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Globalization and Income Inequality in Asian Emerging Economies: Study of Hanoi, Vietnam

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Abstract

The study examined the impact of globalization on income inequality in Hanoi, Vietnam, within the broader context of Asian emerging economies. While globalization has brought about rapid economic growth, infrastructure development, and increased foreign direct investment, it has also intensified income disparities between skilled professionals and low-income workers. Many rural migrants and informal sector employees remain excluded from the benefits of globalization due to limited access to education, social protection, and formal employment. The research finds that globalization in Hanoi has driven strong economic growth but has simultaneously widened income inequality across skill levels and social groups. High-skilled workers have benefited from better wages and job security, while low-skilled and informal workers remain trapped in precarious employment. Spatial inequality has also increased, with industrial development concentrated in select urban areas, excluding many rural migrants and low-income residents from opportunities. Additionally, disparities in education, digital literacy, and gender access have further reinforced income gaps, highlighting the uneven distribution of globalization's benefits. The study concludes that while globalization has accelerated Hanoi's economic transformation, it has also deepened income inequality by favoring skilled workers and urban elites. Marginalized groups, including low-skilled laborers, women, and rural migrants, continue to face limited access to quality jobs, education, and social services. Without targeted and inclusive policy interventions, globalization may perpetuate structural disparities rather than promote equitable growth. The study recommended implementing inclusive policies that invest in equitable education, digital skills, and social protection to ensure all citizens benefit from globalization. It also calls for improved urban planning and labor regulations to address spatial inequality and protect vulnerable workers in Hanoi's evolving economy.

Keywords: *Globalization, income inequality, Vietnam*

1.1 Background of the Study

Globalization has played a transformative role in shaping the economic landscapes of emerging economies across Asia, and Vietnam stands as a prime example (Genc & Ahmed, 2024). Since the Doi Moi reforms initiated in 1986, the country has transitioned from a centrally planned economy to a dynamic market-oriented one, integrating progressively into global trade and investment systems. Hanoi, as the capital and a leading urban center, has been at the forefront of this transformation. It has attracted substantial foreign direct investment (FDI), fostered industrial expansion, and experienced rapid infrastructure development. These changes have undeniably contributed to impressive economic growth and poverty reduction. Nonetheless, globalization has also created disparities in income distribution and social mobility, with the benefits often accruing disproportionately to specific urban groups while many rural and low-skilled workers remain economically vulnerable (Baqai, 2024). This raises critical concerns about the socio-economic equity of Hanoi's globalization-led development model.

One of the most visible effects of globalization in Hanoi has been the emergence of dual labor markets (Castañeda & Shemesh, 2020). On one side, high-skilled workers employed in foreign-owned enterprises, multinational corporations, or the tech and financial services sectors have witnessed significant income gains and improved job security. On the other side, the low-skilled and informal sector workers, who make up a considerable portion of Hanoi's labor force, remain in precarious employment with limited wage growth and few social protections. The wage gap between these groups has widened over time, reflecting not only the disparity in human capital but also the structural bias of global capital toward technologically intensive sectors. While skilled workers can adapt to the demands of a global economy, those lacking education and training are frequently trapped in subsistence-level work or underemployment, despite living in a city experiencing rapid economic growth (Meissner, 2024).

The influx of FDI into Hanoi has created new industrial zones and modern infrastructure, but it has also reinforced regional and social inequalities (Pham, Lam & Yang, 2025). Industrial growth has been spatially concentrated in certain districts of Hanoi and peri-urban areas, leading to uneven development patterns. Migrant workers from northern provinces such as Thai Binh, Ha Nam, and Nam Dinh flock to Hanoi in search of better livelihoods, only to face housing insecurity, exclusion from urban welfare systems, and exploitative labor conditions. Moreover, as land values rise due to investor demand and urban sprawl, low-income households are pushed to the city's peripheries, where public services and transport connectivity are limited. This process deepens spatial inequality and restricts upward mobility, as access to education, healthcare, and decent employment is increasingly tied to location and economic status (Mishra, Mishra & Pandey, 2023).

