



Proposing cultural criteria in the program on building new-style rural area for the 2026-2030 period

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The National Target Program on Building New-Style Rural Area has been implemented nationwide since 2010. After 15 years, the appearance of Vietnam's rural area has fundamentally changed and followed the trend of comprehensive development, the material and spiritual life of the people has increasingly improved. In the goal of the Program from the first period, the cultural factor has always been given attention, for example, in the overall goal of Decision No. 800/QĐ-TTg approving the National Target Program on Building New-Style Rural Area for the 2010-2020 period (dated 4 June 2010), it was clearly stated that "building a democratic, stable rural society, rich in national cultural identity". In following periods, culture always plays an important role in the process of building new-style rural area, advanced new-style rural area, exemplary new-style rural area and is clearly shown in each specific criterion and target.

Over the past 15 years, the National Target Program on Building New-Style Rural Area has made many achievements, including the effective contribution of the cultural field. Rural people are identified as main subjects in building new-style rural area; New cultural institutions have been focused on establishment and investment; Traditional cultural institutions have been restored, expanded, newly built and gradually closely connected with each other, creating favourable conditions for cultural creation and enjoyment; Traditional cultural values are protected, maintained, and restructured, new cultural values are created and operated, making rural cultural life increasingly diverse and rich, better meeting people's needs. Moreover, culture is increasingly integrated into production methods, lifestyles, environmental protection, OCOP products, rural tourism products, etc. However, the cultural field in building new-style rural area in the recent period also has certain limitations, such as: The concept of culture is still understood in a narrow way, lacking updates and sometimes biased; Cultural development in the direction of uniformity, standardization and imposition makes many rural areas become monotonous, with faded identity; Traditional culture has not effectively promoted its role as a foundation and pillars; Formalization still exists

in the implementation of criteria/targets; the role of people, their needs and choices have not received due attention...[7].

Recognizing these issues, currently, facing the requirement of building a set of criteria for new-style rural area for the 2026-2030 period, the cultural field is still being concerned and identified as a necessary and cross-cutting criterion. Therefore, it is very necessary to understand correctly principles of building cultural criteria and building feasible cultural criteria in the entire set of criteria.

1. PROPOSING THE CONTENT OF CULTURAL CRITERIA

Firstly, understand more correctly and fully the connotation of the concept and attributes of culture.

Culture is not only outward manifestations such as art, music, costumes, architecture and many other forms of material and performing culture but also the totality of values, beliefs, customs, practices, codes of conduct between people, between people and nature, philosophies of life, indigenous knowledge systems, forms of social organization that a community creates and shares among its members. In addition, and more importantly, the meaning and value of culture are relative, there is no high - low or civilized - backward culture because culture is created and practiced by members of a community to serve the needs and meanings (spirituality, philosophy of life) of that community. This creation and practice help them adapt to the cultural, economic, social and natural context in which they live. Therefore, instead of seeing culture as limited to "good values" from an outsider's perspective and as superficially artistic and performative, it is necessary to see culture as everything that communities "have", "think" and "do", culture covers almost all aspects of human life such as local knowledge, customs, cosmology, behaviour, ways of organizing family and community space, ethnic cultural value systems, beliefs, etc.

The nature of culture is a comprehensive system, in which cultural elements are always closely linked, symbiotic with each other to coexist and develop. When a cultural element is lost, it will cause imbalance and lead to deformation of other cultural elements in the same system. Therefore, in preserving and



The rammed-earth houses of the Tay people in Cao Loc, Lang Son

promoting the role of culture in building new-style rural area, we should not only “selectively” preserve a few cultural “identities” with certain “typical” values according to criteria of outsiders without paying attention to or intervening to eliminate other cultural elements in the same system that are considered “backward”, “superstitious”, “outdated”. For example, if we want to preserve and promote the Then practice of the Tay, Nung, and Thai people, we must preserve rituals, music, performance spaces, Then masters... and not just preserve and develop Then music, Tinh lute and on that basis compose new lyrics to perform in mass cultural activities.

Culture is created by host communities for their different needs. Therefore, only insiders, that is, owners of cultural practices, can fully and correctly recognize the value, role and function of the cultural practices they create and preserve. The content of cultural criteria needs to be built based on views and choices of insiders - the rural people so that cultural institutions and activities can truly meet their actual needs.

Secondly, cultural diversity and the need to preserve and enrich cultural diversity in the rural area.

