

## **ON THE PHENOMENON OF RETURNING AND LEAVING LAND OF WOMEN SOME MAJOR FINDINGS FROM STUDIES IN THE TWO COMMUNES OF THÁI BÌNH AND VĨNH LONG**

*TRƯƠNG THỊ THÚY HẰNG* (\*)

*Since 2005, much has been talked on the mass media about the returning land of locals to authorities in search for other jobs. A study on this phenomenon has been conducted by a group of leaders from Human Research Institute together with several experts, collaborators sponsored by the Centre for Philosophy, Culture and Society of Vietnam, University of Temply, USA. The study was carried out in the commune of Đông Mỹ (Đông Hưng district, Thái Bình province) and the town of Mỹ Lộc (Tam Bình district, Vĩnh Long). The study duration was November 2007 in Đông Mỹ and December 2007 in Mỹ Lộc. This paper presents some major findings from the study.*

### **I – General introduction**

The relation between economic growth and human development including women in Vietnam has shown a series of contradictions and shortcomings. The process of industrialization and urbanization, on the one hand, has generated high economic growth rate, and on the other hand, made people lose land, traditional jobs despite the fact that these people are not well prepared to get access to new job opportunities.

Unlike the phenomenon that people lost their land, there has been news about people have left land or returned land to authorities of Thái Bình, Vĩnh Long. These two provinces play an important

role in terms of food security for Vietnam.

The phenomenon in which rural women whose job and livelihood are closely connected with land have left their land to move to city in search for non-traditional stuff such as getting marriet to foreigners, joining manpower export activities with simple jobs like housemaid etc., has imposed challenges to not only development for women but also for community and society as a whole. Much has been touched on the fact that women left land and return land on mass media recently. In 2005, this

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(\*) Dr., Institute of Human Research, Education Management Academy.

phenomenon has stirred concerns regarding the decline of food output threatening food security. The Party Central Committee conducted inspection and spelt out the figure: in Thái Bình, there has been 10% of land area returned. This fact has occurred in many other provinces.

To get a deep insight into this phenomenon in Thái Bình and Vĩnh Long, find out the causes, get to know the lives of women before and after land returning, find out obstacles with regard to policies and institutions, implementation of policies for women in localities, we have conducted study on women with 15 years of age onwards; household, especially those with women serving as breadwinners; cadres, members of trade unions and organizations; local authorities, Party cell, women association, farmer association, youth union, elderly association at commune, district and provincial level, Department of Science and Technology, Provincial Committee for Communication and Education. Women and people surveyed are selected on the following criteria: households, people owning land or without land; the rich, the middle-income or the poor classified by local authorities. The study was conducted in the commune of Đông Mỹ (Thái Bình Province) – Nov 2007 and the commune of Mỹ Lộc (Vĩnh Long Province) – Dec 2007.

The commune of Đông Mỹ is a purely agriculture commune with food production as a main job and embroidery or rattan and bamboo as supplementary

jobs done by women. The commune also produces furniture for daily use, implement construction services with no traditional jobs. In the commune of Mỹ Lộc, a majority of people earn a living in trade and service sector.

## II – Study outcomes

### 1. Land returning and leaving actual situation

#### a. On land returning

Land returning differs in the two communes surveyed: *farmers used to request to return land to local authorities in Đông Mỹ previous years; this did not occur in Mỹ Lộc*. Land returning in Đông Mỹ has ended. Reasons of this phenomenon will be discussed later on in this paper. However, land holding at all costs occurs at three levels: 1/ hire rice growers: land owner will get rice but has to cover all costs and contribute ‘food produce’ to the commune; 2/ loan land for rice growing: land owner will not get rice and not contribute ‘food produce’ to the commune; 3/ ‘food produce’ contribution to rice growers: land owner will not get rice, will not cover all costs but has to contribute ‘food produce’ to the commune.

In Đông Mỹ, the phenomenon of loaning land for rice cultivation existed several years ago, however in 2007 it became difficult due to no one wants to rent the land.

Besides the land leaving by women and the youth, there has been situation where retirees came back to countryside from city to take care of their house and keep

land by using their pension for rice growing. This can be understood as a good phenomenon, making contributions to food production, food security to be given incentives or as a 'safe livelihood' of the locals and those who try to keep land for their offsprings in case their business goes bad. Another reason can be due to 'an inch of land is as precious as gold', because if the land is withdrawn, payment will be made. Therefore, locals will try to keep the land to get a certain amount of money.