Income inequality in Hanoi is also shaped by differences in educational attainment and digital literacy. Globalization has amplified the premium on English proficiency, STEM education, and IT-related skills, creating a stratified labor market in which only a select portion of the population can compete. Despite government efforts to improve the quality of public education, access to elite private schools and international curricula remains limited to wealthier households (Crawfurd & Hares, 2021). This education divide replicates itself in labor market outcomes, perpetuating generational inequality. Young people from poorer families often find themselves stuck in low-paying service jobs or informal street vending, while their wealthier counterparts enter the ranks of global companies or pursue education abroad. In a city undergoing technological and economic transformation, this educational barrier becomes a formidable obstacle to inclusive growth.

The structural changes brought about by globalization have also intersected with gender and social class in shaping inequality in Hanoi (Castañeda & Shemesh, 2020). Women and ethnic minorities face additional hurdles in securing equitable income opportunities. While female labor force participation has increased, women remain concentrated in low-wage, labor-intensive sectors such as garment manufacturing, hospitality, and domestic services. These sectors are especially vulnerable to external shocks like pandemics or changes in global demand, which disproportionately affect women's economic stability. Social norms and caregiving responsibilities further limit women's capacity to engage in full-time, high-paying employment, reinforcing income disparities within households and across the broader economy (Dieckhoff, Gash, Mertens & Gordo, 2020). Meanwhile, urban elites benefit from diversified income streams, access to financial services, and capital investments, reinforcing their socio-economic dominance in the city.

Nonetheless, the government of Vietnam has initiated several programs aimed at mitigating income inequality, particularly through its National Target Programs on Sustainable Poverty Reduction and New Rural Development (Tung, Diem, Luan & Linh, 2022). In Hanoi, city authorities have implemented job training schemes, subsidized housing projects, and healthcare access programs for low-income residents. Moreover, Vietnam's increasing engagement with global governance structures such as the WTO and international labor organizations has spurred improvements in labor standards, transparency, and policy alignment with inclusive development goals (Dang, 2025). However, these interventions remain limited in scale and impact, often constrained by resource shortages, urban bureaucracy, and policy implementation gaps. Without comprehensive reform and targeted redistribution measures, globalization may continue to benefit the privileged at the expense of the marginalised.

The case of Hanoi underscores the intricate relationship between globalization and income inequality in Asian emerging economies. While globalization has unlocked substantial growth and modernization opportunities, it has also entrenched socio-economic disparities across skill levels, regions, and demographic groups (Ahmed & Popova, 2023). Hanoi's challenge lies in balancing its aspiration to be a globally competitive city with the imperative of inclusive development. Addressing income inequality will require a deliberate policy shift towards investment in human capital, equitable education, social protection, and urban planning that prioritizes affordable housing and access to services for the underprivileged. By adopting a more socially inclusive model of globalization, Hanoi can transform its growth narrative from one of economic expansion alone to one of shared prosperity.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Globalization has significantly altered the economic trajectory of emerging economies such as Vietnam, fostering integration into global trade, investment, and technology flows. Hanoi, the nation's capital, exemplifies this transformation through remarkable infrastructural modernization, foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows, and urban growth. However, these benefits have not been equitably distributed across the population. While high-skilled professionals in sectors aligned with global markets enjoy increased incomes and job security, low-skilled and informal sector workers remain in precarious employment conditions with limited upward mobility. This disparity in income distribution raises critical concerns about the social inclusiveness of globalization-induced growth in Hanoi. According to Munir and Bukhari (2020), financial globalization tends to increase income inequality due to unequal access to global capital markets, highlighting the risks that unbalanced integration poses to marginalized populations. Moreover, the wage divide between skilled and unskilled workers in Hanoi illustrates the structural inequality embedded within globalization's local manifestations, where the rewards of growth are disproportionately captured by a few.

