



Original Article

Inclusive Trade Facilitation in Vietnam

Vu Thanh Huong*, Nguyen Thi Thanh Mai, Nguyen Phuong Thao

VNU University of Economics and Business, 144 Xuan Thuy, Cau Giay, Hanoi, Vietnam

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Abstract: Based on survey results of the United Nations for the three years 2015, 2017 and 2019, the paper analyzes the current situation of inclusive trade facilitation in Vietnam and compares it with other trade facilitation activities of Vietnam, and with inclusive trade facilitation of some regions in the world. The results show that Vietnam's inclusive trade facilitation is still progressing at a low level compared to other trade facilitation activities, but is much higher than the inclusive trade facilitation of APEC and other ASEAN countries. On those grounds, the article concludes that in order to facilitate inclusive trade, Vietnam should further promote measures to facilitate agricultural activities as well as strengthen deeper participation of women in trade activities.

Keywords: Trade facilitation, inclusive trade, Vietnam.

1. Introduction

During the past 30 years, Vietnam has always been considered as an economy with high openness and considerable success in facilitating trade. In recent years, Vietnam has focused more on facilitating inclusive trade with the objectives to bring benefits to all through trade activities.

In fact, many groups have not yet participated in and benefited from Vietnam's international trade activities. Despite being an agricultural country, the proportion of agricultural products in the total import-export turnover of Vietnam is still at a low level. In

addition, Vietnamese women have fewer chances to participate in trade even though the high-quality female workforce accounts for an increasing proportion of the total workforce in the economy. The participation of Vietnamese small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in trade is also very limited in spite of benefits trade can bring to them, such as expanding markets, increasing revenue and developing business capabilities [1].

There is currently no comprehensive research on inclusive trade in Vietnam, while this has attracted many foreign scholars, typically, Duval and Wang (2015) [2], United

* Corresponding author

E-mail address: huongvt@vnu.edu

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Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) (2019) [3], Johnny [4], Marc et al. (2017) [5], Joosep (2014) [6] and Liapis (2015) [7]. These previous papers have substantially shown the importance of agriculture, women and SMEs' participation in trade, and the benefits achieved by implementing trade facilitation for these groups.

The aim of this paper is to analyze the status of inclusive trade facilitation activities in Vietnam and compare it with other trade facilitation activities of Vietnam, and with inclusive trade facilitation of some other regions in the world, thereby providing some policy implications to promote trade facilitation for the benefit of all groups of people in society.

2. Some concepts related to inclusive trade facilitation

2.1. Inclusive trade

According to the UNESCAP (2013), trade is inclusive if everyone can contribute to and benefit from international trade and equally share opportunities [8]. Inclusive trade aims for sustainable development and helps to achieve specific results such as eradicating poverty, developing comprehensive health and improving education quality. Luke and Rouker (2019) argued that inclusive trade means everyone in the country has a legitimate income from trade [9]. From the above-mentioned concepts, inclusive trade can be understood to mean that actors in the economy, whether large or small, strong or weak, can participate, contribute and benefit fairly and equally from commercial activities.

2.2. Trade facilitation

Trade facilitation is defined differently by international organizations around the world. Table 1 synthesizes some most commonly and widely used definitions. In general, trade facilitation is referred to as all activities or policies that aim to reduce trade transaction

costs by eliminating and simplifying the processes and procedures involved in the importing-exporting process, and increasing efficiency and trade volume.

2.3. Inclusive trade facilitation

There is so far no specific definition of inclusive trade facilitation and it is being realized by practical activities rather than by defining it theoretically. The UNESCAP (2015), and UNESCAP and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) (2019) introduce the concept of "sustainable trade facilitation", but in essence, it refers to measures to promote the participation of vulnerable groups [14, 15]. These measures will be associated with enabling SMEs, the agricultural sector as well as women to participate and benefit from international trade activities in accordance with the definition of inclusive trade, which is geared towards the common good of all groups of people and organizations in trade.

3. Research methodology and data

The paper selects trade facilitation indicators as presented by the UNESCAP and ADB (2019) since these indicators are more comprehensive than the Enabling Trade Index or Doing business [15]. According to UNESCAP and ADB (2019) [15], trade facilitation is classified into four groups, including (i) General trade facilitation measures; (ii) Digital trade facilitation measures; (iii) Sustainable trade facilitation measures; and (iv) Trade Finance Facilitation. The third group "Sustainable trade facilitation measures" and in nature "Inclusive Trade Facilitation Measures" includes three sub-groups: "Trade facilitation for SMEs", "Agricultural Trade Facilitation" and "Trade Facilitation for Women" (Table 2).

