

AN OVERVIEW OF THE CURRENT SOCIO-CULTURAL LIFE IN THE RURAL AREA OF VIETNAM

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Abstract: Over the 25 years of Doi Moi, despite the significant achievement in economic growth, the material and spiritual life of rural residents in Vietnam remains disproportionately poor. These have resulted in many critical social problems. The paper serves as an assessment of the five-year implementation of the Party's Resolution No.26 to configure the cultural and social portrait of rural Vietnam nowadays.

The study results revealed not only a tendency of rapid poverty alleviations, but also indicated income improvement and better standards of living of rural people. Level of expenditure has increased for all social strata; the amount of expenses has been found greater for many households. Social positivity of rural residents has also been observed through their participation in political social organizations and voluntary associations which provided a network of support and protection for the people themselves. This has put forward new policy requirements to develop rural culture towards advancement, modernity and national rich identity.

Key words: poverty reduction, expenditure, social networks, social security, culture, education.

After more than 20 years of reform, agriculture, peasantry and rural area of Vietnam have witnessed all-round changes and achievements. Agricultural production has been rapidly growing and developing into a commodity sector. Material and spiritual life in most rural areas has been increasingly improved with significant achievements in hunger eradication and poverty reduction. The rural political system has been strengthened while political security and social order and safety have been closely maintained. However, these

achievements have not yet to match the potentials and advantages of the country in general and the rural area in particular. Agricultural development is unsustainable while material and spiritual life among rural residents remains low, resulting in more pressing social problems.

The Resolution of the seventh Plenum of the 10th Central Party Committee on agriculture, peasantry and rural area

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(Resolution 26-NQ/TW issued on August 5th 2008) identifies tasks to resolve the situation. This paper summarizes the results of the studies in assessing the 5-year implementation of Resolution 26, mainly related to rural socio-cultural issues. The paper is based on the analysis contrasting the main contents outlined in Resolution 26-NQ/TW and the reality in order to provide an overall picture of the socio-cultural life of Vietnam rural area today.

Data analysis, field studies and reports were conducted by a group of researchers from the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences in two months, in September and October 2013. Data for analysis include data from the *Vietnam Household Living Standards Survey* conducted in 2008 and 2010 (VHLSS 2008 and 2010) and the results from the Quick Assessment of Rural Area conducted by the research team in 4 communes of 2 provinces, 1 in the Red River Delta (Nam Dinh province) and the others in the Mekong Delta (Tien Giang province)⁽¹⁾.

1. Poverty reduction

In recent years, Vietnam has made impressive achievements in poverty reduction. According to the government poverty standards for 2011-2015, the average poverty rate in 2010 stood at 14.2%, of which urban area accounts for 6.9% and 17.4% in the rural area. The highest poverty rates are found in northern midlands and mountainous areas, followed by the Central Highlands and the northern and coastal

central Vietnam. The lowest rates are found among South Eastern provinces. In 2010, 26.7% of the poor households nationwide benefited from poverty reduction policies, increasing by 24.6% compared with 2009, of which 68.1% of the minority ethnic households and 60.3% of the poorest group benefited from the policies. The increase in the population benefiting from the policies in one year, from 2009 to 2010, shows that the coverage of poverty reduction projects/policies is expanding (General Statistics

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Office, 2011)⁽²⁾.

Table 1 shows the poverty rates over the years under the government poverty standards (proposed by the Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs and approved by the Government). Accordingly, under the poverty standards of the General Statistics

Office and the World Bank, the poverty rate in 2010 stood at 20.7% (of which, the urban areas accounted for 6.0% and 27.0% in rural areas), and the rate of the population living in extreme poverty was 8% (World Bank, 2012: iv, v, 64).