Recent empirical literature reinforces that globalization's impact on income inequality varies across countries and is contingent on multiple mediating factors such as institutional quality, sectoral development, and educational access. Heimberger (2020) notes that while globalization exerts a small-to-moderate inequality-increasing effect globally, its intensity is amplified when combined with financial liberalization and uneven technological diffusion. Similarly, Villanthenkodath, Pal, and Mahalik (2024) find that economic globalization can reduce income inequality in middle- and high-income countries but exacerbates it in low-income settings, due to differences in capacity to harness globalization's benefits. In the case of Hanoi, spatial inequalities have emerged, with infrastructure and industrial development concentrated in specific districts, leading to uneven access to jobs, education, and housing. Migrant workers and low-income households face exclusion from urban welfare systems, reinforcing cycles of poverty and social marginalization. The persistence of such disparities despite Vietnam's integration into global systems suggests a systemic problem that warrants policy attention. Without deliberate efforts to address structural imbalances, globalization may continue to deepen inequality in Hanoi rather than alleviate it (Tabash et al., 2024; Behera & Karthiayani, 2022).

2.1 Literature review

Heimberger (2020) examined how economic globalization affects income inequality, but the findings remain inconsistent across studies. This paper addresses that gap by providing a comprehensive quantitative analysis using a new dataset of 1,254 estimates from 123 primary studies. Applying meta-analysis and meta-regression techniques, the study reveals four key findings. First, globalization has a generally inequality-increasing effect, though the magnitude ranges from small to moderate. Second, the type of globalization matters: trade globalization has a relatively weak effect on inequality, whereas financial globalization significantly worsens income disparity. Third, this inequality-widening effect is evident in both developed and developing economies, suggesting a global pattern. Lastly, the study identifies education and technological advancement as critical moderating factors; these elements can buffer or shape the extent to which globalization affects income inequality. By synthesizing a wide range of empirical results, the paper offers a clearer understanding of how globalization contributes to inequality and underscores the role of human capital and technology in mitigating adverse distributional outcomes.

Villanthenkodath, Pal and Mahalik (2024) examined how economic globalization, trade openness, and financial openness affect income inequality across low-, middle-, and high-income countries using panel data from 1991 to 2020. By including control variables such as economic growth, urbanization, and sectoral value-added contributions to GDP, the analysis applies a PMG-ARDL model to identify long-run relationships among the variables. The results reveal that economic globalization and trade openness help reduce income inequality in high- and middle-income countries but have the opposite effect in low-income countries. Conversely, financial openness reduces inequality in low-income countries while increasing it in middle- and high-income countries. Urbanization is found to consistently exacerbate income inequality across all income groups. Economic growth reduces inequality in high-income countries but increases it in middle- and low-income countries. Moreover, output from the industrial and service sectors helps reduce inequality in high-income countries but worsens it in others. Agricultural output improves income distribution in middle- and low-income countries but deteriorates it in high-income countries. The study concludes that low-income countries should enhance globalization and trade openness, while middle- and high-income countries should improve financial openness to optimize economic benefits and reduce inequality over time.

Munir and Bukhari (2020) investigated the distinct effects of trade globalization, financial globalization, and technological globalization on income inequality in Asian emerging economies. Using the Heckscher–Ohlin model and the Stolper–Samuelson theorem as theoretical foundations, the study analyzes data from 11 countries—Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Singapore, South Korea, and Thailand. The dataset spans from 1980 to 2014 for trade and technological globalization, and from 1990 to 2014 for financial globalization. Employing both pooled least squares (POLS) and instrumental variable least squares (IVLS) methods, the study favors IVLS due to concerns about endogeneity and omitted variable bias. The findings showed that trade globalization significantly reduces income inequality in these economies, supporting the idea that openness in trade may benefit lower-income groups. Conversely, financial globalization increases income inequality, suggesting that financial integration disproportionately benefits the wealthy. Technological globalization is associated with a significant reduction in income inequality, likely due to improved access to information, innovation, and productivity. The study emphasized the need for governments to enhance investments in research and development and establish inclusive financial systems to ensure equitable globalization benefits. It contributes to the literature by offering targeted policy guidance for managing globalization's effects on inequality in Asia's emerging markets.