Moreover, to keep land, some households in the commune of Đông Mỹ contribute 'food produce' to those who agree to grow rice on their land; it means that though they get nothing, they have to contribute 50 kg/ha to the Commune People's Committee. Meanwhile, rice growers will get all and pay nothing to land owner and will not have to contribute rice to the Committee.

### ***b. On land leaving***

*Land leaving*, generally speaking, is a phenomenon in which women have land but don't cultivate that land. In fact, there is no area of deserted land, yet women leaving land in the two communes studied expressed in different forms and have had many differences.

In Đông Mỹ, land of women comes from allocation and the right to use since 1993. The land leaving phenomenon can be understood as those who own the land in their name and work far away from their home town, or get married to men in other localities do not grow rice on their legitimate land but leave that

land to their family or relatives, not totally giving up the land.

In Mỹ Lộc, land of women comes from allocation from their biological parents; when they get married, land comes from husband family, therefore they are not entitled to own or transfer the land. When they leave land, or do not grow rice, women give it to others for use (normally relatives), some sell or has land for rent.

*Forms of 'land leaving' is varied* and in our opinions, can be divided into as follows: land is totally let deserted; leave land or rice growing by seasons; leave rice-growing land for growing others like growing farm produce (still do farming); leave land, leave rice growing to do non-farm jobs' "Leave potential land"

Specifically, the actual situation of each pattern in the two communes was as follows:

- Leaving land deserted completely did not occur in both Đông Mỹ and Mỹ Lộc before and up to the time of conducting the study.

- Leave land or rice growing by seasons is a common phenomenon in both communes but occurring in different ways and the causes are different, too.

In the commune of Đông Mỹ, the local authority mobilised people to work on winter-spring season, yet some locals automatically left land without growing rice. On the contrary, people in Mỹ Lộc wish to work on summer-autumn season, however since 2006 Mỹ Lộc have developed policy to cut down on

summer-autumn season from 3 to 2. This is the policy of Vĩnh Long province with many strict measures in the district of Tam Bình.

However, in Vĩnh Long, the Provincial Decision on the reduction of summer-autumn season production from 3 to 2, though made since 2006, in the words of Deputy Director of Vĩnh Long Science and Technology Department, has remained in consideration.

Leave rice-growing land for growing others like growing farm produce (still do farming) is a relatively common phenomenon in the two communes of Đông Mỹ and Mỹ Lộc. Purely agricultural households with few labours and little capital often opt for this choice.

- Leave rice growing to do non-farm jobs: this is a phenomenon mainly occurs to some involved in commune tasks or moved to do jobs in other localities.<sup>1</sup>

e) Leave potential land is the most common phenomenon in the two communes studied. It is the situation in which young school women seeked non-farm jobs in towns or cities. In the commune of Đông Mỹ, they were school girls of 1993 backwards, therefore they

were distributed land in 1993. Currently, these girls have grown up and attended high schools, vocational schools or universities..., their land was transferred to their families. In the commune of Mỹ Lộc, they were single young women (not distributed land but are likely to be given land by biological parents or parents-in-law) now left commune and farm-job for vocational training and non-farm jobs.

#### ***Women without land situation***

Differences in the two communes studied come from average land area per person: in Đông Mỹ, land was distributed on average since 1993, therefore in formality everyone has land if born in 1993 backwards. In Mỹ Lộc, the land belongs to each household, therefore that those with land or without land depends on the decision made by parents or parents-in-law whether they will distribute the land or not.

In Đông Mỹ, women without land was due to they come from other places or just retired after 1993.

In Mỹ Lộc, women without land was due to the fact land was not distributed to them or the husband's family was poor or did not have land; or the husband came from other places without land given; or they had land but had to sell the land to pay for debts. Women do not have land because of the mindset in preference of boys over girls in the commune of Mỹ Lộc. Rice field distribution was influenced by the concept of preferring boys to girls in approximately 30% of households in the province.

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<sup>1</sup> This term is coined by us to emphasize the fact that the youth in general and the young women in particular are potential work force in rural area, however the common trend now of rural young people is, by all means, seeking ways to leave the countryside, farm-jobs, especially rice-growing job. Simultaneously, this term also describes the phenomenon in Mỹ Lộc in which young women may not possess land but they are potentially likely to have land when getting married and start own family.

## 2. Causes of land returning and leaving

The common causes of land returning and leaving were attributed to the low effectiveness of farm-jobs compared to high productivity of non-farm jobs, even within agricultural production, the productivity of growing rice was not as high as growing other crops or doing husbandary or other jobs. Meanwhile, there are some different causes related to the two phenomena.