Table 1: Poor Household Percentage among Rural, Urban Areas and 6 Socio-economic Regions (2004-2012)

Unit: (%)

	2004	2006	2008	2010	2010*	2011	2012
Nationwide:	18.1	15.5	13.4	10.7	14.2	12.6	11.1
Urban area	8.6	7.7	6.7	5.1	6.9	5.1	3.9
Rural area	21.2	18.0	16.1	13.2	17.4	15.9	14.4
6 socio-economic regions:							
Red River Delta	12.7	10.0	8.6	6.4	8.3	7.1	6.1
Northern Midlands and Mountainous Areas	29.4	27.5	25.1	22.5	29.4	26.7	24.2
Northern Central Vietnam and Coastal Central Vietnam	25.3	22.2	19.2	16.0	20.4	18.5	16.7
Central Highlands	29.2	24.0	21.0	17.1	22.2	20.3	18.6
South Eastern Region	4.6	3.1	2.5	1.3	2.3	1.7	1.4
Mekong Delta	15.3	13.0	11.4	8.9	12.6	11.6	10.6

Source: - General Statistics Office (2011: 21).

* Note: In 2010, poor household percentage has been calculated under the poverty standards for 2011-2015 issued by the Government.

- General Statistics Office (2012, 2013: Charts 134, 157)

Under any standards, the poverty rate of Vietnam has declined over the years with the rate in the rural area dropping faster than in urban area, and the areas with high poverty rate decreasing more rapidly than the others (the midlands and northern mountainous areas, the Northern Central Vietnam and the Coastal Central Vietnam and the Central Highlands). In Vietnam,

poverty among ethnic minority groups remains a challenge as these groups make up less

⁽²⁾ The poor household rate was measured based on data concerning monthly income per capita in the household living standards survey for the period 2006-2010 (VND 200,000/person/month in rural areas and VND 260,000/person/month in urban areas). From 2010 to 2015, the rate has been measured in accordance with the government new poverty standard for the period 2011-2015 which stands at VND 400,000/person/month for rural areas and VND 500,000/person/month in urban areas.

than 15% of the total population while constituting 47% of the poor in 2010 (compared with 29% in 1998). Poverty and inequality among regions have also been increasing (World Bank, 2012).

2. Income, expenditure and social networks

2.1. Income

In 2010, the national average income was 1.4 million, increasing by 39.4% compared to 2008. From 2008 to 2010, the average income increased by 18.1% annually. The average net income (after CPI was taken into consideration) in the period from

2008 to 2010 increased by 9.3% per year, higher than that of the period 2006-2008 (8.4%) (General Statistics Office, 2011).

The analysis also shows that the income of rural residents increased among both peasant groups and other social classes (52.8% and 46.3% respectively). When analyzed further among subgroups, the situation stays the same with the increasing income of both the poor and rich resident groups as well as male and female groups (43.7% VS 48.5% and 46.1% VS 46.5% respectively).

Table 2: Rural Resident Income

Unit: 1,000 VND/person/month

Groups	2008	2010	Increase (%)	Difference (times)	
				2008	2010
<i>5 rural expenditure quintiles</i>				4.7	4.8
Quintile 1 (the lowest)	325	467	43.7		
Quintile 2	499	710	42.3		
Quintile 3	653	941	44.1		
Quintile 4	939	1303	38.8		
Quintile 5 (the highest)	1519	2255	48.5		
<i>2 groups of provinces</i>				1.6	1.7
6 poorest provinces	516	738	43.0		
Other provinces	844	1236	46.4		
<i>2 rural social classes:</i>				1.4	1.5
Peasants	739	1081	46.3		
The others	1031	1575	52.8		

Source: Data Analysis from the Vietnam Household Living Standard Survey 2008, 2010 (Conducted with 9,000 Households on Income and Spending. Current Consumer Prices Applied).

A survey by the Central Economic Management Institute and Institute of Policy and Strategy for Agriculture and

Rural Development in 2012 found that the average net income of rural households in 12 provinces was VND 84.7 million

household, of which income from wages makes up 26.6 million (31.4%). Quick Agricultural Assessment data in Nam Dinh and Tien Giang provinces (2013) also show an increase in rural resident income. It should be emphasized that the average income gap per household member per month between rural and urban areas has been decreasing.

The increase in income of households in 2010 was made possible primarily thanks to the increase from the construction salary or wages and self-employment while there have been more commercial activities going on in rural areas. This fact shows the

importance of the non-agricultural sector and commercial activities in the current rural economy.

