

**FROM 'OUTDATED' STUDENT DESKS AND CHAIRS
TO A PUBLIC PROCUREMENT POLICY
FOR WOODEN FURNITURE:
A BREAKTHROUGH OPPORTUNITY TO RESHAPE
THE DOMESTIC WOOD MARKET AND UPGRADE
THE WOOD INDUSTRY VALUE CHAIN**

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CONTENTS

Executive Summary	3
Section 1. 'Outdated' student desks and chairs	4
Section 2. Public procurement policy for wooden furniture: From products of unclear origin and quality to best-value products	6
Section 3. Domestic plantation timber: Part of the solution for public procurement policy	9
Section 4. Public procurement policy prioritizing domestic plantation timber: Reducing dependence on high-risk imported timber	11
Section 5. Public procurement policy: Building a new domestic value chain	12
Section 6. From 'replacing desks and chairs' to a tool for promoting the circular economy	13
Section 7. Conclusion: The urgency of a public procurement policy for wooden furniture	14



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Vietnam is a major global exporter of wooden furniture, with export products currently meeting the strictest market requirements. However, the domestic wood market remains largely unregulated in terms of product quality, legality of input materials, traceability, and mechanisms to monitor the application of product criteria and standards. Taking as a starting point the old and increasingly unsuitable student desks and chairs currently used in public schools, this paper recommends that the Government develop and implement a public procurement policy for wooden furniture, focusing on product quality, health and safety, prioritizing domestically grown plantation timber, and reusing materials at the end of products' useful life. A public procurement policy based on these criteria would not only bring direct benefits to product users but also create opportunities to raise forest growers' incomes and encourage longer rotation, large diameter timber plantations. Such a policy could also drive a breakthrough transformation, reshape the domestic market, lay the foundation for a domestic production ecosystem, and reduce dependence on high-risk imported timber materials. This would directly support export growth and enhance the reputation of Vietnam's wood industry internationally.



Photo 1: At Hiep Thanh High School (Bac Lieu), wooden desks are too low, too small, and severely deteriorated. Source: Tran Thanh Phong / Thanh Nien



1. 'OUTDATED' STUDENT DESKS AND CHAIRS

'Nearly 125,000 students are taller than 1.75 m, yet many desks and chairs have been in use for 20 years...' This information comes from a document issued by the Ministry of Education and Training on 22 August 2026 and cited in the VnExpress article *Students over 1.75 m tall but desks and chairs 'unchanged for 20 years'*, published on 23 August 2026. The article reports that 'many desks and chairs are over 20 years old but have never been repaired or replaced.' At the end of the article, VnExpress conducted an online survey of parents with children in general education schools, asking whether the height of school desks and chairs was suitable for their children. From its launch on 23 August until it closed on 25 August 2026, the survey received 2,200 responses. The results showed:

- 5% of parents said their children had no difficulty with the furniture height;
- Another 5% said the impact on their children was minor;
- Most parents (90%) said the desks and chairs were too low, forcing children to hunch over and sit uncomfortably.

Parents' comments provide further evidence of the situation. One parent said: 'I see many students from grades 6 to 9 sitting at desks and chairs as low as those used in primary school. Many sixthgraders are already very tall now, while this furniture design has been used for 20 years. It is really inappropriate.' Another parent said: 'Everyone has seen this [problem of unsuitable desks and chairs] for years... At home, parents take great care of their children, using antislouch desks and chairs and so on, but at school the furniture does not fit, making all that effort feel wasted!!!' Another parent, who is also a lower secondary teacher, shared: 'When I see the children sitting at such low desks and chairs, I feel both sorry and worried; their backs are almost bent over just to write.' Many parents called for change: 'This issue has gone on for years. We need a farreaching reform [to replace school furniture with appropriate sizes] so that children can sit comfortably every day and protect their health and musculoskeletal development.'

According to the article, the Ministry of Education and Training is coordinating with the Ministry of Science and Technology and the Ministry of Health to revise and supplement standards for school desks and chairs. It has also asked local authorities to classify existing furniture, compile data on students' heights, and calculate how many sets need repair or replacement.