Based on the above classification of the UNESCAP and ADB (2019) [15], the paper assesses Vietnam's implementation level of inclusive trade facilitation measures. Then, the paper points out the weaknesses of Vietnam in

implementing inclusive trade facilitation and from that provides some policy implications to facilitate inclusive trade in Vietnam.

Table 3 indicates how to evaluate the performance of trade facilitation measures proposed by UNESCAP and ADB (2019) [15].

Table 1: Definitions of trade facilitation

Research	Definition
UNCTAD (2001)	“Simplify and harmonize international trade procedures, including related activities, practices, and procedures in the collection, presentation, exchange and processing of data required for the transportation of goods in international trade” (page 80) [10].
APEC (2002)	“Trade facilitation is generally understood as a simplification and harmonization process, using new technologies and other measures to address administrative procedural obstacles to trade [11].
OECD (2001)	“Simplify and standardize relevant procedures and information flows needed to transport goods internationally from seller to buyer and to make buyer's payment to seller” [12].
UN/ECE (2012)	“A comprehensive and unified approach to minimize the complexity and cost of the commercial transaction process, while at the same time ensuring that all these activities can take place in an efficient, transparent, and predictive way, based on internationally recognized standards, standards and best practices” [13].

Source: Compiled by authors.

Table 2: Inclusive trade facilitation measures

No.	Measures	Activities	Code*
1	Trade facilitation for SMEs	Government has developed trade facilitation measures that ensure easy and affordable access for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to trade-related information	SME_1
		Government has developed specific measures that enable SMEs to more easily benefit from the Authorized Economic Operator scheme	SME_2
		Government has taken actions to make single windows more easily accessible to SMEs (e.g., by providing technical consultation and training services to SMEs on registering and using the facility)	SME_3
		Government has taken actions to ensure that SMEs are well represented and made key members of National Trade Facilitation Committees Implementation of other special measures to reduce costs for SMEs	SME_4
2	Trade facilitation for agriculture	Testing and laboratory facilities are equipped for compliance with sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) standards in your main trading partners	AGRI_1
		National standards and accreditation bodies are established for the purpose of compliance with SPS standards	AGRI_2
		Application, verification, and issuance of SPS certificates is automated	AGRI_3
		Special treatment given to perishable goods at border crossings	AGRI_4
3	Trade facilitation for women	The existing trade facilitation policy/strategy incorporates special consideration of women involved in trade	WOMEN_1
		Government has introduced trade facilitation measures aimed at women involved in trade	WOMEN_2
		Female membership in the National Trade Facilitation Committee	WOMEN_2

* Code generated by the authors

Source: UNESCAP and ADB (2019) [15].

Table 3: Performance indicators for trade facilitation

No	Measures	Activities
1	Full implementation	Trade facilitation measures are implemented in full compliance with international standards, recommendations and conventions of trade facilitation agreements or conventions. A country evaluated in this indicator means that this country has taken full measures to facilitate trade.
2	Partial implementation	A measure is considered partially fulfilled if one of the following conditions is met: (1) Trade facilitation is a partial, incomplete implementation of international standards, recommendations and conventions. (2) The country is still in the process of implementing measures. (3) This measure is being used but on an unsustainable, short-term or irregular basis. (4) This measure was implemented in a number of target locations. (5) A number of targeted stakeholders participate.
3	Testing implementation	Methods that are considered to be experimental will fulfill the general requirement of partial implementation i.e. partial commercial facilitation. Testing against some of the intended stakeholders is being performed on a trial basis. When a new trade facilitation measure is in the experimental stage, the old measure is often used in parallel to ensure that the service is still available even after there has been an interruption to the new measure.
4	Not implemented yet	The trade facilitation measure is not taken. However, it cannot be denied that, at this stage, the intentions for trade facilitation can take place.

Source: UNESCAP and ADB (2019) [15]. The data are mainly collected from the United Nations Global Survey on the Facilitation of Digital Trade and Sustainable Trade for 2 years 2017 and 2019.

4. Vietnam's inclusive trade facilitation implementation

4.1. Overview

Vietnam's total trade facilitation index witnessed an upward trend over the studied period. It slightly increased from 2015 to 2017 by about 3% and by nearly 10% from 2017 to 2019, proving that Vietnam has performed its free trade agreements quite well and improved the business environment to make trade become easier.

