

## Overview of Ethnic Minority Policies in Vietnam from 1980 to Date

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**Abstract:** The ethnic minority policy is an indispensable part of the lines and policies of Vietnam Communist Party and State. By now, a lot of ethnic minority policies have been implemented in Vietnam (until 2011 there are about 182 policies relating to ethnic minorities). However, it is difficult to make classification of ethnic minority policies. Thus, many authors have been confused between the principle and the policy or overlaps among policies, when mentioning ethnic minority policies. The article has come to the classification that will be used as a framework of analysis and from here giving some general assessments of the ethnic minority policies promulgated by the Party and the State since 1980.

**Key words:** Ethnic minority policies; classification; Vietnam; 1980 to date.

The ethnic minority policy is an indispensable part of the lines and policies of Vietnam Party and State. This is obviously shown by the principle of “solidarity, equality, and help for mutual development” of the Communist Party of Vietnam. In the Constitution in 1981 and 1982 as well as the Revised Constitution in 2014, this was elucidated as below: “All the ethnicities are equal and unite with, respect and assist one another for mutual development; all acts of discrimination against and division of the ethnicities are prohibited. Every ethnic group has the right to use its own spoken and written language to preserve its own identity and to promote its fine customs, practices, traditions and culture. The State shall implement a policy of comprehensive development and create the conditions for the minority ethnicities to draw upon/ further their internal strengths and develop together with the country”. Those basic policies are further concretized

in many areas involved, including political, socio-economic and cultural.

In reality, many documents of the Party and the State as well as some research works [9, pp.407-424] have mentioned and paid attention to the concept of “ethnic minority policy”. All those documents share a common argument that the ethnic minority policy is a part of the policy system of the political party and the State, which is implemented for ethnic groups in the same country for the purpose of solving ethnic issues. In Vietnam, the ethnic minority policy can be made for all ethnic groups, or for a group of ethnic groups, or for a particular ethnic group, in order to keep the national solidarity and ensure development of ethnic groups. According to the Central Committee for Ideology and Culture and the Committee for Ethnic

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Minority Affairs, Vietnam ethnic minority policy certainly bears the nature and viewpoint of the ruling party [10, pp.46-49].

By now, a lot of ethnic minority policies have been implemented in Vietnam. According to Dang Kim Song and colleagues [4, pp.52-53], 182 policies relating to ethnic minorities had been promulgated by the government and the Prime Minister until 2011. It is, however, difficult to make classification of ethnic minority policies. Thus, many authors have been confused between the principle and the policy or overlaps among policies, when mentioning ethnic minority policies. In fact, there are policies overlapping each other. The poverty reduction policy, for example, consists of many aspects involved with other policies such as investment, finance, education, and healthcare etc. In the Decree No.05/2011/ND-CP of the government on the ethnic minority work issued on 14 January 2011, ethnic minority policies are classified into 12 groups. Yet, they consist of only specific policies; whereas, macro-policies such as the lines and viewpoints of the Party and the State are not mentioned as a type of the ethnic minority policy.

Looking at ethnic minority policies issued by the Party and the State in Vietnam from 1980 up to now, we have come to the following classification that will be used as a framework of analysis.

1. Macro-policies
2. Specific policies, including:
  - 2.1. Policies on poverty reduction
  - 2.2. Policies on land-use
  - 2.3. Policies on investment
  - 2.4. Policies on public officials
  - 2.5. Policies on education and training
  - 2.6. Policies on healthcare

2.7. Policies on culture

2.8. Policies on the ethnic minority regions

2.9. Policies for some particular ethnic minorities

For the group of specific policies, we would like to mention only significant policies that cause profound impacts on socio-economic development of ethnic minority people. On the other hand, there are also unavoidable overlaps between different policies. For example, the policies on poverty reduction consists of issues involved with the policies on education, the policies on healthcare and the policies for some particular ethnic minorities. However, they are involved with each other mainly in the economic aspect, but not in the nature and characteristics of those policies. Following is a description of ethnic minority policies with our preliminary remarks, since the ethnic minority policies in Vietnam are very copious and diversified. This description is, therefore, quite similar to a literature review.

