

# A Literature review on the livelihoods of the Thai ethnic group resettled by hydroelectric projects in Vietnam<sup>1</sup>

**Le Hai Dang**

Assoc. Prof. Dr., Institute of Social Sciences Information, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences

Email: lehaidang74@gmail.com

Received 10 October 2023; published 15 November 2023

**Abstract:** *Hydroelectric plant projects have greatly contributed to providing energy for the cause of industrialization and modernization of the country and socio-economic development in Vietnam. However, there are inadequacies in the process of migration and resettlement that affect sustainable development. Livelihood instability has created several social consequences, such as spontaneous migration, destruction of environmental resources and especially poverty. These inadequacies are identified through published studies on the livelihoods of the Thai people resettled by the construction of hydroelectric power plants.*

**Keywords:** Thai People, Resettlement, Hydropower Resettlement, Livelihood, Sustainable Development

## 1. Introduction

The Communist Party and the Government of Vietnam have pursued several major schemes and policies, enabled through large-scale socio-economic development programs, in order to foster industrialization and modernization. Among those, the construction of modern and large-capacity hydropower facilities is to meet the energy demand from industrial production and to regulate water resources for agricultural irrigation.

Hydropower projects are often located in the upstream mountainous areas where many ethnic minorities reside. These groups of people live on farmed and foraged food, so land and water are of great importance to them. As the building of hydropower plants displaces those who live at the locations, the people have to leave their land and abandon their experience-based farming and knowledge which are the core values of their built-through-generations cultures. Ensuring the people's production and living conditions in resettlement areas are the key policy but also the big challenge to all-level authorities. The resettled communities face a lot of difficulties due to restricted pool of cultivable land and limited capability for job switch.

---

<sup>1</sup> The article is part of the ministry-level research project "The livelihoods of the Thai people in Ban Ve Hydropower Resettlement Area in Nghe An province" (2023-2024) led by Assoc. Prof. Le Hai Dang (PhD) and managed by Institute of Social Sciences Information.

## 2. International literature on livelihoods and resettlement

*On livelihoods*, the popularization of livelihood and sustainable livelihood concepts started in 1980s owing to studies on rural development and poverty reduction. Most development projects adopted the sustainable livelihood approach when dealing with poverty and poverty reduction, resulting in the development of various analytical frameworks on sustainable livelihoods (Ashley and Carney, 1999: 4-5).

Chambers and Conway (1992) were the pioneers to introduce the connotations of livelihood and sustainable livelihood. Livelihood from their view includes capabilities, assets and activities necessary for earning a living. Sustainable livelihood therefore should be considered through both social and environmental dimensions. The research suggested gender as the key among determinants to livelihood activities.

Livelihood later became increasingly central in development projects and assessments of living standards. Studies on how people around the world make their living had proposed different sustainable livelihood strategies, which then laid foundation for building development indicators. Ellis (2000), for example, considered livelihood as assets (including natural, physical, human, financial, and social capital) and each individual or farming household was entitled to access those assets. Meanwhile, Koos Neefies was interested more in the relationship between poverty and environmental changes. He believed the relationship was founded not only on theories and history but practical development experiences as

well. Besides, he analyzed how livelihood strategies could address the causes of environmental degradation and poverty (Cited from: Nguyen Thi Tam, 2017: 19-20).

Lestrelin and Giordano (2007) through their study on the livelihoods of ethnic groups in northern Laos stated that changes in the people's livelihoods depended greatly on different environmental conditions despite the Government's policy efforts in improving both economic and social conditions. Even land of poor conditions, for both quantity and quality, remained very critical to the people's livelihood and investing more labor and utilizing better this resource were their adaptation strategy.

Through the lens of an economic anthropologist, Clammer (2001) discussed a wide range of theoretical and practical aspects of livelihoods in different countries. Seeing economic anthropology as a discipline focusing on the material sides of life, from production, distribution, and consumption, in a cultural and social context, one of Clammer's important contributions was his classification of economic systems by four types: society based, ecology based, production based, and culture based. This classification allowed his nearly complete reflection of Asian people's livelihood activities: hunting and gathering, shifting cultivation, farming, fishing, and nomadic living. Clammer held that economic studies should not consider rationality and optimization of people's decision only but also ecological and cultural aspects as people's interpretation of natural environment was often expressed in ritual or religious forms (Cited from: Le Manh Hung, 2022).