2.2. Expenditure

Rural resident expenditure also witnessed significant increase during the period. Expenditure of the poorest quintile increased by 33.7% while that of the richest quintile increased by 56.9%. From another look, expenditure in the rural population of the six poorest provinces increased by 63.3%, while in the other provinces, it was 52.2%. In terms of social classes, peasants spending increased by 48.5% while that of the other social classes stood at 59.5%.

Table 3: Rural Resident Expenditure

Unit: 1,000 VND/person/ month

Groups	2008	2010	Increase (%)	Difference (times)	
				2008	2010
<i>5 rural expenditure quintiles</i>				4.2	5.0
Quintile 1 (the lowest)	270	361	33.7		
Quintile 2	409	578	41.3		
Quintile 3	517	772	49.3		
Quintile 4	680	1048	54.1		
Quintile 5 (the highest)	1146	1798	56.9		
<i>2 groups of provinces</i>				1.4	1.3
6 poorest provinces	463	756	63.3		
Other provinces	639	973	52.3		
<i>2 rural social classes:</i>				1.3	1.4
Peasants	569	845	48.5		
The others	740	1180	59.5		

Source: Data Analysis from the Vietnam Household Living Standard Survey 2008, 2010 (Conducted with approx. 9,000 Households on Income and Spending. Current Consumer Prices Applied).

Rural economy and rural society have shifted to a different structure, shown in the significant changes from “barter” to cash use: *“It’s a kind of half-rural and half-urban spending that is practiced now in rural areas. Rural residents now also have to pay water and electricity bills like city dwellers”* (Male, 49 years old, Tan My Chanh Commune, 2013). Cash has now become a “problem” in rural life. *“In nowhere can we find anyone in hunger now; what we are short of is cash!”* (Female, 52 years old, Hai Van Commune, 2013).

Saving in rural areas has also increased, both in the poorest and the better-off quintiles. Moreover, deeper analysis on household’s expenditures shows an uneven progress among areas and social groups. While the 6 poorest provinces experienced negative saving rate, the other provinces enjoyed positive saving increase from 2008 to 2010⁽³⁾.

2.3. Social networks

A good number of studies on Vietnam rural society yield the findings converging in one fact that there has been the enhancement in peasant social networks associated with the development of rural economy after *Doi moi* (renovation) (Hy Van Luong, 1994; Kervliet, 2000)⁽⁴⁾. These social networks include socio-political, social, and voluntary organizations.

To a certain extent, these socio-political organizations formed a social “safety net” in rural life. Data from the Quick Assessment (2013) show a positive picture of the relationship between authority

officials and people. People often turn to local officials when they need help:

People here always turn to the authority when in need. Once, a family with a seriously-ill person woke me up at midnight to call the medical staff. Or another example is when the father of a newcomer family died. Not knowing what to do, the young son and daughter-in-law called us (Commune People’s Committee). The authority then took over everything, from finding a place in the burying-ground to the funeral organization. (Male, 53 years old, Tan My Chanh Commune Official, 2013).

Loosely-united communities in the south could also be one of the reasons why local officials are considered reliable for people to turn to when in difficulty. *“When in trouble, we usually seek help from the village chief and village party secretary... The village also operates people’s self-managing group that can help. If they find it hard to solve the problem, they’ll to report to their superiors. Our relatives are not so nearby.”*(Male, 59 years old, Tan My Chanh Commune, 2013).

Meanwhile, the social and voluntary

⁽³⁾ Data from Vietnam Household Living Standards Survey 2008, 2010 (samples surveyed on income and expenditure).

⁽⁴⁾ The expenditure for “socializing activities” in data from Vietnam Household Living Standards Survey is actually the “investment” in the maintenance and development of contacts and social networks. The expenditure includes spending on funerals, weddings, anniversaries, celebrations, gifts, donation, group activities, etc. Our findings show that the expenditure accounts for a significant proportion of the household budget, no less than spending on the two essential needs of healthcare and education.

organizations constitute a different kind of social network⁽⁵⁾. Most of these organizations are set up under the decisions of the commune government. The members of these organizations themselves want to be closely managed by local government! In general, social contact is limited within the village while it is rather rare for people to maintain social contact at and outside the commune boundary.