The issue of 'outdated' student furniture arises while Vietnam's exportoriented wood processing industry holds a major position in global furniture supply. In 2025, the industry's export turnover exceeded USD 17 billion, ranking second in Asia and fifth globally. Vietnam exports wooden furniture to more than 100 countries and territories, including demanding markets such as the EU, the United States and Japan. So why, in a country among the world's leading furniture exporters, able to meet the strictest export requirements on quality and origin, are student desks and chairs at home still 'unchanged for 20 years'?



SEPTEMBER 2026

Is it because we reserve 'the finest' for export (to borrow the words of a former Chair of the Vietnam Timber and Forest Product Association) while forgetting the country's future generation?

These questions point to a form of 'discrimination' between wood products made for export and those consumed domestically, including student desks and chairs. They also show that the domestic market remains largely openended in its requirements for product specifications, quality and origin. This does not necessarily mean that all products sold domestically are of poor quality. The State has issued a number of standards for furniture.² However, producers serving the domestic market are not required to apply these standards. There is also no effective mechanism to assess or monitor whether the standards are actually applied to products sold domestically. In other words, the quality and origin of wood products consumed in the domestic market remain largely unregulated.

The Ministry of Education and Training's plan to replace student desks and chairs with more suitable furniture creates a major opportunity for Vietnam's wood industry to supply schools with products that are highquality, traceable and safe for health. Whether this opportunity becomes reality, however, depends on the choices made by the State: What kinds of desks and chairs will be purchased? What wood materials will be used? Which standards will apply? How will price and quality competition be organized, and how will compliance be monitored? A public procurement policy for wooden furniture in general, and school desks and chairs in particular, could create a breakthrough in leading and shaping the future domestic wood market if it prioritizes domestically grown plantation timber, applies appropriate standards, and is implemented under fair competition with transparent information. Such a policy would enable consumers including students, patients and publicsector employees to access highquality wood products that are safe for health. Prioritizing domestically grown plantation timber in public procurement would also help expand plantation areas, improve timber quality, substitute highrisk imported raw materials, create opportunities to increase forest growers' incomes, and strengthen the industry's international reputation.

² For national standards on furniture and other related wood products, see: <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/TCVN/Nong-nghiep/TCVN-12624-1-2019-Do-go-Phan-1-Thuat-ngu-va-dinh-nghia-918677.aspx>



Photo 2: Students place textbooks on the chair and keep schoolbags behind their backs because the desktop is too small. Source: Ha Xuyen / Dan Tri



Photo 3: Grade 4 students at Song Ve Town Primary School (Quang Ngai) 'struggle' with furniture sized for Grade 1 students. Source: Ha Xuyen / Dan Tri



2. PUBLIC PROCUREMENT POLICY FOR WOODEN FURNITURE: FROM PRODUCTS OF UNCLEAR ORIGIN AND QUALITY TO BEST-VALUE PRODUCTS

2.1. Current status of public procurement of wooden furniture

In Vietnam, the State is one of the most important groups of buyers of wooden furniture. Schools, public offices, hospitals, cultural centers and military barracks all require furniture. There are currently no statistics on the annual budget spent on purchasing wooden furniture. However, within the roughly 2030% of total annual budget expenditure allocated to public procurement, spending on furniture is not insignificant.³

A 2019 survey by VCCI and Forest Trends on wood use requirements in public procurement packages reviewed tender documents, request documents and actual quotation requests for wooden furniture. It found that:

- About 77% of procurement packages did not mention timber legality;
- 11% of packages were high risk because they required precious timber. Of these, about 74% of contractors had previously used Group I and Group II precious timber to supply public procurement packages for wood and wood products. Requirements for precious timber were concentrated mainly in desks and chairs for agencies, offices and project offices.