Vietnam is proud to be a country rich in cultural diversity with ecological diversity, ethnic diversity and diversity of cultural expressions. Although the goal of the National Target Program on Building New-

Style Rural Area mentions cultural diversity, in the implementation process, cultural diversity is often overlooked or even ignored. For example, customs of taking a portion of the meal in Nam Dinh, inviting extra meals before the wedding day in Lang Son, Nghe An, making a long funeral in Northern mountainous provinces, etc. are all considered backward customs and achievements in building new-style rural area that local authorities report often point out how these customs have been eliminated. Meanwhile, from a cultural perspective, it is clear that maintaining these practices is a way to create, strengthen and increase dimensions of connection and mutual support in the community, maintain human relationships and ensure cultural diversity. In another dimension, the Program on Building New-Style Rural Area encourages and promotes the process of rural modernization, narrowing the gap between the rural area and the urban area. In many localities, the urban area is even used as a model and a destination for rural development. As a result, the rural area is no longer rural, but the rural area cannot become the urban area. Cultural diversity is gradually lost in that process, instead, there is uniformity everywhere: From the village entrance gate to the cultural house, which is often in the same style, from flower roads to solid or semi-solid houses, from industrial zones/clusters to straight streets in the



village, etc. Therefore, the content of cultural criteria needs to overcome this risk of uniformity as much as possible, instead, proposing criteria to protect, encourage and enrich rural cultural diversity.

Thirdly, use and promote traditional cultural institutions more effectively.

Existing traditional institutions of ethnic groups in Vietnam are very rich and diverse. The National Target Program on Building New-Style Rural Area has initially paid attention to these institutions. Circular No. 41/2013/BNNPTNT guiding the implementation of the National set of criteria for new-style rural area 2013 has allowed the recognition of communal houses with equipment and activities meeting standards of cultural houses as cultural institutions. However, in addition to communal houses of the Kinh people and communal houses of some ethnic groups in the Southern Central Highlands, many other ethnic groups also have their own traditional institutions, such as pagodas of the Khmer people, assembly halls of the Chinese people, long houses of the Ede people, Guol houses of the Ka Tu people, shrines of the Tay and Nung people... To make good use of all these important traditional institutions, it is necessary to expand the scope of determining types of traditional institutions. In addition, due to differences in culture and living habits, traditional institutions of different ethnic groups have different scales and ways of arranging the space used. Therefore, in criteria for considering the recognition of traditional institutions as cultural institutions that meet standards of the new-style rural area, there should be no rigid regulations on the scale of the campus, area of use, or function, etc. The determination of criteria for recognizing traditional institutions as new cultural institutions in the National Target Program on Building New-Style Rural Area should be given to local authorities and communities. In addition, new cultural institutions should also be integrated into traditional institutions, and institutions such as post offices and libraries should be integrated into traditional cultural institutions. If we can take advantage of mobilizing existing cultural institutions in the community in combination with new cultural institutions, we will overcome the current situation of lack of land and lack of funding in building grassroots cultural institutions, as well as lack of human resources, management overload and monotony in the operation of grassroots cultural institutions.

Fourthly, pay attention to culture in all aspects of the process of building new-style rural area.

The Program on Building New-Style Rural Area has recently focused on building rural infrastructure,

but it seems that cultural factors associated with these works have not been carefully considered. For each work, from design, selection of materials to decisions on construction locations, etc., are closely linked to cultural concepts of the community, thereby helping create meaning for those works in the daily lives of the people. When cultural factors are given due attention during the construction process, works will not only be physical structures but also become symbols of community values and identity, thereby receiving widespread participation and use from the people. For example, for residential housing, the concept of a solid house based solely on universal criteria (a house with all three main structures: foundation - frame - roof must be made from good quality materials) has ignored effective knowledge, experience and creativity, suitable to natural conditions of the community, such as the case of rammed earth houses of the Tay and Nung people in Lang Son, the Ha Nhi people in Lao Cai, the Mong people in Ha Giang, etc. The rammed earth house is not considered a solid house according to criteria of "hard foundation-frame-roof" of the Program on Building New-Style Rural Area while in reality, this type of house is very solid (walls are about 30cm thick), suitable for local climate conditions, warm in winter, cool in summer (benefits that "modern" concrete houses do not have) and the earthen wall is very fireproof and effective in soundproofing [8]. Similarly, in the organization of agricultural production, due attention has not been paid to the role of indigenous folk knowledge as an important resource. Indigenous knowledge is effective in organic cultivation of crops, in intercropping, in natural cultivation in each land area... Indigenous knowledge also contributes significantly to creating skills and know-hows unique to each community to create typical craft products, OCOP products with symbolic characters. When these products are imbued with local culture (associated with ecology, customs, beliefs and conveying related stories), the value of products will increase many times (not only economic value but also symbolic value, brand value...). The cultural aspect is also reflected in many other criteria and targets such as space, landscape, environment, etc. and even criteria that many people still think have nothing to do with culture such as security and order, access to law, etc. An open, inclusive and humane cultural approach should be followed throughout the process of building content and implementing criteria to address current limitations and create effective cohesion of the entire National Target Program on Building New-Style Rural Area.



Phong Giang village's Cultural House in Nghi Xuan, Ha Tinh, is integrated as a venue for displaying local culture and history

Fifthly, further empower communities in protecting and promoting cultural resources.