Mallick, Mahalik and Padhan (2020) examined the long-term effects of economic globalization on income inequality in China and India using annual data from 1980 to 2013. The analysis incorporates key determinants such as FDI inflows, remittances, sectoral output, infrastructure development, human capital formation, government size, urbanization, and economic growth into the income inequality model. Employing the Bayer–Hanck combined cointegration method and the ARDL bounds testing approach, the study confirms a long-run relationship among the variables for both countries. The findings showed that economic globalization reduces income inequality in China but increases it in India. FDI and remittances also help reduce inequality in China, whereas in India, these inflows worsen inequality. Sectoral output dynamics present an inverse relationship: structural changes in China's industry and services sectors contribute to greater inequality, while in India, they help narrow the income gap. Infrastructure development is found to raise inequality in both countries. However, human capital formation consistently reduces inequality across both nations. Additionally, economic growth, urbanization, and increased government size are associated with improved income distribution patterns in both economies. These findings carry critical implications for public policy, highlighting the need for context-specific strategies to mitigate inequality while promoting inclusive development.

Han, Ocal and Aslan (2023) explored the impact of globalization on income inequality across the 28 European Union (EU) countries using panel quantile regression analysis and data from 1995 to 2018. The research focuses on how key globalization factors—trade openness, foreign direct investment (FDI), stock market capitalization, R&D expenditure, and economic growth—affect income inequality across countries with varying development levels and inequality intensities. The study finds that trade openness and stock market capitalization consistently reduce income inequality across all quantiles, indicating their broad equalizing impact regardless of a country's initial inequality level. R&D expenditure, however, has a mixed effect: it increases income inequality at medium and high inequality levels, possibly due to its benefits being concentrated in more developed sectors or among skilled individuals. FDI helps reduce inequality at low and medium inequality levels but is less effective in highly unequal countries. Economic growth generally increases income inequality across most quantiles, although this effect weakens as inequality levels rise. At the highest inequality quantile (90th), GDP growth begins to exhibit an equalizing effect. Overall, the study highlights that globalization's impact on inequality in the EU is complex and varies by country context and inequality intensity.

Behera and Karthiayani (2022) analyzed the impact of different dimensions of globalization—economic, social, and political—alongside sectoral growth shifts on income inequality in India between 1976 and 2012. Drawing on data from the Standardized World Income Inequality Database (SWIID) and the KOF Globalization Index – Revisited, the authors use the Stock and Watson Dynamic Ordinary Least Squares cointegration model for empirical analysis. The findings revealed that economic globalization has a mitigating effect on income inequality in India, while social and political globalization tend to exacerbate it. Specifically, factors such as international influence on public policy, societal shifts, and the expansion of the service sector—driven by social and political globalization—have increased inequality. Conversely, higher per capita income, increased fiscal spending, and a continued reliance on agriculture are associated with reduced income inequality. Growth in agricultural value added plays a particularly positive role, reflecting the sector's importance in supporting rural livelihoods. The study recommends enhancing the agricultural sector through crop diversification, value-added processing, and rural infrastructure investment to sustain its inclusive growth potential. These findings underscore the need for targeted policies that balance the benefits of globalization while minimizing its inequality-amplifying effects, particularly from social and political dimensions.