Natural forest timber, including Group I and Group II species, is now mostly imported. This timber is considered high risk in terms of deforestation. The use of public funds to procure furniture made from high risk imported timber was one of the main factors leading to the United States' investigation of Vietnam's wood industry in 2020. In addition, the use of high risk imported timber has raised concerns internationally as countries seek to protect forests and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.⁴ This has directly affected the image of Vietnam's wood industry.

Product price remains the most important criterion in selecting products for public procurement of wooden furniture. Criteria such as quality, fitness for purpose and replaceability are often not the main concern of purchasing units. For student desks and chairs, for example, suppliers competing in tenders may

³ Information in a publication released by the TWO Center and Forest Trends in 2019: <https://trungtamwto.vn/an-pham/13480-bao-cao-nghien-cuu-tinh-hop-phap-cua-san-pham-go-trong-mua-sam-cong-tai-viet-nam--thuc-trang-phap-luat-thuc-tie-n-vu-thach-thuc-trong-thuc-thi-v>.

⁴ In October 2020, the Office of the United States Trade Representative (USTR) launched an investigation under Section 301 of the U.S. Trade Act of 1974 into Vietnam's alleged use of illegally harvested or traded timber and currency practices. Following the investigation, the U.S. and Vietnamese Governments reached an agreement to combat illegal logging and trade in illegal timber. See: <https://trungtamwto.vn/hiep-dinh-khac/18828-viet-nam-va-my-dat-duoc-thoa-thuan-ve-kiem-soat-go-bat-hop-phap>.



SEPTEMBER 2026

compete with one another and offer low prices in the hope that their products will be selected. Yet such lowpriced products may have a number of shortcomings, including:

- Designs and dimensions unsuitable for students;
- Short service life and difficult repair;
- Use of lowquality materials;
- Use of unsuitable or unsafe chemicals.

Although these products may have a low purchase price, the shortcomings above mean that they are not truly 'cheap' in economic terms. Price is only one of the important factors that should be considered when deciding what to buy.

2.2. Key elements of a public procurement policy for wooden furniture

Developing and implementing a public procurement policy for wooden furniture in general, and student desks and chairs in particular, has significant potential to change the structure and operation of the domestic wood market and to determine the quality of products sold in it. The core of such a policy is the establishment of clear procurement standards. For student desks and chairs, quality and technical criteria could include:

- Suitability for students' height and age;
- Ergonomic design;
- Safety;
- Durability;
- Repairability and replaceability;
- Amount of wood used;
- Origin of materials, with priority for domestic plantation timber;
- Formaldehyde and other chemicals at safe levels;
- Product life cycle;
- Reusability and recyclability.

Products that meet these criteria cannot be expected to have a 'cheap' purchase price. The key question, however, is not which product is the cheapest especially when its quality and origin cannot be controlled but which product offers the best value over its entire life cycle. Reusing products and materials after the end of their first use cycle can also promote the circular economy and contribute to sustainable development.



SEPTEMBER 2026

At present, the quality, design and origin of wood products sold in the domestic market receive insufficient attention. A public procurement policy with clear priorities for product quality, origin and safety can play a major role in leading and shaping the market in the future. A policy with clear criteria, transparent implementation and a level competitive playing field would send an important positive signal to the market: domestic demand for wooden furniture is large, and that demand comes with specific product requirements. The market will respond positively to this signal if manufacturers see a good opportunity to participate.



Photo 4: Desks and chairs that meet Ministry of Education and Training standards. Source: Government News



3. DOMESTIC PLANTATION TIMBER: PART OF THE SOLUTION FOR PUBLIC PROCUREMENT POLICY

Vietnam has more than 4 million hectares of production plantations. Around 60% of this area is managed by households, including many ethnic minority households. In many localities, income from plantation timber is important to household livelihoods. Household plantation timber is often regarded as a form of family savings and is harvested to meet major expenses such as building a house, weddings, funerals or children's education.