*On resettlement*, according to Guggenheim and Cernea (1993), social science studies on resettlement since 1980s had increased exponentially and become a critical topic. The World Bank soon after initiated studies on resettlement and, in one of its publications in 2000, discussed the concept and practices of involuntary resettlement in several countries like China, Thailand, Indonesia, Brazil, and Togo. The purpose of the study was to evaluate the problems resulted from involuntary resettlement in different countries for lessons learned and suggestion of optimal solutions (World Bank, 2000).

In 1998, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) carried out assessments and proposed solutions to minimize risks of resettlement, particularly involuntary resettlement. It then published a handbook on resettlement with guide to good practice, in which the Bank outlined its policies on involuntary resettlement. In addition to the resettlement impacted scenarios, the handbook also introduced involuntary resettlement related concepts and it then became a working document for the ADB staff and its consultants (Cited from Le Manh Hung, 2022).

*On environmental and social issues*, practices show resettlement has impacts on all aspects of the people's life, first and foremost their livelihoods, then their cultures and social environment. Studies in the 1990s by Kloos (1990) and Croll (1999) attested that poverty and impoverishment were the two severe consequences of involuntary resettlement despite the absence of resettlement risks. Resettlement also has relation with land issues, food security, and income levels (Webber and McDonald, 2004; Cernea and Schmidt-

Soltau, 2006). The main causes to the decline in living standards include loss of farmland, limited market access, and disruption of established social networks. Parasuraman (2001) and Scudder (2005) also specified the impact of hydropower dams on the environment and ecosystem of the resettled communities.

*On farmland, adaptation, and livelihood transformation*, Cernea and Guggenheim (1993) were the first to adopt the anthropological approach to resettlement when studying involuntary resettlement in several countries. They looked at its different angles such as: involuntary resettlement, human capital, and economic development; drivers of post-resettlement economic adaptation and society in Ethiopia; involuntary displacement and changes in kinship in Orissa. They believed that the poor and hasty design of the resettlement program had produced negative impacts on the economic life, culture, living environment, and the health of the people. The construction of the hydropower plants not only contributed to deforestation but upset the land use structure of the local communities.

Resettlement process also increases the risks of losing productive land and being unemployed that affect the people's livelihoods and food security. Resettlement communities often consists of a large number of household members as their economic and social forces. Nevertheless, these households have to split into smaller households in order to receive more subsidies from the government, weakening the household economy and the role of the household heads. In addition, resettlers often encounter unfriendly competition from the locals for natural resources. The

research by Cernea and Guggenheim (1993) showed the evidences collected through anthropological fieldwork for the fundamental problems at resettlement areas, which could be helpful for the development plans in resettlement projects. The anthropological approach also complements previous studies on resettlement regarding structural defects and social and cultural changes.

### **3. Livelihoods of the Thai people in hydropower resettlement areas**

The Thai is an ethnic group residing mostly in the valleys of the northwestern mountainous provinces of Lai Chau, Dien Bien, Son La, Hoa Binh and the western areas of Thanh Hoa and Nghe An provinces. The Thai communities therefore are often at disadvantage of local construction of hydropower plants in a direct and large-scale manner. An outsized number of studies on livelihoods and hydropower resettlement is dedicated to the Thai people, particularly those in Son La and Lai Chau provinces.

*Wide ranging impacts of the hydropower construction process* on the economic and social life of the Thai communities have been of great research interest. These studies provide a socio-economic assessment of the impacts of hydropower plant construction on resettlement communities. Hoang Lan Anh and Truong Quoc Long (2004) and Pham Quang Hoan (2012) indicated that moving to new places for resettlement caused dramatic changes to the economic and social life of the local Thai communities. Their studies also considered the people's wellbeing and economic opportunities in resettlement areas and discussed the resettlement issues that should be taken into account.