### a. Cause of land returning

History and actual situation of land use right or possession were different in the two communes, therefore causes were also different.

In the commune of Đông Mỹ, people requested to have land distributed per capita in 1993 and contract-based land from People Committee with the contract of 130 kg/360m<sup>2</sup> that was considered too high compared with productivity and input costs.

In the commune of Mỹ Lộc, the phenomenon of returning land did not occur because the land of women came from their biological parents, therefore the women had the right to transfer or possess; when they got married, they can possess more land from husband's family. Regarding land distributed by parents-in-law, women might not have the right to transfer or possess if husband's family or the husband did not agree to do so.

### b. Causes of rice-growing land leaving

- On the side of local authority and organisation, they had recognised the ineffectiveness of summer-autumn

season with the consecutive use of 3 seasons leading to diseases related to agricultural production, herefore under the policy of Vĩnh Long province, in Mỹ Lộc people are advocated not to use land for summer-autumn season. This is perceived as a flexibility of each locality adapting to the actual situation. At the same time, people in Đông Mỹ believed that the restructuring of crops growing and husbandary of the local authority helped people use land for growing other crops instead of growing rice.

- *On the side of farmers*: there are causes leading to land leaving such as low productivity of grow rice in comparison with other agricultural jobs and non-farm jobs because the price of input materials kept increasing while the price of rice remained unchanged; or farmers wished to change job and expected to have exchanges.

- 'Land in exchange for education' is not an unusual phenomenon in Vĩnh Long in general. Even in the commune of Mỹ Lộc, there have been several families selling the land to equip their children with education. However, these families obtain the silk-printing to afford their lives and help lift them out of poverty.

- Without labour is also a reason for leaving the winter-spring season in the commune of Đông Mỹ. Children reaching youth or middle-age and earning a living in other localities were left with old parents or their old parents retired from city to go back to their home town for taking care of the rice field.

- Poor land, eroded land, large percentage of flooded land area, irrelevant irrigation system and complex weather of spring season (warm in the beginning, heavy rain by the end causing damage to productivity) are reasons making people from Đông Mỹ reluctant to agree with the policy of growing short-term rice in spring, some only grew farm produce, some left land even the commune leader critically asked them to do.

***c. Women leaving land to do other jobs as a cause***

This is a major cause due to the fact that their family did not own much land or the family is in difficult situation. They could not depend on rice growing but to opt for other jobs. Another reason can be their family had other business relations so they can change their jobs, or their education or expertise level helped them get a job in enterprises. One reason being very important to married women is that they need agreement from their husband to do other jobs.

Besides the causes mentioned above, to women and young women, there were several causes such as: well-paid women had decisive voice. Working as an employee helped them participate in other jobs other than leaving the hard work of farming, protect their complexion, dress up with office uniform, gain more exchange, understanding, respect and honour to the family and community. Moving to other locality to live with husband was also a cause making women leave land distributed by the local authority since

1993 in the communes of Đông Mỹ and Mỹ Lộc (distributed by parents)

**3. Life of women before and after leaving land**

***a. General situation***

In general, before leaving land, a majority of women in the two communes did farming jobs. After leaving land, there was an increasing number of young women leaving commune, farm-jobs to seek other jobs in industrial parks and urban areas. The proportion of young women leaving commune to search jobs was approximately equal to the that of young men. Women had tendency to seek jobs nearby their hometown meanwhile young men worked far away from their homes. More young men in Mỹ Lộc worked in Binh Duong province than young women. The number of middle-aged and married women change jobs within their locality: moving from growing rice to growing other crops or doing non-farm jobs, or combining both.

There are two viewpoints with regard to priorities given to the change of job between men and women. One viewpoint refers to the fact that priority should be given to men in changing jobs because men often had bolder decisions and more daring in business plans. Another viewpoint refers to the fact that priority should be given to women because women are often more hard working and their ability to make decision is lower than men.

If opportunity doing business far away from home between husband and wife is taken, middle-aged women had tendency

to let their husband take it and they will grow rice at home to balance family and jobs as well as to take care of children and parents. Along with young men working far away from home, more women are doing the same leading to the 'aging' of work force in the two communes.