Timber from household plantations is currently processed into a range of products, including furniture (using largediameter logs), veneer and plywood (mediumdiameter logs), and particleboard, MDF, woodchips and pellets (smalldiameter wood and processing residues). Information from several sources suggests that around 80% of the country's total plantation timber volume is used as input for woodchip production (mainly) and pellets.⁵

Businesses in the wood sector are debating the value that plantation timber brings to the industry. Most plantation timber is currently used to produce woodchips. According to furniture manufacturers that require largediameter logs, the woodchip sector consumes very large volumes of raw material but does not require large logs, encouraging households to harvest plantations early for chips. This, they argue, leaves Vietnam without sufficient largediameter timber for furniture processing. Under this view, exporting woodchips amounts to exporting raw material and does not generate high value for the industry; expansion of the chip sector may also threaten rawmaterial security for furniture manufacturing. Some businesses therefore propose increasing the export tax on woodchips.

Woodchip businesses disagree. They argue that the chip sector provides an essential outlet for household plantation timber. In their view, demand for largediameter timber from furniture manufacturers is currently low, so households that grow larger logs may still struggle to find buyers. They also argue that purchase prices offered for large timber are low and that returns to households from producing large-diameter timber can be lower than returns from growing pulpwood for chips. For these reasons, chip businesses recommend that the State not increase export taxes and instead use nontax measures to encourage households to grow largediameter timber, rather than applying nonmarket mechanisms that force growers to extend rotation periods.

⁵ <https://vneconomy.vn/con-khat-go-lon-lam-kho-cac-doanh-nghiep-che-bien-sau.htm>;
<https://vneconomy.vn/thao-go-diem-nghen-nang-cao-gia-tri-gia-tang-cho-nganh-go.htm>



SEPTEMBER 2026

Demand for publicly procured wooden furniture, including student desks and chairs, is very large. A public procurement policy that prioritizes domestic plantation timber could bring an important change to Vietnam's current plantation timber supply picture: it could encourage households to grow longer rotation, large diameter timber for furniture serving the domestic market, promote deeper processing focused on high value added products, and support the expansion of plantation areas.



Photo 5: Rubber plantation in Dau Tieng, Ho Chi Minh City. Source: Forest Trends



SEPTEMBER 2026

4. PUBLIC PROCUREMENT POLICY PRIORITIZING DOMESTIC PLANTATION TIMBER: REDUCING DEPENDENCE ON HIGH-RISK IMPORTED TIMBER

A public procurement policy that prioritizes domestic plantation timber and meets the criteria set out in Section 2 would not only support the development of domestic plantation resources; it would also directly reduce the volume of highrisk imported timber, lower the risk of investigations by export market partners, and strengthen the international image of Vietnam's wood industry.

On average, Vietnam imports around 2 million m3 of raw natural timber each year, harvested from tropical countries. This timber is considered to carry a risk of deforestation. Most of these imports currently enter traditional woodcraft villages to produce furniture such as tables, chairs, beds and cabinets; some is used in construction for stairs, flooring, door frames, churches, communal houses and pagodas. Almost all of this highrisk imported timber is consumed in the domestic market.

A public procurement policy that encourages the use of domestic plantation timber, assures product quality, helps protect the environment and promotes sustainability has the potential to lead and reshape the domestic market. A pioneering policy would send a strong signal to consumers and help shift purchasing habits from products made of natural forest timber toward products made from plantation timber. This shift could occur particularly quickly among younger consumers. In other words, the policy's impact could extend far beyond products purchased through public procurement: it could generate breakthrough changes in the domestic market, reduce demand for highrisk imported timber, improve market transparency and enhance the reputation of Vietnam's wood industry.



Photo 6: Imported timber from high-risk sources. Source: Forest Trends



5. PUBLIC PROCUREMENT POLICY: BUILDING A NEW DOMESTIC VALUE CHAIN

Many export-oriented wood processors say they are ready to enter the domestic market if it offers good opportunities. A public procurement policy that sends a clear market signal could help create a new domestic value chain, beginning with household plantation timber and ending with finished products and related aftersales services, along the following sequence:

Forest growers -> specialized timber traders -> sawmilling/kiln-drying facilities -> secondary wood processors -> designers -> furniture manufacturers -> logistics -> installation -> maintenance -> repair -> recycling.