Friend, relative and neighbor networks constitute the most important source of information for agricultural production, followed by the loud hailer system and agriculture extension centers (CIEM, 2013). People living in rural areas receive assistance from friends, neighbors more often than the urban population (16.7% compared to 8.9%). The rural population also has more access to information concerning vocational training through friends, neighbors than urban residents, with 18.1% compared to 12.8%⁽⁶⁾ (Bui Quang Dung, 2012). At the communes where the Quick Assessment was conducted, associations, groups, voluntary organizations make up local social networks, regularly hold meetings and often visit each other: *"People spend so much time visiting each other therefore that salary is not enough for going to the funerals, anniversaries, weddings, birthdays. Every organization and business in the commune invites people when holding an event."* (Male, 56 years old, Than Cuu Nghia Commune Official, 2013).

3. Social security

3.1. Housing and water supply

The rate of hovels in rural areas has decreased from 15.9% (2008) to 7.3% (2010). However, the rate is still high. The poor and near-poor households living in hovels account for 16.8% and 11.2% respectively. The rates of midlands and northern mountainous areas, Mekong Delta, and ethnic minority household groups are 11.2%, 19.3%, and 14.0% while 9.0% of the whole peasants live in temporary living places⁽⁷⁾.

Data gained from Vietnam Household Living Standard Survey conducted in 2008-2010 show that about 80% of the rural population now have access to clean water. This rate, however, decreased from 2008 to 2010. People having access to clean water stood at 84.2% in 2008, but fell to 81.5% in 2010. In 2012, better situation was noticed when 84.0% of the households using clean water (CIEM, 2013: 25). The Quick Assessment over rural area in Tien Giang province (2013) also confirmed that situation. A report by Tien Giang Department of

⁽⁵⁾ Social and voluntary organizations at commune level include Association of Victims of Orange Agent, Former Youth Volunteer Association, Lawyer Club, Fishery Association, Bonsai Club, Comrade-in-Arms Club, Veteran Association, Student Association, Areca Drying Guild, Gardener Club, Pet Club, Green Bamboo Club, Fellow-countrymen Club, etc. (Data from interviews conducted in Than Cuu Nghia, Tan My Chanh, Hai Van and Hai Duong communes, 2013).

⁽⁶⁾ Data gained from the survey over 1,000 households in Tien Giang and Ha Nam provinces conducted by the Institute of Sociology in 2012 under the Ministerial-level Scientific Study 2010-2012.

⁽⁷⁾ Data from Vietnam Household Living Standards Survey 2008, 2010 (samples surveyed on income and expenditure).

Agriculture and Rural Development estimated that by the end of the first 6 months of 2013, about 88.2% of the province's rural population use clean water (100% of the target set for 2013, up by 9.4% compared to 2008, 3.2% ahead of the national action program for the period 2012-2015).

3.2. Healthcare and health insurance

Healthcare Spending

According to Vietnam Household Living Standards Survey conducted in the period 2008-2010, the average monthly healthcare

spending in 2010 was approximately VND 63,000 per person, accounting for 5.4% of the total household spending. These expenses increased from 2008 to 2010 nationwide. At the same time, the gap in average healthcare spending per person/month decreased gradually between rural and urban areas, from 1.7 times in 2008 to 1.4 times in 2010. The gap between the 6 poorest provinces and the other provinces also lowered from 1.7 times in 2008 to 1.5 times (2010).

Table 4: Healthcare Spending in Rural Areas

Unit: 1,000VND/ person/month

Groups	2008	2010	Increase (%)	Difference (times)	
				2008	2010
<i>5 rural expenditure quintiles</i>				7.8	9.0
Quintile 1 (the lowest)	10.9	13.4	22.9		
Quintile 2	19.7	26.5	34.5		
Quintile 3	28.1	41.8	48.8		
Quintile 4	40.6	64.4	58.6		
Quintile 5 (the highest)	85.0	120.8	42.1		
<i>2 groups of provinces</i>				1.7	1.5
6 poorest provinces	23.6	39.8	68.6		
Other provinces	39.9	58.2	45.9		
<i>2 rural social classes:</i>				1.3	1.1
Peasants	32.1	52.1	62.3		
The others	42.5	57.0	34.1		

Source: Data Analysis from the Vietnam Household Living Standard Survey 2008, 2010 (Conducted with approx. 9,000 Households on Income and Spending. Current Consumer Prices Applied).