Meanwhile, Lam Minh Chau (2010), Tran Van Ha (2012), and Pham Quang Linh (2017) focused more on the connections between the social and ecological environment and livelihoods and livelihood sustainability of the ethnic groups affected by hydropower construction. They also included the downstream communities while analyzing the fishery resources, the construction of hydropower dams in the main run of rivers, responses against the poverty of the downstream people, and the impacts of water discharge from hydropower plants.

*Resettlement policies* have been reflected in studies by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (2004), Lo Van La (2012), and Dieu Chinh Toi (2015). The authors examined the scientific base of the land policy planning and making process, the immigration plans and scenarios for land clearance and resettlement, and how a master plan for immigration and resettlement and an environmental impact assessment had been built for the government's approval of the Son La hydropower project. Besides, Tong Van Chung (2005), Do Van Hoa (2006), and Dang Nguyen Anh (2008) also provided an in-depth review, with evidences from surveys, of support policies for hydropower resettlement projects in vocational training, occupational change, and concessional loans from the bank for social policies.

Another focus is *environmental and social impacts of resettlement projects*. Dang Ngoc Ha (2015) and Tran Thi Mai Lan (2007) viewed resettlement as one of the complex issues that produced prolonged impacts on the displaced communities. People have to endure post-resettlement

problems such as disruptions of their living habits and cultural practices in a novel natural and social environment, resulting in limited income sources and life insecurity. According to Vi Van An and Bui Minh Thuan (2012) and Pham Quang Linh (2017), the biggest challenge to the resettled people's livelihood is the scarcity of production land and natural resources. The resettlement communities tend to rely on forest offerings for food and income, as their survival strategy, which in turn poses unsustainability risks to forest resources.

*Arable land and post-resettlement livelihoods*, from the views of Bui Van Tuan (2015) and Nguyen Duc Minh (2015), have become limited. The shrinkage of arable land is observed both in resettled and local communities. In particular, forest land and land for wet rice cultivation decreases significantly in resettlement areas. The studies also examined changes in the people's cultivation and husbandry practices and concluded that the land area allocated by the government was merely enough during the early stage of the resettlement and soon became exhausted after. Therefore, they suggested the application of technology into production should be seriously considered.

Looking at differences in the economic life of the Thai communities who resettled in the proximity to their old living areas and who intermingled, Nguyen Ngoc Thanh (2016) and Giang Van Trong (2015) noticed some issues, such as certain difficulty in sharing resources between the local and the latter group due to the government's slow compensation while lower productivity for the former group despite their changes of crops to adapt better to the

new production environment. People's adaptation, according to Lam Minh Chau (2010) and Pham Quang Hoan (2012), depends largely on their available assets and livelihood strategies. Nevertheless, novel living conditions and production materials, together with the poor quality of land and production, resources have weakened people's traditional farming methods, resulting in their more unstable living conditions, higher risk of falling into poverty, and greater dependence on the government subsidies. Meanwhile, Nguyen Duc Minh (2015) and Bui Thi Minh Hang et al (2013) noted the small-scale livestock and fish farming of several 'progressive' resettled households, but as well their obstacles related to the grazing land and market access. The survey results for hydropower resettlement communities, therefore, often indicate an increase of social evils and significant numbers of hired and unemployed people with a major part of young adults.

In addition, the most prominent urgency is to create new and suitable livelihoods for the resettled in order to ensure their economic stability and sustainability. Due to limited room for enhancing production areas, support policies in vocational training and improvement of production techniques are possible solutions (Tong Van Loi et al, 2015).

*On post-resettlement cultural issues and cultural preservation*, existing literature provides a comprehensive and systematic review of the Thai's cultural wealth and diversity, focusing on their identity characteristics, ethnic cultural elements, and the requirement of preserving those cultural identities in resettlement areas. Other research works (Pham Quang Hoan,

2012; Nguyen Ngoc Thanh, 2016; Nguyen Thi Hao, 2011; Vu Truong Giang, 2007) have also looked at different aspects of ethnic culture and post-resettlement cultural preservation.