The implementation level of Vietnam's inclusive trade facilitation increased dramatically from 17.23% in 2017 to 50.37% in 2019, equivalent to an increase by more than 33% (Figure 1)¹. Even Vietnam's implementation rate of inclusive trade increased

more strongly than that of Vietnam's total trade facilitation index; the former was still much lower than the latter at around 11%.

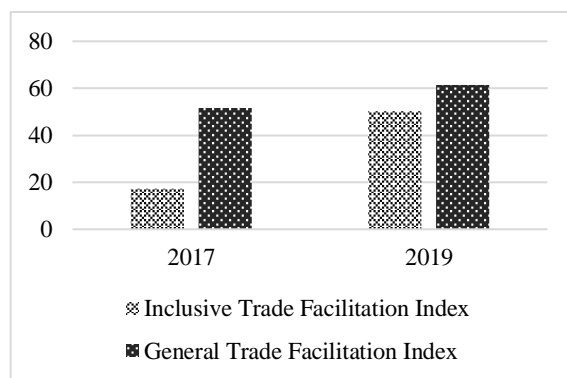


Figure 1: Trade facilitation index of Vietnam in 2017 and 2019 (Unit: %).

Source: UNESCAP and ADB (2019) [15].

¹ There were no statistics for the inclusive trade index of Vietnam in 2015.

4.2. Inclusive trade facilitation of Vietnam by category

In 2017, Vietnam had not implemented any measure to facilitate the participation of women in trade. Conversely, SMEs were strongly facilitated to participate in international trade as the implementation level was 26.7%, 1.7% higher than that of the agricultural group (Figure 2).

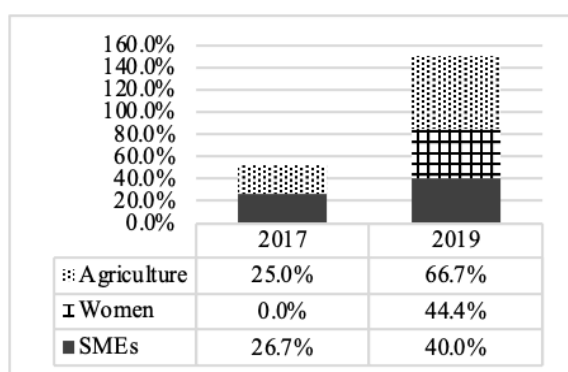


Figure 2: Vietnam's inclusive trade facilitation index for 2017 and 2019 by category (Unit: %).

Source: UNESCAP and ADB (2019) [15].

By 2019, the implementation rate for SMEs was 40%, corresponding to an increase of 13.3% compared to that of 2017. This increase resulted from Vietnam's great effort to facilitate trade for SMEs through customs' procedures, SMEs network creation and SMEs supporting law promulgation. The year 2019 also witnessed a jump in implementation rate to facilitate the agricultural group to be engaged in trade in Vietnam. The figure for the facilitation of the agricultural group was 25% in 2017 but increased very sharply to 66.7% in 2019. This is also the group that was given the most attention, so the level of facilitation was the highest among the 3 vulnerable groups. Women's facilitation rates in Viet Nam increased dramatically by more than 44% over the two years from 2017 to 2019.

In short, it can be seen that over the two years, Vietnam had put substantial efforts to make trade more inclusive by getting women, SMEs and agricultural groups more involved in international trade.

4.3. Comparison of Vietnam's inclusive trade facilitation to APEC and Southeast Asia

There was a dramatic increase in the inclusive facilitation index from 2017 to 2019 in Vietnam, APEC and other ASEAN nations (Figure 3). For both 2017 and 2019, Vietnam had the highest inclusive trade facilitation index compared to the APEC and ASEAN region.

In terms of the implementation index by category, by 2017, Vietnam's facilitation for SMEs was highest at 26.7%, while APEC was at 13% and ASEAN at 20.6% (Figure 4). The index of Vietnam for the agricultural group was 25%, for the APEC group 20.6% and ASEAN 18.9%. However, Vietnam did not pay attention to the group of women and did not create very favorable conditions for them to participate in trade. The trade facilitation index for women in Vietnam is 0% while APEC has facilitated women at 4.2% and ASEAN 6.1%.

Vietnam's trade facilitation index for women increased from 0% in 2017 to 44.4% in 2019 as women in Vietnam increasingly owned many large and small domestic enterprises. Vietnamese women are increasingly being equipped more with knowledge and professional skills through a wide range of women empowerment programs. Although the index to facilitate women in both APEC and ASEAN increased over the two years but by 2019, Vietnam outperformed the average level of the two areas.