When subgroups are taken into consideration, the gap in healthcare spending between the rich and the poor households was 7.8 times

in 2008 and increased to 9.0 times in 2010. From 2008 to 2010, the number of people having sufficient money to pay for each

hospital visit or treatment increased and vice versa. And it is also more affordable for urban residents to pay medical expenses than those in rural areas⁽⁸⁾.

Health Insurance

From 2008 to 2010, the percentage of health insurance card holders increased nationwide, both in rural and urban areas. However, few people made use of the cards. Among the poor, the ethnic minority and disadvantaged groups, the card use is even lower than in other areas⁽⁹⁾. The difference between the increasing number of card holders and those who use the cards may suggest the low effectiveness of the health insurance cards.

Data from the Quick Assessment of rural areas point to the fact that the health insurance card holder rate in two communes of Hai Duong and Hai Van (Nam Dinh province) is 45%⁽¹⁰⁾, primarily among public sector employees (commune officials, teachers, medical staff), students and families with members contracting chronic diseases. In Tien Giang, by the end of 2012, the percentage of health insurance participants stood at 55.6 % (Tien Giang Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2013). It is the common knowledge that health insurance card holders may be discriminated when using the cards for medical practice and treatment. Respondents in interviews converged to one response to this problem. That is when in emergency, health insurance card holders are often left waiting for longer while those without insurance are immediately examined

and treated. Due to that fact, the “common strategy” when going to hospital is to pay in advance and the cards are used only after the medical practice has finished. At present, health insurance costs a person 527,400 VND per year. However, surveys conducted in rural communities have turned the result that people proposed the fee of approximately 400,000 VND per person per year so as to attract more people participating in health insurance. The issuance of more than one health insurance cards for the same beneficiary is also a waste of state and individual budget.

I myself alone hold 3 health insurance cards. Being a wounded soldier, I receive one card for free. As a member of the People's Council, I hold the second one also for free. The third one is compulsory for being a commune official. And I have to pay for the third one. How come do I need to hold so many cards, for I even do not use a single one among all the three. (Male, 53 years old, Tan My Chanh Commune Official, 2013).

Commune Health Stations

Almost every rural commune has a

⁽⁸⁾ Data from Vietnam Household Living Standards Survey 2008, 2010 (samples surveyed on income and expenditure).

⁽⁹⁾ Data from Vietnam Household Living Standards Survey 2008, 2010 (samples surveyed on income and expenditure).

⁽¹⁰⁾ One of the criteria to achieve the title new rural commune is that the rate of health insurance participants must be 70% or higher. Hai Duong and Hai Van communes are those with low percentage of health insurance participants; and the average percentage for the whole Nam Dinh province was 51.3%.

health station (up to 99.0% of all the communes), including communes in the remote areas and areas in need. The percentage of commune health stations meeting national standards is quite high and increased rapidly after 2 years, from 55.9% in 2008 to 71.8% in 2010. However, in another notable respect, the rate of commune whose people in need of healthcare service but refuse to resort to commune clinics is also high, up to 65.4% in 2008 and 63.9% in 2010⁽¹¹⁾.

The answers for the reason why people do not use commune clinics fall into four groups: i) the medical staff has not yet to be qualified, ii) the medical facilities and medication are not so good and unavailable, iii) private services are more convenient, and iv) commune clinics are not as convenient as other state services. The difficulties of commune clinics at present (2010) are mainly the “lack of facilities” (68.9%), and the “lack of medical staff” (10.8%)⁽¹²⁾.

4. Culture and education

4.1. Cultural and educational infrastructure in rural areas

Statistics show that investment projects in culture and education increased in all communes and regions from 2008 to 2010 (General Statistics Office, 2011). The percentage of commune with cultural post offices and radio stations is quite high (80-90% of the communes). The rate of communes with communal cultural houses is lower, but also up to 40-50 % of the communes. Socio-cultural infrastructure increased in all communes, but less in the

areas in difficulties. In the northern mountainous communes, the rates of radio-station-equipped communes in 2008 and 2010 were 43.6% and 50.8% respectively. In the Central Highlands, the rate of the communes equipped with communal cultural houses decreased from 37.0% in 2008 to 33.1% in 2010. In Mekong Delta, the rates were only 30.3% and 39.1% in 2008 and 2010 respectively, lower than the northern mountainous areas and only higher than the Central Highlands.