People's participation in the process of building new-style rural area should be understood in a broad sense, that is, people have the right to contribute throughout the process, from selection to implementation and enjoyment. For example, in the construction of a Cultural House, people should be able to contribute from the stage of consulting to the stage of designing, choosing the construction site, deciding on the scale, quality, equipment and even participating in the management of the Cultural House. Only then it will be suitable for the people's needs and their living habits as well as maintaining the sustainability of this institution. In addition, more power should also be given to the community in protection and promotion of cultural heritage values. Cultural heritage, regardless of its type, tangible or intangible, belongs to the community. Therefore, it is essential that the people - subjects of cultural heritage - protect and promote their heritage themselves. Building content in cultural criteria in the Program on Building New-Style Rural Area for the 2026-2030 period requires the maximum participation of cultural owners, while cultural management agencies and local authorities should only play the role of consultants and supporters.

2. PROPOSING THE PROCESS OF BUILDING CULTURAL CRITERIA

From above proposals, in the process of shaping the set of criteria for building new-style rural area for the 2026-2030 period, it is not advisable to build cultural criteria of a "national standard" nature, built by Central cultural managers. Instead, build cultural criteria that are suitable to actual needs of communities, ethnic groups and ensure the diversity of cultural traditions, inheritance and require a comprehensive, flexible approach and respect for cultural values, characteristics of each community as well as of cultural subjects. Therefore, the process of building the set of criteria for new-style rural area in general and building cultural criteria in particular should follow and combine following three basic directions:

Research and assessment:

+ Provinces/cities conduct surveys to identify the cultural status of communities and ethnic groups in the province/city. This helps understand cultural characteristics, customs, practices, festivals, languages, beliefs, and other important cultural elements that the community values and practices. Based on this scientific information, provinces/cities will build specific cultural criteria and targets (including equipment for cultural institutions, cultural house architecture, cultural heritage, customs and practices that need to be maintained and developed...) based on the Program's orientation framework.

+ At the grassroots level (commune, village), organize meetings and discussions with the participation of people so that they can express their cultural aspirations and needs. This ensures that cultural criteria accurately reflect what the community wants to maintain and develop.

Building criteria:

+ Cultural criteria need to ensure inheritance, flexibility, and can be adjusted to suit characteristics of each community and ethnic group. For example, there should be general criteria for building new cultural institutions or for preserving and promoting traditional cultural values (such as protecting languages, customs, and festivals), but the implementation method may vary depending on each community and ethnic group.

+ Each community, ethnic group has different cultural values, so it is impossible to apply a single set of criteria to all. Criteria should include factors such as protecting and promoting tangible and intangible cultural heritage, protecting and promoting languages, festivals, arts, forms of community organization, etc.

+ Assessment of cultural criteria and targets needs to ensure fairness and balance between cultural elements and types (traditional culture - contemporary culture, tangible culture - intangible culture, majority ethnic



culture - minority ethnic culture) and regional culture - local culture.

+ Assessment and measurement should be based on cultural criteria provided by localities. For example, the number of traditional festivals held, the proportion of residents participating in cultural preservation activities, the number of traditional handicrafts produced and consumed, rituals honouring cultural values of ethnic groups maintained and developed, etc.

Organizing ongoing community feedback programs:

For building new-style rural area in general and the sustainability of cultural criteria in particular, it is necessary to create a mechanism that allows people not only to participate in the decision-making process but also to continue to reflect and adjust criteria based on their experience and practical application results. An effective feedback mechanism is not only about simply collecting opinions but also ensuring that feedback is expressed freely, transparently, listened to and systematically put into practice. Avoid the tendency to formalize and represent in collecting feedback as it is the reality in some localities. Feedback programs need to be designed flexibly and sensitively to cultural characteristics and actual situation of each community and locality (languages, expression, accessibility, etc.), helping improve representation and transparency. Even reports on results of building new-style rural area at the local level should allow the community to respond to see if they agree with assessments, and whether those assessments are truly true to the actual situation that is taking place.

3. CONCLUSION

Culture is always an important content in the set of criteria for building new-style rural area. In the set of criteria for building new-style rural area for the 2026-2030 period, culture is a field that should stand alone with specialized criteria. Overcoming limitations of cultural perspectives as well as implementation of cultural criteria and targets in previous periods, in this period, building cultural criteria as well as perceiving culture in the overall set of criteria for building new-style rural area needs to be more cautious; consistent with currently updated perceptions of culture and cultural diversity; more closely following reality and better adapting to the context of implementing the two-tier local government organization model with the expansion and integration of geographical, residential and economic areas; the main trend of labour flows and migration is still from the rural area to the urban area; rural people are increasingly proactive and dynamic in life; building modern, developed and

comprehensively integrated new-style rural area while still maintaining traditional identity, rural area is still rural area without dissolving into the city. With the spirit of "building new-style rural area has a starting point but no ending point", the process of building new-style rural area has been and is continuing to be carried out with increasingly appropriate orientations, in which principled orientations on the content and process of building cultural criteria are necessary in the National Target Program on Building New-Style Rural Area for the 2026-2030 period.■

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