Tabash, Elsantil, Hamadi and Drachal (2024) investigated the impact of globalization on income inequality in 18 developing countries over the period 1991 to 2021. Concern over globalization’s influence on living standards is growing, with some literature suggesting it marginalizes the poor in developing economies, while others argue it can reduce inequality. Using the KOF Globalization Index and applying a two-stage least squares (2SLS) method, the study finds that globalization—across its economic, political, and social dimensions—has a negative effect on income inequality in developing countries. In particular, the combination of trade openness and foreign direct investment (FDI) plays a crucial role in narrowing income gaps. The results suggest that globalization can foster inclusive growth by opening up markets, attracting investment, creating jobs, and driving technological advancement. The study concluded that governments in developing economies should support globalization policies that enhance trade and encourage FDI. These efforts can improve living standards, reduce poverty, and promote more equitable income distribution. The findings emphasized the importance of understanding the distinct effects of each dimension of globalization and tailoring policies to harness their potential benefits while mitigating any adverse impacts on inequality within developing nations.

Osinubi and Olomola (2020) investigated the impact of globalization on income inequality in Mexico, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Turkey (MINT countries) from 1980 to 2018, using the Dreher, Gaston, and Martens (2008) framework, which categorizes globalization into economic, social, political, and overall dimensions. Employing the dynamic Generalized Method of Moments (GMM), the study reveals varying effects across countries and globalization types. Economic globalization significantly increases income inequality in Mexico and Turkey, while it has an insignificant inequality-reducing effect in Indonesia and Nigeria. Social globalization generally raises inequality in all four countries, except Turkey, where its effect is insignificant. Political globalization increases inequality in Mexico but reduces it in Nigeria and Turkey. In Indonesia, political globalization shows a minor, insignificant positive effect. Overall globalization exacerbates income inequality in Mexico, Nigeria, and Turkey, but reduces it in Indonesia. These findings highlighted that the relationship between globalization and income inequality is complex and country-specific. The study concluded that different dimensions of globalization are important drivers of income inequality across the MINT countries, although the impact varies depending on national contexts, suggesting the need for tailored policy responses that consider the unique dynamics of each country.

Osode, Iheonu and Dauda (2022) investigated the impact of globalization and institutional quality on income inequality, with a specific focus on how institutional quality influences the globalization–inequality relationship. Using instrumental variable quantile regression to address simultaneity and reverse causality, the study assesses how different levels of existing inequality shape these effects. The findings reveal that globalization's impact on income inequality varies depending on the type of globalization measured, while the influence of institutional quality depends on a country's initial level of inequality. Specifically, trade globalization reduces income inequality in countries with low initial inequality when institutional quality is high but increases inequality in high-inequality countries even with strong institutions. Additionally, financial globalization—captured through foreign direct investment (FDI) and official development assistance (ODA)—tends to increase inequality in countries regardless of initial inequality levels, especially when institutional quality is considered. The study emphasizes that institutional quality moderates the globalization–inequality relationship in complex ways. Based on these insights, the paper recommends tailored policy approaches that improve institutional frameworks and carefully manage globalization, depending on a country's starting level of income inequality and the specific form of globalization being pursued.

3.1 Research Findings

The research findings revealed that globalization has had a dual impact on income inequality in Hanoi, Vietnam. On the one hand, it has facilitated significant economic growth, technological advancement, and integration into global trade, notably through the attraction of foreign direct investment (FDI) and the expansion of high-value sectors such as finance, technology, and manufacturing. These developments have benefited skilled labor, urban professionals, and foreign-educated individuals who possess the qualifications and competencies aligned with global economic demands. As a result, this group has experienced increased wages, job security, and access to quality services. However, the same wave of globalization has left behind large segments of the population, particularly low-skilled workers, rural-urban migrants, and informal laborers, who face stagnant wages, job precarity, and exclusion from social protections. The emergence of a dual labor market—one embedded in the global economy and the other relegated to low-productivity sectors—has intensified income gaps and social mobility constraints within Hanoi's rapidly evolving urban economy. The findings mirror those of Munir and Bukhari (2020), who highlight that while trade globalization may reduce inequality in emerging economies, financial globalization tends to worsen it by channeling gains toward capital-owning elites.