There is a significant difference between the rich and the poor household quintiles in spending on cultural, sports, entertainment and socializing activities. Our data suggest that the richest households spent on these activities 53.6 times higher than the poorest households⁽¹³⁾. Additionally, the noticeable trend in this period (2008-2010) is that there was an increase in spending on cultural, sports and recreation activities nationwide as well as in subgroups.

⁽¹¹⁾ *Data from Vietnam Household Living Standards Survey 2008, 2010* (samples surveyed on income and expenditure).

⁽¹²⁾ *Data from Vietnam Household Living Standards Survey 2008, 2010* (samples surveyed on income and expenditure).

⁽¹³⁾ According to the General Statistics Office, in 2010 “spending of the richest quintile on commodities and services excluding food was 7.4 times greater than that of the poorest quintile, of which spending on housing, electricity and water supply and sanitation was 10.9 times as much as that of the poor quintile, 5.8 times for the spending on household appliances, 3.6 times for healthcare expenses, 12.5times for travel and postal costs, 5.6 times for education, and 132 times for cultural, sports and leisure activities.” (General Statistics Office, 2011: 16).

Table 5: Spending on Cultural, Sports, Entertainment (CSEA) and Socializing (SL) Activities among Subgroups*Unit: 1,000 VND/ person/ month*

Groups	2008		2010		Difference (times)			
	CSEA	SL	CSEA	SL	2008		2010	
					CSEA	SL	CSEA	SL
<i>5 rural expenditure quintiles</i>					44.9	12.2	53.6	7.5
Quintile 1 (the lowest)	0.3	13.4	0.4	14.8				
Quintile 2	0.9	28.3	0.9	31.2				
Quintile 3	1.3	43.2	1.8	45.7				
Quintile 4	2.9	69.1	5.0	66.0				
Quintile 5 (the highest)	13.8	163.4	18.8	110.4				
<i>2 groups of provinces</i>					2.0	1.8	2.4	1.6
6 poorest provinces	2.1	39.2	2.6	37.0				
Other provinces	4.3	69.2	6.2	58.6				
<i>2 rural social classes:</i>					2.5	1.3	2.0	1.3
Peasants	2.6	64.7	4.2	52.9				
The others	6.4	82.5	8.4	70.6				

Source: Data Analysis from Vietnam Household Living Standards Survey 2008, 2010
(Conducted with 9,000 Households on Income and Spending).

Spending on telephones in rural areas and nationwide rapidly increased from 2008 to 2010 with the higher rate in rural areas (5 times in rural areas compared to 3.1 times in urban areas). The difference has narrowed the spending gap between the urban and rural areas from 4.3 times in 2008 to 2.5 times in 2010. Also, the rich-poor household gap declined⁽¹⁴⁾.

4.2. “Unity for building a new lifestyle of culture”

On summarizing the results from the campaign “Unity for Building a New Lifestyle of Culture” in residential areas,

⁽¹⁴⁾ *Data from Vietnam Household Living Standards Survey 2008, 2010* (samples surveyed on income and expenditure).

Additional data concerning the spending on books or comics for kids show families investment for future. An average urban household owns over 2 times more books than that in rural areas (4.8 vs 2.3 books per household) while the rich households own more than 5 times more books than poor households (4.2 compared with 0.8 book).

Tien Giang Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (2013) informed that 95.4% of the households in the province meet the standards of “the family of culture”; 90.8% village and residential areas were recognized as neighborhoods of culture; and 37.9% of communes, wards or townlets were recognized as communes, wards or townlets of culture. In 2 communes of Hai Van and Hai Duong (Nam Dinh), according to data from the Quick Assessment, by the end of 2012, about 80% of the households met the standards of the family of culture. All villages operate communal cultural houses to meet people’s demand for observing cultural and recreation activities.