Vietnam also focused on agricultural facilitation and as a result, the index increased from 25% to 66.7%. In fact, agriculture is Vietnam's key economic sector and therefore was strongly facilitated. For the two regions of APEC and ASEAN, the index for agriculture are also extremely impressive with 54.5% for APEC and 56.7% for ASEAN. However, Vietnam also surpassed the average levels of these two regions in facilitating the agricultural group.

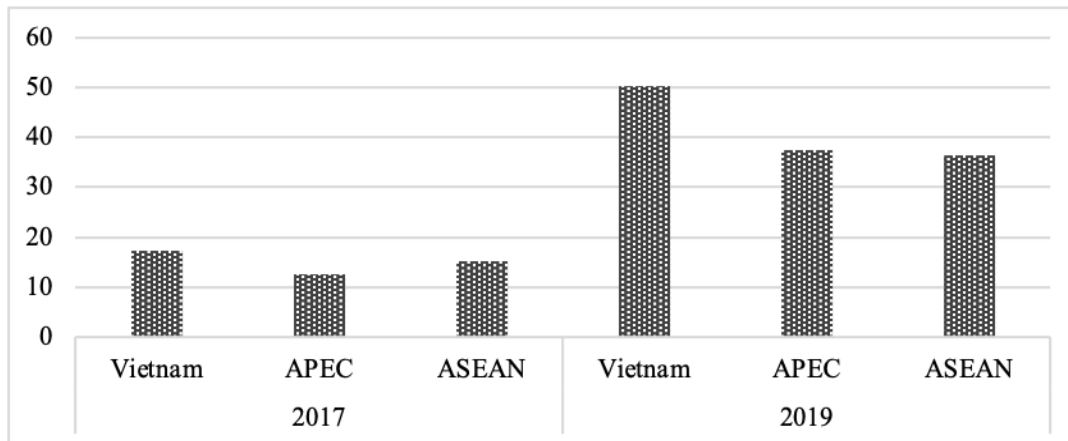


Figure 3: Inclusive trade facilitation index of Vietnam, APEC and Southeast Asia
Source: UNESCAP and ADB (2019) [15].

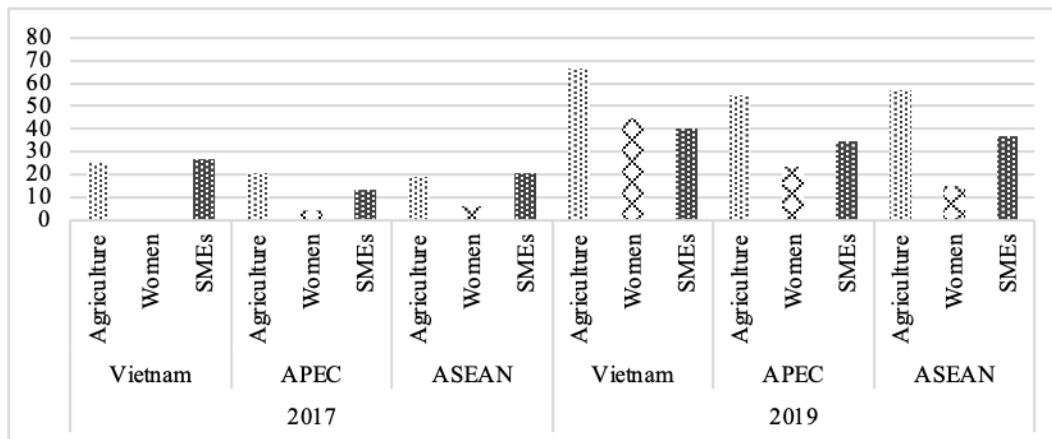


Figure 4: Inclusive trade facilitation index of Vietnam, Asia-Pacific, and Southeast Asia, 2017, 2019 (Unit: %)
Source: UNESCAP and ADB (2019) [15].

4.4. Viet Nam's inclusive trade facilitation by specific measures

(i) SMEs group

SME_1: Vietnam has implemented partially

The Vietnamese government has been actively taking measures to promote trade for SMEs. The government has issued and implemented policies to support SMEs to access finance and credit services, improve capital efficiency, and encourage SMEs to apply new technologies. Besides, the governmental agencies also provide information to support SMEs, promote them to expand markets and build up SMEs assistance systems.