Ban Ve Hydropower Plant is considered a large-scale project with a wide range of impacts on the local and the Thai communities, such as livelihoods, resettlement, and development, for which literature remains limited. Apart from few media statements on immigration and resettlement, only the research by Vi Van An and Bui Minh Thuan (2012) on resettlement and livelihood changes of the Thai in Ma village, Thanh Huong commune, Thanh Chuong district in Nghe An province could count. Their focus of study was on the relationship between resettlement and livelihoods and centered around human factors in order to clarify the people's adaptation strategies in new social environment. They provided also some resettlement related policy analysis and suggestions for sustainable livelihoods against the identified issues in resettlement areas.

### Conclusion

In summary, there is a significant number of studies on hydropower migration and resettlement, leaning towards livelihoods and livelihoods for ethnic groups. Particular interest in the Ban Ve Hydropower Plant project remains restricted though, given that the project has been in operation for over ten years up to now. This necessitates further studies with comprehensive views on economic, cultural and social aspects to provide scientific base and practical foundation for more appropriate policy suggestions and adjustments for local development programs □

### References

#### Vietnamese

1. Vi Van An and Bui Minh Thuan (2012), "Resettlement and livelihood changes of the Thai in Ma village, Thanh Huong commune, Thanh Chuong district in Nghe An province", *Ethnology*, No. 2, pp. 33-42.
2. Dang Nguyen Anh (2008), "Hydropower migration and resettlement from a sociological approach", *Sociology*, No. 2, pp. 23-27.
3. Hoang Lan Anh and Truong Quoc Long (2004), *An assessment of living standard and economic development potential for the Son La Hydropower Plant project: A case study of Tan Lap, Hanoi*.
4. Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (2004), *Summary of the master plan for migration and resettlement for the Son La Hydropower Plant project*, Hanoi.
5. Lam Minh Chau (2010), "Resettlement and changes in economic life of the Thai in Nam Ren village, Chieng Son commune, Moc Chau district, Son La province", *Ethnology*, No. 2, pp. 43-51.
6. Tong Van Chung (2005), "Hydropower resettlement from a sociological management view", *Public Management*, No.116, pp. 35-38, 55.
7. Vu Truong Giang (2007), "Impacts of Son La hydropower resettlement projects on preservation and promotion of the knowledge of the local Thai", *Educational Theories*, No. 12, pp. 47-49.
8. Dang Ngoc Ha (2015), "Cultural and material changes among the Thai community during the Son La hydropower resettlement process: the case of Nhap