### **1. Macro-policies**

There were some changes in the macro-policies, compared with those before 1980. Those changes are mainly relating to words and sentences in the documents, making them more appropriate to the new context. This is shown in the political programs and resolutions of the National Congresses of the Communist Party as well as in the revised Constitution in 2014 of the State. In the Party's political program in 2011, it is clearly stated: "To perform the policy of equality, solidarity, mutual respect and help among ethnic groups, creating favorable conditions for all ethnic groups to achieve development and attach themselves to common development of the entire community

of ethnicities in Vietnam” (p.8). At the 9<sup>th</sup> National Congress, the Political Report of the Central Executive Committee of the Communist Party also affirmed: “all ethnic groups in the great family of Vietnam are equal; they should unite with each other, love, respect and help each other for mutual progress, aiming at achieving success in industrialization, modernization, and national development and defense for the sake of wealthy people, strong country, just and civilized society” (pp.86-87).

It is possible to conclude that equality, solidarity, and help for mutual development are the very guidelines for all the ethnic minority policies of the Party and the State of Vietnam in the past revolutionary period. Professor Phan Huu Dat argued that it was the very basic policy in the Party’s ethnic minority directions and it was clearly stamped with the nature of the proletariat [15, pp.713-724]. In the meanwhile, Le Ngoc Thang classified the “equality, solidarity, and help for mutual development” into the category of principles for ethnic minority work. He did not see it as an ethnic minority policy. Yet, he also admitted that this principle was a foundation for ethnic minority policies [9, pp.77-79].

At the micro-scale, all Vietnam’s ethnic minority policies specify that interests and development of each ethnic group must be attached closely to interests and development of the whole nation. Although it can be expressed by various terms in documents, such as “A Great Family of Vietnam”, “The Community of All Ethnicities in Vietnam”, or “54 ethnicities of brotherhood”, it does not change by nature.

While researchers and practitioners in Vietnam completely agree with the above-

mentioned macro-scale ethnic minority policy and they all affirm that it is the very basis for success in ethnic minority work in Vietnam, some overseas scholars and organizations show a different opinion with critical implication. They argue that like those in China, Vietnam policies for mountainous rural areas (ethnic minority policy, by implication) are influenced by the theory of evolution, viewing ethnic minorities as inherently “backward” and “uncivilized” in comparison with Kinh (Viet) people; that’s why we have to make it favorable so that people of ethnic minorities can catch up with people of the ethnic majority and highlanders can catch up with lowlanders [26; 28, pp.124-128; 36]. Neil and his colleagues argue that a more developed ethnic group (Kinh people, by implication) has the right and responsibility to carry out transformations to help backward ethnic groups to reach the level of natural evolution of the more developed ethnic group [26, p.19]. This contention is obviously inappropriate to the nature of ethnic minority policies in Vietnam.

## **2. Specific policies**

According to Cao Van Thanh, more than 40 target programs and big projects on socio-economic development had been carried out in the areas of ethnic minorities by 2010 [3]. To make it easier to follow specific policies, we are now reviewing them one after another by the above-mentioned framework.

### **2.1. Policies on poverty reduction**

In fact, these policies are implemented for not only ethnic minorities alone, but also for all the poor in Vietnam. A significant landmark for this sub-group of policies is the Decision 133/1998/QĐ-TTg issued by the Prime Minister on 23 July

1998 that ratified “the National Target Programme for Hunger Eradication and Poverty Reduction in the Period 1998 – 2000”. Afterwards, there were many other programs such as the Programmes No.134, 135, 661 etc., of which the major aim is to achieve poverty reduction for people of ethnic minorities. Reviewing those policies, some people identified them as economic policies or those relating a lot to economic issues. In our opinion, they are the very policies on poverty reduction, because there were no other terms used so frequently as “poverty reduction” or “poverty” in official documents of the Party and the State as well as research works and mass media articles, when mentioning ethnic minorities for the past decades. Poverty and the struggle against poverty for ethnic minorities have been very burning issues, so they are shown profoundly in the policies of Vietnam Party and the State.