***b. Diversified forms of employment and development of women leaving rice-growing land***

The model of leaving the commune, farm-jobs for non-farm job could be seen in several forms: joining secondary schools, colleges, universities or vocational training; working as an employee (in industrial zones and urban areas); doing business as small traders; industrial and handicraft; housemaid (in service sector in urban areas); getting married to foreigners (from South Korea, Chinese Taiwan). In Đông Mỹ and Mỹ Lộc, the number of women getting married to foreigners was small. However, this is the increasing trend in Vĩnh Long province. Recent years have seen the trend go down, but other phenomena have emerged: some women who were ill-treated returned to their hometown and the number of hyphenated children was all the more increasing, particularly in Thuận An commune, Bình Minh district, Vĩnh Long province with 25 children. What's worth noticeable is that *a majority of these children were girls.*

The model of leaving rice-growing and raising other animals was mainly chosen by married women because they could harmoniously deal with other stuff such

as ensuring both income generation and sentimental need as they could enjoy their time with their husband and children, thus family happiness is ensured. There have been several women successfully followed this model.

The model of leaving farm-jobs to do non-farm jobs: working as employees in industrial zones, enterprises nearby at day time has been developing in the two communes studied because Đông Mỹ is 5 to 6 km far away from Thái Bình province and Mỹ Lộc 8-9 km from industrial zones. Young women of these communes have tried to follow this model.

Besides, there is quite a small number of college and university women who was assigned to work far away from hometown or to a difficult working site, or needed to get married have returned home and turned into small trading. Some who are advanced in age and whose children worked far away also worked as small traders or hire people to grow rice.

**4. Advantages and disadvantages of women as they left land**

***a. Advantages***

As women left land together with economic restructuring, people in general and women in particular all believe that the first advantage gained was thanks to the support of the Party and the State in terms of sector expansion. That the authority allowed women to move in 2007 was much easier than 5-6 years ago; policy on land was easier. The increasing demand of

people required a greater and more diversified number of items, such as growing rice together growing flowers, for instand, a woman from Đông Mỹ grew both rice and flowers on a daily basis for trading in commune market in Thái Bình); the process of loan procedures was getting easier compared with a few years ago.

### **b. Disadvantages**

Most of the women and locals in the two communes believed that as they left land with economic restructuring the disadvantages were lack of capital, high interest rate, intensive funds from banks compared with little loan incentives for farmers, difficult loan procedures. Women found it hard to access loan as they were not the owner of the household without property for mortgage. Besides, other difficulties could be known as high input price and low output price, lack of orientation of husbandary, outlet contacts, consumption stage, semi-manufactured products, not finished products, little and too general training information. The weather was not favourable (such as, rain and storms, wintery climate were typical of flower growing job in Đông Mỹ).

Regarding the model of leaving the commune for other jobs, women believed that the great challenge they faced was many of them felt reluctant to do so because they might not have opportunities to take care of their children or husband. Other non-farm

jobs were hard and required physical strength.<sup>2</sup>

To women working as small traders in Mỹ Lộc, the most difficult disadvantage was concerned with tax level, time of imposing tax and tax increase. High level of taxation with the increase of tax 2 to 3 times a year, level of taxation not adaptable to the local situation but applied in line with general regulations of taxation department led to the fact that tax was calculated by the end of the year and middle of the year – two periods of time when people were in need of shopping during Tet holiday and were affordable for shopping, without consideration of times when they suffered floods or bad business. Noticeable was that in the policy of commerce, service development and infrastructure improvement for countryside by building markets, the markets were built but no traders involved.

In Mỹ Lộc, though the old market was moved to a more comfortable place, small traders remained reluctant to join in. The reason was due to the high cost of 50 to 60 million VND to get a nice spot in the market. Difficult spots also cost 30 to 40 million VND.

**c.** Necessary supports for the women concerning restructuring were mentioned by the locals from the two communes as follows:

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<sup>2</sup> Kien Giang Province has 18 newly-built markets being left unused. Current News at 6:00, 17-18 Dec 2007; Pham Do. Billion-worth markets left unused! Dat Viet Newspaper, 25 March 2009.



The household should create favourable conditions for women with sympathy and sharing of work.

The community should develop other professions and provide training, capital assistance, technology transfer and vocational training.

The authority should provide appropriate guidance, directive, offering priority of job to women; the authority should make some intervention so that women aged over 35 can work for enterprises.

### III. Conclusions and recommendations

#### 1 – Conclusions

- On leaving and returning land: in reality in the two communes studied, women there asked to return land to authority or left land with several reasons. The reasons are diverse but have not affected food output. This is not a usual phenomenon, affecting food security, threatening food security at micro-level as households or at macro-level as a nation.