Moreover, the study shows that spatial and demographic dimensions significantly mediate the effects of globalization on inequality. Industrial development and infrastructure expansion are geographically concentrated in specific urban zones, leaving peripheral districts and informal settlements under-served. This contributes to unequal access to education, healthcare, transport, and employment opportunities. Migrant workers from rural areas, particularly those from northern provinces, face institutional and social barriers that prevent full participation in Hanoi's formal economy, thus reinforcing cycles of urban poverty. Additionally, disparities in educational attainment and digital skills have become a critical determinant of income inequality. The premium placed on English proficiency, science, and ICT-related skills excludes many low-income households from benefiting from the digital and knowledge-based economy. This confirms the findings of Heimberger (2020), who notes that education and technology are key moderators in the globalization-inequality relationship. Gender and ethnic dimensions further compound the issue, with women and minorities disproportionately represented in low-wage, insecure sectors. Although Vietnam's government has introduced poverty reduction and social protection programs, their limited scope and inconsistent implementation have not sufficiently narrowed the income divide. Thus, while globalization has transformed Hanoi into an economic hub, it has also deepened structural inequalities that require comprehensive, equity-driven policy interventions.

4.1 Conclusion

The study concludes that while globalization has acted as a catalyst for economic growth and modernization in Hanoi, it has also significantly exacerbated income inequality across social, spatial, and sectoral lines. High-skilled professionals and urban elites have been the primary beneficiaries of Vietnam's global economic integration, leveraging their access to education, digital skills, and international networks to secure better employment and income opportunities. In contrast, low-skilled workers, informal sector employees, and rural migrants remain marginalized from the gains of globalization, with limited access to secure jobs, quality housing, and essential services. This bifurcation in economic outcomes has led to the emergence of a dual labor market and reinforced socio-economic hierarchies. The findings are consistent with broader patterns observed across Asian emerging economies, where the positive effects of globalization are unevenly distributed due to disparities in human capital, institutional support, and infrastructural access. The unequal spatial distribution of industrial growth and services within Hanoi has further entrenched urban poverty and social exclusion, particularly among populations residing in peripheral districts.

Furthermore, the study underscores the role of education, gender, and digital access as critical determinants of income distribution in the context of globalization. The digital economy, driven by technological globalization, has increased the premium on specific skills, sidelining individuals and communities unable to meet these evolving labor market demands. Women and ethnic minorities are disproportionately employed in sectors most vulnerable to global market fluctuations, such as garments, domestic services, and hospitality, further compounding their economic vulnerability. Although policy measures such as subsidized housing, vocational training, and engagement with global governance bodies have been introduced, their impact has been constrained by limited scale, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and underfunding. The research thus concludes that globalization in Hanoi, while economically transformative, remains socially incomplete. Without deliberate, inclusive policy strategies focused on equitable education, infrastructure redistribution, and protection for vulnerable labor groups, globalization risks entrenching rather than alleviating inequality in Vietnam's capital.

5.1 Recommendations

To mitigate the widening income inequality resulting from globalization in Hanoi, the study recommends a multifaceted policy approach that emphasizes inclusive development and equitable access to economic opportunities. The government should prioritize investment in education reform, focusing on universal access to quality primary and secondary education, as well as technical and digital skill training that aligns with the demands of a globalized labor market.

Expanding vocational training centers and subsidizing digital literacy programs for low-income and rural populations can bridge the skill divide. Urban planning policies should ensure affordable housing, equitable infrastructure development, and improved access to healthcare and transport services, particularly in peripheral districts where marginalized groups reside. Additionally, targeted social protection programs—such as conditional cash transfers, unemployment insurance, and maternity support—should be scaled up to shield vulnerable populations from economic shocks. Regulatory measures should also be enhanced to enforce labor standards, ensure fair wages, and protect informal sector workers, especially women and migrants. Moreover, collaboration with international development organizations can help align local policies with global best practices, ensuring that globalization not only fuels economic expansion but also fosters social justice and shared prosperity for all segments of Hanoi's population.

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