Relating to these policies, there have been a lot of programs and projects. Bui Minh Dao and his colleagues argue that policies on poverty reduction for ethnic minorities are clearly applied in poverty reduction programs and projects, such as: the Annual Relief Programs; the Residence Settlement Program; the Inter-commune Center Building Program (added into the Program 135 afterwards); the project to support price and bill payment; the project to assist in selling local products from areas of ethnic minorities and remote mountainous areas; the project to support particularly poor people of ethnic minorities; and the Program No.135 [1, pp.54-60]. In a research work conducted in 2002, Ha Que Lam summarized that poverty reduction for ethnic minorities was carried out in 7 programs or

spheres, including: 1. Development of agriculture, rural areas and irrigational - transport infrastructure; 2. Employment; 3. Credit program; 4. Education and healthcare program for poverty reduction; 5. the National programme No.06/CP; 6. The program on supports for particularly poor people; and, 7. Environmental protection (Project No.327, FAO, PAM) [5, pp.108-137]. If we review all policies that aim at the goal of poverty reduction, we can enumerate more and more programs and projects.

The policies on poverty reduction for ethnic minorities in Vietnam have resulted in great achievements. Those achievements are shown via gross domestic product (GDP) growth in mountainous provinces, making a contribution into transition of economic structure towards industrialization and modernization in mountainous areas as well as in the areas of ethnic minorities [5, pp.109-110]. Vietnam has a higher rate of poverty reduction than other countries of the same development level [35] and it has really gained excellent results in poverty reduction – mainly in the areas of ethnic minorities [34, p.7].

Besides those achievements, there are still a lot of challenges to poverty reduction in the areas of ethnic minorities, as it is very difficult for people in those areas to get over poverty completely [35, p.59]. For people of ethnic minorities, achievements in poverty reduction still remain limited. The rate of those who have fallen back in poverty is high [1, p.78]. In 2004, the proportion of poor people among ethnic minorities was 61%, i.e. 4.5 times higher than that of overall Kinh and Hoa people [34, p.9]. According to a document published in 2014, after over two decades

of struggling against poverty, 35 millions people have overcome poverty in Vietnam. Although the proportion of poor people among ethnic minorities has been much lowered in comparison with that in the early 1990s, it still remains higher than that of ethnic majorities. People of ethnic minorities make up about 15% of all population, but the number of poor households of ethnic minorities makes up 53% of all poor households in the whole country [33]. Some reports from different organizations reveal that Kinh and Hoa people have more advantages to access resources for poverty reduction than people of ethnic minorities. It is the very reason why ethnic minorities have been lagging behind [29, p.5; 32].

The causes of the above-mentioned shortcoming are identified to come from both ethnic minority people and the institutions that undertake policy implementation. On the side of ethnic minority people, they have low education, unsound customs, and the habit of relying on others. On the side of institutions of policy implementation, they haven't made proper and synchronous investments; they haven't carried out well the grass-roots democratic regulations; the implementation of policy hasn't been appropriate for the local characteristics [1, pp.77-78]; there have been too few policies and programs helping to improve effectively income of ethnic minority people [29, p.6]; and people have too little fertile farmland [35, p.29], etc.

## ***2.2. Policies on land-use***

Land is an important resource for livelihood of ethnic minority farmers. Many policies on land-use have been issued since 1980. Some of them were seen as breakthroughs involved with land-use,

including: The implementation of the policy on farmland contracting 10 (allocating farmland to households); the promulgation of the Land Law in 1993; the Law on Forest Protection and Development in 2004; and, the Revised Land Law in 2013. The promulgation of policies on land-use, especially the policy on the 5 rights of land-users, has caused positive impacts, contributing a part into improvement of agricultural productivity in many areas of ethnic minorities. Owing to those policies, some people have become small and medium-sized farm owners; ethnic minority people have changed the habit of cultivation from the nomadic farming to the settled farming; they have switched from forest exploitation to forest development and protection; different ethnic minorities have started to share the same living places; trading and technical activities have been promoted; and, gender justice has been improved [18; 24].