- Regarding awareness of women about food security: it is hard to conclude that peasant women lack awareness so they left land to find other jobs. In terms of household, food security is always attached with great importance by the locals, especially women. What matters is that if food security is considered at national level, the State should have studies with appropriate and timely policies.

On the other hand, through our studies at the two communes, we have recognised that farmers, though geographically different, have been well aware that rice

growing generated low productivity but is safer than growing other crops such as water melon or flower due to *seasonal feature of rice*. Rice, after being harvested, can be stored and sold when in need or sold at high price. Seasonal feature of growing water melon or flower produced high yield, yet after being harvested, it could be difficult to store to sell at high price. As a result, not quite a few households in Mỹ Lộc while took part in some stable non-farm jobs (working as civil servants, local officer, small traders, supporting industries such as duck, fruit trees growing, snake raising etc.), remained area of growing rice without growing other crops. Therefore, an appropriate restructuring of crops and husbandary serves as a factor/model to maintain and balance food security both at micro-level as households and macro-level as a nation.

- Main causes of land leaving and returning were concerned with the calculation of productivity of rice, mechanism, policies towards management of use of land in each locality. Dealing with this requires not only administrative order but needs policy adjustment with active participation among entities: farmers-the State – enterprises – scientists.

- Lives of women after leaving or returning land were complex, having both success and failure, positive and negative effects.

#### 2. Some recommendations

First, all parties concerned the people, women, authorities, union should base on the effectiveness of production to

make decision of 'leaving land' or using land for the purpose of restructuring of crops and husbandary.

Second, in the relation between food security policy and the objective of becoming a rice-exporting country, it should be aware that the link between these two objectives should be a clear-cut, so that limitation of area for rice growing to ensure food security and area to become the first or second biggest rice exporter worldwide can be mapped out.

Third, concept on food security being closely linked with the maintenance of rice growing area with the number of rice growers or the increasing number of Farmers' Association members should be clearly determined. Limit of food output, of rice-growing area, how many workers are needed, though taken for granted, need specific plan for socio-economic development annually with mid-term and long-term plans so as to have the suitable economic restructuring, thus making it easier for famers in transition process.

*Fourth, an appropriate roadmap* is needed in terms of economic and husbandary restructuring. What matters is whether we should reach the objective of becoming the first or second largest rice exporter in the world with the maintenance of such an area for growing rice, while the farmers hardly afford the minimum living standard. This question needs to be answered in light of both theory and practice in the context of Vietnam. Hence, a roadmap should be carefully, not spontaneously or in the

sense of 'general law of the world', mapped out so that farmers could be lifted out of their hard lives due to unreasonable policies and regulations.

*Fifth, land accumulation* has been brought to the table in forums, workshops, conferences concerning agriculture and countryside in Vietnam at present. Agriculture is one-to-one transfer, that is one household should pass on their know-how to only one child. This is said by a farmer from Vĩnh Long province. This opinion has reflected the fact that several farmers were also well aware of the relation between land scale and livelihood.

At present, this should be taken into consideration so that the phenomenon of 'leaving land' could be seen from different angles. In case after 'leaving land' the farmers still ensure their livelihood and income for living and investment for education for their children, this should be understood as a voluntary process of land accumulation, therefore an appropriate mechanism is needed to facilitate this process. Normally, the development of agricultural production needs an area of land big enough for mechanisation in an effective way and needs a duration long enough, which is also a difficulty to farmers in Đông Mỹ commune and north area of Đông Hưng district. However, irrelevant management mechanism will become all the more complex as agricultural land is transferred to urban land for building of industrial zones etc.,

Sixth, how commerce and service is developed by tax policy, tax increase roadmap, purchase of a spot in the market, training are provided should be considered so that small woman traders have opportunities for existence and development and for those who are in transition can boldly enter trade and service sector.

Seventh, feedback, accountability and evaluation of guidelines and policies: the examples of Đông Mỹ and Mỹ Lộc have shown the great impacts of policies and guidelines, yet a lack of continued feedback with research to ensure the objective information and via local information channels leads to lack of

adjustment. Differences from the two different ways of implementation with the model of 50 million VND/ha and the ways of mobilisation of scientific researches to the reality in the two provinces have spelt out the roles of the 4 factors, especially the roles of technology and science, social and humanity science over the development of agriculture – countryside – farmers need to be improved in the coming time. In reality, in the two communes studied, *the phenomenon of leaving and returning land is a case, a type of 'mechanism' reflecting the response by women and farmers.*