- village, Chieng Lao commune, Muong La district, Son La province”, The 7<sup>th</sup> National Conference for the Thai studies, The Gioi Publishing House, Lai Chau, pp. 233-241.
9. Tran Van Ha (Chief Editor, 2012), *Impacts of hydropower dam construction on livelihood development of the downstream communities*, Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi.
  10. Nguyen Thi Hao (2011), “Cultural preservation during the process of Son La hydropower resettlement”, *Southeast Asian Studies*, No. 1, pp. 73-76.
  11. Do Van Hoa (2006), “Hydropower resettlement policies for sustainable development”, *Sociology*, No. 3, pp. 99-105.
  12. Pham Quang Hoan (Chief Editor, 2012), *Ethnic culture in the lake bed and resettlement areas: the Son La Hydropower Plant project*, Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi.
  13. Le Manh Hung (2022), *Livelihoods of the Khmu people in the hydropower resettlement area in Thanh Chuong district, Nghe An province*, Doctorate thesis in Anthropology, Graduate Academy of Social Sciences, Hanoi.
  14. Lo Van La (2012), “Some questions on migration and resettlement of the Thai for the Son La Hydropower Plant project”, The 6<sup>th</sup> National Conference for the Thai studies, The Gioi Publishing House, Thanh Hoa, pp. 476-482.
  15. Tran Thi Mai Lan (2007), “The Thai in the resettlement area in Tan Lap commune, Moc Chau district, Son La province”, *Ethnology*, No. 1, pp. 22-25.
  16. Pham Quang Linh (2017), *Livelihoods of the Thai resettled community for Son La Hydropower Plant*, Doctorate thesis in Anthropology, Graduate Academy of Social Sciences, Hanoi.
  17. Tong Van Loi, Do Van Kien, Vu Thi Ngoc Ha (2015), “Some issues among ethnic groups during the resettlement process for Son La Hydro Power Plant”, The 7<sup>th</sup> National Conference for the Thai studies, The Gioi Publishing House, Lai Chau, pp. 682-689.
  18. Nguyen Duc Minh (2015), “Economic changes among the Thai community in the resettlement area in Hoa 2 village, Tan Lap commune, Moc Chau district”, The 7<sup>th</sup> National Conference for the Thai studies, The Gioi Publishing House, Lai Chau, pp. 491-499.
  19. Nguyen Thi Tam (2017), *Livelihoods in the fishing villages along the Lo river in the two provinces of Tuyen Quang and Phu Tho*, Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi.
  20. Nguyen Ngoc Thanh (2016), *Culture of the ethnic groups in the Lai Chau hydropower bed area*, Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi.
  21. Dieu Chinh Toi (2015), “Slow compensation for the resettled communities in Son La”, *Magazine for Ethnic Groups and Mountainous Areas* dated 16 June 2015, <http://dantocmiennui.vn/kinh-te-xa-hoi/cong-tac-boi-thuong-di-dan-tai-dinh-cu-o-son-la-con-cham/2119.html>
  22. Giang Van Trong (2015), “Differences in the economic life of the Thai communities who resettled in the proximity to their old living areas and who intermingled in the villages of Na Nong (Chieng Lao, Muong La) and Mai Quynh (Muong Bon, Mai Son)”, The 7<sup>th</sup> National Conference for the Thai

studies, The Gioi Publishing House, Lai Chau, pp. 531-540.

23. Bui Van Tuan (2015), "Social changes of the Thai communities in the Son La hydropower resettlement areas", The 7<sup>th</sup> National Conference for the Thai studies, The Gioi Publishing House, Lai Chau, pp. 541-552.

### English

24. Ashley, Caroline and Carney, Diana (1999), *Sustainable livelihoods: Lessons from early experience*, DFID, UK, pp. 4-5.
25. Cernea, Michael M. and Guggenheim, Scott E. (1993), *Anthropological approaches to resettlement: Policy, practice and theory*, Westview Press.
26. Cernea, M.M. and Schmidt-Soltau, K. (2006), "Poverty risk and national parks: Policy issues in conservation and resettlement", *World Development*, 34 (10), 1808-1830.
27. Croll, E.J (1999), *Involuntary resettlement in rural China: Field observations*, World Bank Publications, Washington, DC.
28. Ellis, F. (2000), *Rural livelihood and diversity in developing countries*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
29. Kloos, H. (1990), "Health aspects of resettlement in Ethiopia", *Social Science and Medicine*, 30 (6).
30. Bui Thi Minh Hang, Pepijin Schreinemachers and Thomas Berger (2013), "Hydropower development in Vietnam: Involuntary resettlement and factors enabling rehabilitation", *Land Use Policy*, 31(2013): 536-544.
31. Neefjes, Koos (2000), *Environments and livelihood: Strategies for sustainability*, Oxfam, Oxford, Vietnamese edition, National Political Publishing House, Hanoi.
32. Parasuraman, S. (2001), *Impact of dams on natural resources dependent and vulnerable communities*, Discussion paper at the 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Asian Training and study Session.
33. Scudder, T. (2006), *The future of large dams: dealing with social, environmental, institutional and politics cost*, Sterling, London.
34. Webber, M. and McDonald, B. (2004), "Involuntary resettlement, production and income: evidence from Xiaolangdi, PRC", *World Development*, 32 (4), 673-690.
35. World Bank (2000), *Involuntary resettlement: Comparative perspective*, Transaction Publishers, USA.