Besides positive impacts, the policies on land-use promulgated after 1980 have also resulted in some negative impacts. There were conflicts over the right of land-use, after the policy on allocation of farmland to households, the Land Law in 1993, and the Decree No.364 were promulgated. The conflicts took place popularly in the Northwest and particularly in the Central Highlands [22; 20; 7]. They consist of conflicts between an individual and another individual, between an individual and a collective, or between a collective and another collective. Those conflicts mainly resulted from changes in the ownership system and the right of land-use as well as implementation of the new policies on land. In addition, many ethnic minority households encountered a shortage

in cultivated land, due to various factors, such as: land occupation for farms and plantations; trade in land among Kinh people; increase in the area of industrial plants; and, allocation of farmland and forest land according to the Land Law in 1993 and 2003 [20, pp.118-133]. To deal with the shortage in cultivated land for ethnic minority households, the State implemented the Program No.134. Yet, the program could not meet the demand for cultivated land among farmers, because in many local areas there was no farmland reserve left at all [23].

The policies on land also led to land stratification. For those who have a lot of land, they not only have a larger total area of farmland, but their farmland is also more fertile. Especially, they have a lot of good farmland and forest land [17; 23]. On the other hand, the Land Law and policies on land promulgated after 1986 were more effective for poverty reduction in the lowlands, but they were not significantly effective for that in remote and mountainous areas [24].

### ***2.3. Policies on investment***

This sub-group of policies can be understood in the broad sense as all investments made by the State into ethnic minority areas, which are shown most clearly through programs and projects. Thus, the policies on investment are partly expressed in the policies on poverty reduction. Specifically, investments for infrastructure building and farmers' households are included in the Program 135. The investments were, however, made asynchronously, so they were not very effective in improving production and living conditions of local people [1, p.78].

For the past years, the policies on

investment into areas of ethnic minorities haven't attracted much attention from businesses and social organizations. As a result, they just made investments into the areas, where they thought they could get profits easily [6, pp.40-42].

### ***2.4. Policies on public officials***

To build a force of public officials for ethnic minority areas is an important task, so the Party and the State have concerned a lot about this. Since 1980 up to now, many policies relating to public officials, including both those who are ethnic minority people as well as those, who are Kinh people but working in the areas of ethnic minorities, have been issued.

Of all the policies relating to the above-mentioned aspect, the most remarkable is the project of cadre training for communes, wards and towns of ethnic minorities in the period 2006 – 2010, based on the Decision No.34/2006/QĐ-TTg by the Prime Minister on 8 December 2006. The goal of the project was to enhance the quality and qualifications of public officials at the level of commune/ward in the areas of ethnic minorities so that they could undertake political assignments successfully. The training content was much diversified, including general education, professional training, political education, administrative management and use of computers in office. Besides, there have been other policies on job arrangement for graduates [33, pp.32-33].

To create favorable conditions for development in mountainous and ethnic minority areas, the State has also issued policies to provide supports, such as supports for training, health insurance, social insurance, unemployment allowance,

production norms, land rent, and funding, for the companies and organizations that have employed ethnic minority laborers in mountainous areas as well as in the particularly difficult areas. Furthermore, the policies regulate responsibilities of the relevant State institutions (Decision No.42/2012/QĐ-TTg on 8 October 2012). In addition, there are policies encouraging voluntary young officials, who are university graduates, to work as commune vice-chairmen/chairwomen in 500 communes in the particularly difficult and mountainous areas of ethnic minorities in the period 2013 – 2020 (Decision No.1758/QĐ-TTg on 30 September 2013).

