in Vietnam

The research result shows that social assistance has a positive effect on household welfare (hypothesis H1). In addition, hypothesis H2 also supports household welfare having a positive impact on child well-being. From there, the authors can estimate the level of the indirect impact of social assistance on child well-being through the mediating role of household welfare by 0.0436 (= 0.1267 x 0.3441). In other words,

through the mediating role of household welfare, when the percentage of members in the sample locality who received social assistance programs increases by 1%, it will contribute to the improvement of child well-being by 0.044 units.

The total impact of social assistance on child well-being is equal to the sum of direct and indirect impacts from the above results, which has a total value of 0.1583 (= 0.1147 + 0.0436). The results show that, through indirect effects, the total impact of social assistance on child well-being in Vietnam increases but not significantly.

Note: *p < 0.1, **p < 0.05, ***p < 0.01.

Figure 1: Research model
Source: Authors' calculation.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

The research examines the correlation between social assistance, household welfare and child well-being through the SEM model. The results show that not only social assistance has a positive direct impact on child well-being in Vietnam but it also indirectly affects this index by improving household welfare. From there, several theoretical and practical recommendations are given out as follows:

Theoretically, the authors emphasize the importance of studying the overall well-being of children, a relatively new topic in a developing country like Vietnam. Moreover, the research proposes the efficiency of the asset index as an alternative way of measuring household welfare (Filmer & Pritchett, 2001) instead of income and expenditure like previous studies because of its

capability of representing the long-term standards of living within a volatile economic context.

In practical terms, the research results show that household welfare and social assistance programs have a great influence on the overall well-being of children. Therefore, social assistance programs aimed at children need to be monitored regularly in order to accurately meet the needs of children in different aspects, thereby improving their well-being. Moreover, the Government and household heads also need to ensure that social assistance payments are used for the right purposes in order to maximize their role in improving children's quality of life.

Additionally, in order to maximize the impact of social assistance in enhancing the overall well-being of children in Vietnam, apart from policies that directly affect children, the Government should consider giving out assistance programs aimed at improving household welfare, especially those with difficult circumstances, thereby creating opportunities for children to have a more fulfilling life. Above all, when implementing social assistance programs, state agencies need to be flexible, which means eliminating rigid criteria and paying more attention to the actual circumstances of children and households who need help in society.

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