The construction of the communal cultural houses is one of the criteria to be recognized as the village of culture and also one criterion in the national set of criteria for the new rural areas. A national-standard communal cultural house normally costs somewhere between 400 and 500 million VND. The fund will be allocated to the commune if it is recognized to be the village of culture. The original purpose of the communal cultural house is to meet the need for recreation activities of local people. However, in practice, the house has become the place for village agencies, organizations and associations to hold meetings, serving as the assistance for the village authority, which is known as the

“Village Office” in many localities.

The drafting of new village conventions in localities is one of the State’s efforts to build a new lifestyle of culture in local communities. Village convention is understood as a system of local regulations related to the code of conduct, prohibitions and encouragement in building a civilized lifestyle, families of culture, preserving traditions, and maintaining security and order in the localities, etc. Basically, the State assigned localities to pro-actively build conventions according to adopted contents⁽¹⁵⁾. To uniform the specifications and contents of conventions, convention forms are usually sent to localities, serving as the basis for the drafting. A convention, once expected to show the typical characteristics of a village, has now become an administrative document and lacks its identity (Bui Quang Dung et. al., 2011).

Village leaders together with commune officials, steering committee members and some village representatives are responsible for building the convention, usually based on a ready form. When completed, the

⁽¹⁵⁾ The contents of the village convention must be “discussed by the local people, voted at a voter or household meeting of the village, and approved by the district People’s Committee to ensure that the contents of the convention are consistent with the provisions of existing laws, without heavy penalties, fees and charges that may harm or affect legitimate rights and interests of citizens” (Article 2, Directive 24/1998-CT-TTg).

convention is to be approved and stamped by the commune authority before being hung at the communal cultural house. The administrative procedure in the drafting of the conventions makes them all the same, both in form and contents. This may be the reason why local people are somewhat indifferent to the conventions. One of the villagers admitted: “[I] see that the head of each neighborhood also hands out a copy of cultural regulations to each household, but hardly anyone reads it, because of their very high independence. Even if I violate the regulation, no one reminds me.” (Male, 33 years old, Well-off household, Than Cuu Nghia Commune, 2013). Therefore, building a new lifestyle of culture has really become an issue in rural areas.

Now, there’s no need for the authority to worry about economic life of the people because there are hardly any households in hunger. The biggest matter of concern at localities is the socio-cultural issues. There

should be more attention paid to the preservation of national traditions and cultural identity. I don’t know whether younger generations can preserve the traditions of their parents and ancestors or not? (Male, 46 years old, Than Cuu Nghia Commune Official, 2013).

4.3. Education in rural areas

Spending on Education and Training

The absolute value of spending on education has increased over the years in rural as well as urban areas. The increase in these expenses was distributed evenly in all the five expenditure quintiles, of which the poorest quintile spending increased by 11.1% and that of the wealthy quintile by 54.7%. In 6 poorest provinces, the expenditure increased by 39.3% while in the other provinces spending on education increased by up to 53.1%. Compared with the other social classes, the peasant group spending on education is only 1.7 percentage points lower (54.2% to 55.9%).

Table 6: Monthly Average Spending on Education and Training/ Person (2002-2010)

Unit: 1,000 VND (Current Consumer Prices)

	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010
Nationwide	17	23	30	43	68
Urban Areas	33	43	50	75	120
Rural Areas	11	16	22	31	46
<i>Difference (times)</i>	<i>3.0</i>	<i>2.7</i>	<i>2.3</i>	<i>2.4</i>	<i>2.6</i>

Source: General Statistics Office, 2011: 299.

Most of the population of 15 years old upwards in rural areas hold high-school diploma and lower. However, when comparing data of 2008 and 2010, the percentage of the population holding secondary diploma or lower was decreasing and the number of college and university degree holders was increasing. Especially, the poor peasant quintile enjoyed an increase in low qualifications (from 42.6% in 2008 to 46.4% in 2010) while the rich peasant quintile witnessed the reduction in low qualifications (from 14.1% in 2008 to 12.1% in 2010)⁽¹⁶⁾.