If procurement is sufficiently large-scale and the policy is stable, businesses will have incentives to:

- Invest in machinery;
- Design new products;
- Build production lines;
- Train an appropriate workforce;
- Sign long-term contracts with forest owners to establish stable timber supply areas.

Public procurement could therefore become a lever for building a new value chain rather than simply a budget expenditure used to buy wooden furniture.

In addition, a public procurement policy with clear product criteria and long-term demand would encourage businesses to design solutions that respond to real needs. For student desks and chairs, for example, the policy might state: 'Over the next 510 years, Vietnam needs a school furniture system suitable for different student height groups, safe, durable, repairable, and using domestic plantation timber to the greatest extent possible.' This would not merely be a government requirement for a furniture procurement package; it would be an innovation challenge for businesses participating in the market. Vietnam's wood enterprises are fully capable of helping the State solve this challenge.



Photo 7: Production and product-finishing activities at a wood-processing factory. Source: NEM Company



6. FROM 'REPLACING DESKS AND CHAIRS' TO A TOOL FOR PROMOTING THE CIRCULAR ECONOMY

If the State continues buying new desks and chairs in the same way as before, without specific requirements and criteria for product quality, product origin or input materials, then after some time Vietnam will face exactly the same problem it faces today: products with unclear legality, poor quality and poor fit with users' needs. In other words, the absence of a public procurement policy with specific priorities would reinforce today's mistakes and begin a new cycle of waste.

A public procurement policy for wooden furniture, with a focus on student desks and chairs, is therefore urgently needed. The policy should include the following features:

- Designed for students' height, with adjustable height;
- Durable;
- Easy to repair;
- Replaceable parts;
- Easy to disassemble and reassemble;
- Reusable.

Products designed for reuse would also promote a circular economy in the wood sector.

A public procurement policy that considers product life cycles and recycling would create a foundation for encouraging participating businesses to innovate and invest in design, research and development, warranties, maintenance, and the takeback and reuse of materials at the end of a product's life.



Photo 8: Current desk and chair dimensions are 'outdated' relative to students' height. Source: Huy Dat / Thanh Nien



7. CONCLUSION: THE URGENCY OF A PUBLIC PROCUREMENT POLICY FOR WOODEN FURNITURE

This paper discusses the need and urgency for a public procurement policy for wooden furniture, focusing on student desks and chairs. It was developed in the context of schools continuing to use student furniture that is outdated and unsuitable. This situation creates a potentially breakthrough opportunity for woodsector businesses to enter the domestic market and produce products with traceable origin, appropriate quality and designs that meet users' needs. A public procurement policy with clear criteria could not only improve products purchased through public procurement in terms of quality, health and safety, traceability and sustainability; it could also generate breakthrough transformations in the domestic market by leading and shaping the market and changing purchasing habits and behavior. To achieve this, the policy should ensure that products are fit for purpose; product quality is assured; input wood materials are sustainable and traceable, with priority for legally sourced domestic plantation timber, especially sustainably certified timber; and wholelife value is considered together with related services such as repair, warranty, maintenance and endoflife treatment.

By issuing and implementing such a public procurement policy, the State would play a particularly important role in leading the market. Its role would shift from being 'a buyer of desks and chairs' to being 'a buyer of school furniture solutions.' This role would extend across the entire product life cycle. Businesses, in turn, would be responsible for design, production, installation, warranty, maintenance and endoflife product takeback.

A public procurement policy that meets the criteria above would directly contribute to protecting health and supporting the development of consumers, including students; improving the educational environment; increasing the efficiency of budget use; raising forest growers' incomes; and reducing risks associated with imported timber. It would also directly promote the circular economy and sustainable development in the future.



Photo 9: Rubber nursery in Dau Tieng, Ho Chi Minh City. Source: Forest Trends



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