### **2.5. Policies on education and training**

In this sub-group, the policies show more concern about some specific issues, including: the system of education – training; school curriculums; infrastructure and facilities (school building and classrooms); and, teachers and pupils. In Vietnam, the State promulgated a policy on setting up a particular system of education for children of ethnic minorities. It consists of ethnic minority boarding-schools, ethnic minority day-boarding schools, ethnic minority language teaching and learning schools, and particular training schools (schools of preparation for university; appointed and selected student training; priority to ethnic minority students at the entrance examination to university/college; support provision for poor pupils from particularly difficult communes; vocational training) [33]. To deal with difficult conditions of ethnic minorities in some areas, an initiative to provide education and training for children was made. It is the establishment of “joined classes” [2; 27; 12]. However, the curriculums at school are

often too difficult for ethnic minority children in mountainous areas [2]. By now, the schooling curriculums have been cut down to be more appropriate to ethnic minority children, but they still remain difficult for most children in remote mountainous areas. In addition to general education, discussion about ethnic minority language teaching and learning has been also made. Yet, there hasn’t been a common consensus on whether the ethnic minority language teaching/learning should be applied widely or not. Indeed, this activity seems unlikely to succeed [21, p.358].

Infrastructure for education and training in areas of ethnic minorities has been improved considerably, since the Resolution No.22 and the Decision No.72 took effect together with many different programs and projects. Nevertheless, material facilities are still poor in general, especially in mountainous and remote areas. There are not enough classrooms for children; teachers have no working office; classrooms and school buildings are inadequate; children and teachers lack basic teaching/learning instruments and even textbooks as well [27]. In terms of the teaching force, there is a lack of ethnic minority teachers, especially in particularly difficult areas. Besides, a large part of ethnic minority teachers still remain unqualified. This shows that a preparation of resources hasn’t been done well and the treatment for teachers in areas of ethnic minorities is limited.

### **2.6. Policies on healthcare**

Policies on healthcare for ethnic minority people are involved with some other policies and development programs. Yet, the key point of the policies on healthcare is to provide healthcare for

ethnic minority people; specifically, to provide them with health insurance cards. In addition, these policies are also added into various programs, such as: the malaria preventive program, the goitre preventive program, the HIV/AIDS preventive program, the extensive program of compulsory vaccination, the program of mother and child care, the population and family planning program, the village healthcare program etc. In the context of market economy, the State always tries to ensure that the poor, including mainly ethnic minority people, can get free medical examination and treatment owing to preferential policies, although the fund is limited. In order to perform those important policies, the healthcare system, especially local clinics, must be strengthened to be appropriate to the conditions in mountainous and remotes areas, where most ethnic minority people are living. This is the very reason why the number of ethnic minority people coming to the local clinics is higher than the number of those coming to the district or provincial healthcare units. As a result, the access to healthcare service has increased [31; 32; 33, pp.32-33].

To make the Party's and the State's policies satisfy more and more the demand for healthcare among ethnic minority people, the Ministry of Health has regulated that medical officials and staff at the grassroots and district levels must know the language of local ethnic minorities. On the other hand, it is necessary to pay more attention to training of medical human resource for ethnic minority people. In some provinces in the North, local officials, who are ethnic minority people, can undertake almost all tasks at the grassroots level.

## ***2.7. Policies on culture***

Since 1980 up to now, in addition to many directly or indirectly culture-related policies, the 5<sup>th</sup> Plenum Resolution of the 8<sup>th</sup> Session Central Committee has been considered to cause great impacts on cultural life of ethnic groups in Vietnam. In reality, traditional cultures have been revived significantly, since the Resolution was issued. Due to impacts of the Resolution, a lot of cultural activities in the area of ethnic minorities have been carried out, aiming at preserving and developing cultural identities of ethnic groups as well as building the grassroots cultural institutions and improving cultural enjoyment of local people. Consequently, many cultural works and traditional festivals have been restored; cultural movements at the local level have been improved; and, ethnic cultures have been more diversified, owing to cultural exchange and exposure. Those cultural activities have contributed a part into speeding up socio-economic development in the local areas [25, pp.45-48]. Recently, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam has promulgated the 9<sup>th</sup> Plenum Resolution of the 11<sup>th</sup> Session on cultural issues. This Resolution surely will help to get more achievements and make good the shortcomings of the 5<sup>th</sup> Plenum Resolution of the 9<sup>th</sup> Session.