SME_2: Vietnam has implement partially

Vietnam applied the Customs Enterprise Priority Program which has brought about encouraging results in promoting SMEs' trade. The program has contributed to shorten clearance time, cut down trade costs and increase the prestige of SMEs. In conducting a compliance assessment of special priority enterprise standards, customs agencies always took into account the economic constraints of SMEs and other conditions [16]. However, instead of lowering security criteria, the custom agencies should consider the size of the business to provide SMEs with the opportunity to benefit from the Enterprise Priority Program.

SME_3: Vietnam has not done this yet

SME_4: Vietnam has not done this yet

SME_5: Vietnam has implemented partially

Specialized inspections in Vietnam are assessed to involve many ministries, causing significant delays in the clearance of goods, and making importers and exporters waste time and money. The USAID-funded Trade Facilitation project was implemented over a five-year period with the aim of assisting the government of Vietnam in adopting and implementing a risk management approach at customs and specialized inspection, thereby enhancing the implementation of the Trade Facilitation Agreement of the WTO of which Vietnam and the United States are members. This would help Vietnam achieve its development goals while significantly reducing the time and cost of trade for SMEs.

In summary, with activities enabling SMEs to participate in international trade, Vietnam has achieved important results. Policies and procedures among governmental agencies are harmonized, simplified, and coordinated between central and local levels. As a result, SMEs have produced 19-31% of Vietnam's total exports.

However, there are still limitations Vietnam needs to overcome. Policies to support SMEs have not met the requirements and needs of enterprises in the context of increasingly deep international integration. The proportion of SMEs participating in and benefiting from the state's policy is still at a modest level, resources for SMEs development are still fragmented, and the procedures for SMEs to enjoy the state's support policies are inadequate and difficult [16]. In addition, ineffective capital sources make it difficult for SMEs to access new technologies as well as policies to support technological innovation. The national trade support programs only include the promotion, connection support and general information provision.

(ii) For the agricultural sector

AGRI_1: Vietnam has not done this yet

In 2020, Vietnam has been actively changing SPS regulatory information to suit and improve product quality, notably publishing the newspaper "SPS Vietnam Newsletter" No. 1, September 2020.

AGRI_2: Vietnam has implemented partially

Currently, the authorities recognizing the national standards that comply with SPS standards are the Ministry of Industry and Trade, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Ministry of Health and the Vietnam TBT Office. All imported or exported goods must have a safety and hygiene certificate through these agencies, so that food safety will be tightened.

AGRI_3: Vietnam has implemented partially

From April 1, 2020, the procedures for issuing phytosanitary certificates for imported plants and state inspection of food safety of plant origin are carried out on national single window and ASEAN single window, enabling to harmonize and simplify trade procedures, and promotes exports.

AGRI_4: Vietnam has implemented partially

When the border is congested due to overload or congestion, especially during the Covid-19 outbreak, the People's Committees of the border provinces apply measures to give priority to exports of perishable agricultural products.

In summary, the activities to facilitate the participation of the agriculture sector in trade has brought about certain results. The development of agricultural enterprises also plays an important role and contributes a lot in promoting production, boosting exports, creating jobs for rural workers and promoting economic development and social stability.

However, there are still some existing problems. Enterprises meet many difficulties in planning and accessing land for production; and land planning is not stable [16]. Technology investment incentives in agriculture are not strong enough; administrative procedures and business conditions in agriculture are still unreasonable, and policies to support the development of businesses have not been

seriously enforced at a local level. In addition, there is no official testing facilities or laboratories. Furthermore, it is necessary to make adjustments so that SPS no longer accidentally becomes a barrier for agricultural products.

(iii) For the women's group

Vietnam is considered to implement gender equality very well compared with countries with the same level of economic development. The three measures taken when it comes to trade facilitation for women have all changed quite markedly over time. Recognizing the importance of women, Vietnam has tried to facilitate women's participation in trade.

WOMEN_1: Vietnam has implemented partially

In accordance with the labor commitments in the new generation FTAs, the contents of the Labor Code have been revised by the Vietnamese government to ensure compatibility. In particular, Vietnam has revised legislative regulations related to the difference in retirement age between men and women to create more equal treatment in employment, in job opportunities, and fair trade facilitation between these two groups.