According to the data from Vietnam Household Living Standards Survey in 2008, 2010, the percentage of communes with dropout students (or not attending school) was highest at secondary level (66.1% in 2007 and 63.3 % in 2009). The rate decreased at high school level (58.1% in 2007 and 57.0% in 2009). In remote areas this rate was even higher. Among the regions, the Red River Delta enjoyed the lowest dropout rate, but also ranging around 30-40 % of the communes. The Central Highlands and the Mekong Delta are the two regions with the highest rate of communes with dropout students (or students not attending school) (approximately 70-90% of the communes), even at primary level. Meanwhile, the other regions experienced much lower rates at primary level (about 30-40% of the communes).⁽¹⁷⁾

The most noticeable groups of major obstacles to all 3 education levels in rural communes include: i) poverty, ii) insufficient necessary facilities, and iii) limited budget. In addition, another two groups of difficulties include: i) teachers' low living standard, and ii) the low quality of teachers.

5. Conclusion

Poverty has significantly been reduced in Vietnam, even when surveyed under different standards and approaches. Achievements in poverty reduction show the efforts to reach the targets (towards 2010) outlined in Resolution 26-NQ/TW 2008 on "Agriculture, Peasantry and Rural Areas" of the Party, which reads: "*Enhancing poverty alleviation, especially in districts with over 50% of the population being poor households [...] and reducing poverty rate under new poverty standards.*" That line of the Party has been manifested in reality. However, current poverty still shares a lot of characteristics of the poverty in the 1990s including low education, limited working skills, being much dependant on self-sufficient agriculture production, geographical and social isolation, ethnic-specific disadvantages, and the risk of natural disasters.

⁽¹⁵⁾ Data from Vietnam Household Living Standards Survey 2008, 2010 (samples surveyed on income and expenditure).

⁽¹⁶⁾ Data from Vietnam Household Living Standards Survey 2008, 2010 (samples surveyed on income and expenditure).

Rural resident income has increased significantly, improving rural living standards. Consumer price indices reflect the dramatic change, gradually deviating from the “material economy” while diversifying rural needs. The rural socio-economy is swiftly shifting to a different structure while the improvement in living standards mainly results from paid jobs and non-agricultural employment. This may point to the fact that social policies for rural development at present and beyond should focus more on the development of the non-agricultural economic sector. Income and expenditure inequality due to income disparities between rural and urban areas has been declining. It can be seen that the targets towards 2010 set by the Central Party Committee in Resolution 26-NQ/TW which reads *“Narrowing the gap between rural and urban areas,”* have been realized in rural resident life.

The positive social features of rural residents have also been recognized through their participation in politico - social organizations and voluntary associations and organizations. These organizations form an important support and protection network in response to the difficulties and risks in life.

The improved peasant housing and medical indicators have proved that efforts to implement the targets outlined in Resolution 26-NQ/TW, which reads

“Basically ensuring that no households have to live in temporary living places” and *“Well-implementing health insurance policies [...], and continuing to implement health insurance policies for the poor,”* have been realized. However, there should be more effective measures to reduce inequality among social groups and between rural and urban areas. Also, increasing the efficiency of the issuance and use of health insurance cards is one of the matters of concern in rural areas that should be paid more attention to.

The absolute value of spending on education has increased over the years in rural areas, increasing among all the quintiles, including the poor households. The negative side of the situation is that the difference in monthly spending on education and training per person between the rural and urban areas is also increasing and there still exist various reasons for students to drop out, or not to attend school at all levels. This fact shows that there still remain difficulties in implementing Resolution 26-NQ/TW of the Party on *“Ensuring basic conditions for schooling, medical treatment..., placing priority on investment and development of education and training in remote and ethnic minority areas.”*

The consistent growth in spending on cultural activities among rural population suggests that rural residents have initially crossed “subsistence level” and to reach for

a higher quality of life. The targets set by Resolution 26-NQ/TW, which reads “*Improving material and spiritual life for rural residents*” has been realized in a positive fashion.

It is noticeable that there still exists a gap between the efforts from the State and governments at all levels to improve the quality of rural cultural life and village cultural traditions. The movement “Unity for Building a New Lifestyle of Culture” has not yet to be really associated with traditional cultural space of the rural population. These are important issues in the cultural life of rural areas today, which set new requirements for policies to develop rural culture into an advanced and modern culture deeply imbued with national identity.

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