## ***2.8. Policies on the ethnic minority regions***

Since the early 1990s, after a disturbance in the Central Highlands, regional development has attracted more attention, especially in the regions, where a lot of ethnic minority people live. This is shown firstly via the establishment of 3 steering committees, including: the Northwest Steering Committee,



the Central Highlands Steering Committee, and the Southwest Steering Committee. Each of the three committees is led by a member of the Politburo. Consequently, a lot of particular policies, programs and projects have been implemented, aiming at accelerating socio-economic development and strengthening security and national defense in those regions, of which the main beneficiaries are ethnic minority people. For the past time, however, few summaries and research works on the policies for ethnic minority regions have been done. There are just some from the cultural perspective [19; 30; 8]. In addition to “the Central Highlands Program III” and “the Northwest Program”, which have been implemented recently, the State is now finalizing preparation for “the Southwest Program”, aiming at setting up a foundation for comprehensive development of all those regions in coming time.

### ***2.9. Policies for some particular ethnic minorities***

Of all ethnic minority policies promulgated in Vietnam since 1980, some policies are implemented for some particular ethnic minorities that have special conditions, including the ethnic groups, of which the historical and development situations can be easily exploited by hostile forces to undermine the national solidarity. On the other hand, since the program of poverty reduction and socio-economic development in the mountainous and ethnic minority areas was carried out, the State has also promulgated various policies to provide assistance for ethnic minorities of especially difficult conditions as well as the ethnic groups of small population. There have

been specific policies implemented for particular ethnic groups, such as: Hoa people, Cham people, Khmer people, and Hmong people, as well as supporting policies for the ethnic groups that have small population or the ethnic groups that have especially difficult conditions, such as: Si La, Pu-Peo, Ro-mam, Brau and O-du.

The key goals of the policies for particular ethnic minorities or ethnic minorities of small population and ethnic minorities of especially difficult conditions are to accelerate economic development, improve living standards, enhance education, healthcare, human resources, and preserve ethnic cultural identities [13; 16; 30; 11; 14]. Although some summaries of policy implementation for particular ethnic minorities as well as ethnic minorities of small population and ethnic minorities of especially difficult conditions have been done, they are mainly in form of separate professional reports. Unfortunately, no comprehensive research work on this issue has been done yet.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the above-described overview, we can come to some general assessments of the ethnic minority policies promulgated by the Party and the State since 1980, as below:

*In terms of achievements:* All relevant comments affirm that the guideline on “equality, solidarity and help for mutual development” has been a really sound policy, making a great contribution into accomplishment of industrialization and modernization in Vietnam. Of specific policies, the policies on poverty reduction have brought us the most achievements. It is the most important factor to get basically the ethnic stability in Vietnam.

*In terms of shortcomings:* The system of ethnic minority policies hasn't yet paid enough attention to ethnic minorities in the border areas and they are not very appropriate to particular and diversified characteristics of ethnic groups. Policy-making still follows completely the previous model with too little consultation from scientific institutions; and, the policy critical mechanism is not very effective. Some policies overlap each other; some policies are too broad; and, some are completely ineffective – especially those relating to public officials. Policies are often implemented slowly and the capacity of officials involved still remains insufficient. Especially, the supervisory and assessment mechanisms are not good enough.

In addition, we can realize that of all the specific policies, there is not a policy to encourage mutual help for mutual development between ethnic minorities. Until now, supports and help for ethnic minorities are mainly provided by the State or international organizations and non-government organizations.

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Community house of Van Kieu people built with the funding from the Programme 135  
(in Tram Village, Huong Tan Commune, Huong Hoa District, Quang Tri Province)

*Photographer: Ngoc Lan*