WOMEN_2: Vietnam has implemented partially

Vietnam has actively and proactively launched many initiatives to promote the status of women, especially the establishment and development of the ASEAN female entrepreneur network. Vietnam has achieved encouraging ranking indicators in the implementation of the UN's gender equality, ranking third in the ASEAN region and 47th out of 187 countries participating in the ranking. This proves that Vietnam really pays attention to engage women in economic activities, including trade.

WOMEN_3: Vietnam has not implemented this activity yet

Vietnam does not have any female members on the National Trade Facilitation Committee.

In short, with the activities to facilitate women's participation in trade activities, Vietnam has achieved encouraging results. The

2015 Enterprise Census found that women-owned small businesses had an average annual revenue of 0.9% higher than men-owned small businesses. Meanwhile, among medium-sized enterprises, men-owned businesses have an average turnover of 1.2% higher [17]. The percentage of female employees participating in labor export annually accounts for 33-34%. The proportion of female employees in economic sectors and fields with technical requirements and high technology reached 34%. More than 41% of owners of production and business establishments, and more than 20% of business owners are women [17, 18]. To achieve this result, many ministries and local agencies have stepped up the implementation of widespread propaganda among the people about the National Strategy for the Advancement of Vietnamese Women and the National Target Program on jobs, etc.

However, there are also some problems regarding facilitating trade for women in Vietnam. The restriction on women's participation in the economy appears to be higher for ethnic minorities, especially in rural areas where a more traditional division of labor remains detrimental to women. Specifically, women from these groups and regions have less access to productive resources, lower access to health services, education and extension, and less ability to participate in community leadership and decision-making. In addition, female-led enterprises are facing difficulties in accessing capital to participate in trade, but Vietnam has not implemented any measures to support loans for this business.

5. Conclusion and Implications for Vietnam

Based on the United Nations Global Survey on the Facilitation of Digital Trade and Sustainable Trade for the 2 years 2017 and 2019, the paper has analyzed Vietnam's inclusive trade facilitation in comparison with general trade facilitation of Vietnam and with inclusive trade facilitation of APEC and other ASEAN

countries. The paper also analyzes Vietnam's efforts to facilitate inclusive trade by each measure. The results show that Vietnam has done quite well in making trade easier and revising policies more appropriate to the commitments on trade facilitation. Vietnam has also made many efforts to implement group-by-group inclusive trade facilitation. Facilitating the agriculture group in trade activities is given the highest attention by Vietnam, so the level of facilitation for this group is the highest among the three vulnerable groups. SMEs are also paid much attention by Vietnam for facilitation when the level of facilitation has increased over time. From the analysis results, the paper provides a number of implications for Vietnam to promote more strongly inclusive trade facilitation, helping vulnerable groups in society to participate more in trade activities.

- Facilitate SMEs participation in trade

Policies supporting SMEs must be more transparent in terms of the content, object, order, procedures, resources, and level of support. At the same time, to ensure the effectiveness of the support, it is necessary to organize a review and evaluation of the legal aspects that have been done, including the strengths and weaknesses. It is also necessary to strengthen support for businesses and make more policies to promote SMEs to participate in trade activities. It is necessary to prioritize support for SMEs on the basis of realizing immediate and long-term goals, given that such support should be placed in the specific conditions and limited resources context of the national economy.

- Trade facilitation in the agricultural sector

It is of great importance to create a land fund and make stable and transparent plans for agricultural lands. There is a need to research and amend agricultural policies to facilitate the conversion of agricultural land, promote agricultural land accumulation and concentration, and ensure the harmonization of interests of the state, farmers and enterprises. Vietnam's agriculture still has great potential for development, especially the organic and processed products with high added value and

high-tech products. Therefore, in the coming time, the government should promote enterprises to invest in and apply advanced and modern science and technology to agricultural production and business [19]. In particular, it is necessary to promulgate breakthrough policies on science and technology, and encourage technology investment projects in some key fields. At the same time, building and organizing official laboratories and testing facilities for quality control of agricultural products, and promoting large-scale agriculture must be strengthened as well.

- Make it easier for women to participate in trade

First, some of the articles in the employment policy system for female employees should be amended. State management agencies should strengthen cooperation and exchange of international experiences in the formulation and completion of employment policies for female employees, opening up more opportunities for women to study and work to improve their capacity. Business development support for women-owned SMEs should be increased, and more trade access opportunities for women should be created, especially for women in ethnic minority areas. The government should take measures to encourage banks to supplement financial services or related non-financial assistance services for women-owned businesses. Banks can also improve services for female entrepreneurs by simplifying loan application procedures and requirements.

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