

Physical capital of the resettled community under the Ban Ve hydropower project in Nghe An province¹

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Abstract: *The Ban Ve hydropower project, which was aimed to promote the socioeconomic development in Nghe An province, has benefited greatly local people, particularly the Thai and the Khmu communities. Their life was gradually improving after the resettlements. The government's policies and international support have been focused on building natural capital, financial capital, and more importantly physical capital to restore the people's livelihoods and ensure the success of the development project.*

Keywords: Ban Ve Hydropower Plant, Livelihood, Physical Capital, Resettlement, Thai People, Nghe An Province

1. Introduction

The construction of Ban Ve Hydropower Plant (BVHP) in Tuong Duong district, Nghe An province had enormously affected the local ethnic groups. Among those, the Thai people experienced the most pronounced impacts. A total number of 13,735 people from 2,910 households residing in 31 villages of eight communes in Tuong Duong district had to relocate due to the BVHP project. There are three forms of relocation: voluntary relocation [*di dân tự nguyện*] (1,170 people from 236 households), community relocation

[*di dân tập trung*] (12,214 people from 2,622 households in the districts of Thanh Chuong and Tuong Duong), and elevated relocation [*di vén*]² (346 people from 52 households in the area of the hydropower reservoir in Tuong Duong district) (Tuong Duong District People's Committee, 2023). Many policy solutions by the central and local governments have been put in place to facilitate the resettlement and stabilization of the people's socioeconomic life before, during, and after relocation (Le Hai Dang, 2023: 12).

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² The depth of the reservoir is 120-plus meters. If the water level is above 120 meters, people living close to the reservoir would start to relocate to the mountainside areas of higher elevation. The households in the lowest areas would relocate first; those in the higher areas would relocate later if the water level continues to elevate to their areas.

2. Research approach

Studies on livelihoods adopt different approaches to the issue but there is no a one-size-fit-all method. This study targets the resettled Thai community at the BVHP site following the theory of five capitals of sustainable livelihood by the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID). The five capitals that help ensure a sustainable development of people's livelihoods, according to DFID, include natural capital, human capital, social capital, physical capital, and financial capital (Le Hai Dang, 2023: 13). Physical capital, in particular, refers to fundamental social services and assets that people can use for their livelihoods, such as transport connectivity, electricity, household and production water systems, schools, community places, government workplaces, houses, farms, family valuable assets, production tools, etc.

The key focus of this article is the physical capital of the resettled Thai people under the BVHP in Nghe An province. The primary source of data was collected through field observations, in-depth interviews, and focused group discussions with the Thai resettlers in the study location in April 2023.

3. Physical capital of the resettled Thai people

We studied the physical capital by three groups of the resettled Thai during our field visits to different locations of resettlement under the BVHP. The summary of key findings is as follows.

3.1. Voluntary relocation

People of voluntary relocation are those whose houses or productive land are

not affected by the project and therefore are not subject to relocating. However, the project could impact their social and business relations and change their living environment as their neighbors, family relatives, or customers move to new places. In such cases, local authorities would support their voluntary relocation by purchasing their assets and estates. Those households, with the payments from the government, are responsible for their resettlement by themselves (Le Hai Dang, 2023: 13-14).

For those of voluntary relocation their physical capital is difficult to determine due to its location-based variability. These people might live close to their relatives or move to other communes and districts. Upon their residing locations, physical capital (electricity, roads, schools, stations, etc.) would differ.

There is also a group of people with 'unplanned' relocation after their resettlement for both subjective and objective reasons (inability to adapt with the new climate conditions, inability to live in harmony with adult children or grandchildren, shortage of productive land, underemployment, and so forth). These people often move spontaneously to their preferred places like the case of 13 families who reside at an 'unplanned relocation site' in Khe Hoc village, Huu Khuong commune, Tuong Duong district. It takes about two hours by motorboat from the wharf located at the foot of the hydropower dam and half an hour walking (or ten minutes by motorbike) on a dirt road to reach the site in Khe Hoc. Thanks to the joint effort by the local government and the

BVHP for a power grid built in 2022, the life of people here has improved. Phone communications however remain limited due to nonexistence of signal towers in the location. People source water from higher mountainous areas through their self-erected pipelines. There are not yet canals, water tanks, or irrigation stations. Underdeveloped infrastructure obstructs the local production and trade and raises production and transportation costs.

3.2. Elevated/mixed relocation

Elevated relocation under the BVHP only accounted for very small proportions, 1.79 per cent of the total households (52 over 2,910) and 2.52 per cent of the relocated population (346 out of 13,735). Elevated relocation is a distinctive feature of hydropower projects and often occurs during the reservoir construction and water reserving phases. People living close to the reservoir move to higher areas for production and resettlement. Nevertheless, elevated relocation is neither seen rural nor urban resettlement in scholastic term and therefore has not been frequently used in normative and policy documents on compensation and support, particularly since the Son La Hydropower Project. The small population of elevated relocation under the BVHP has now integrated into the other local communities, which is also referred to as mixed relocation. Thus, the elevated relocation of the 52 households in Yen Na commune (Tuong Duong district) could be classified as mixed rural resettlement.

There are advantages of the elevated/mixed relocation as people only move within close proximity and could make use of the semi-submerged waters for production, fishing, and even tourism development. It is also

easier for them to adapt in similar natural environment and climate conditions. The drawbacks of this relocation form include dispersed and unstable resettlement, restricted transport conditions due to higher elevation, and lack of clear space for infrastructure development. In particular, residential and production area would become scarcer.

As for the physical capital of the 52 households in Yen Na commune, their houses, barns, and other valuable assets has basically remained unchanged before and after the BVHP. They benefit from the existing infrastructure, like roads and power and water systems, in the new village where they resettle. Despite some transport difficulties, as above mentioned, the conditions in the new village are generally comparable to those in their old one, as confirmed through in-depth interviews with some of the households. In addition, there was a budget from the relocation project for the construction of infrastructure in the mixed resettlement areas.

3.3. Community relocation

People with community relocation is the dominant population, making up of 90.1 per cent of the total relocated households (2,622 over 2,910) and 88.93 per cent of the total population (12,214 out of 13,735 people). There are 37 community relocation sites in the two districts of Tuong Duong and Thanh Chuong as demonstrated in the below table.

Investments in physical infrastructure in resettlement areas in the districts of Tuong Duong and Thanh Chuong comply with the compensation regulations and support policies for relocated people. The two critical policy documents include Decree

Table: Distribution of the community relocation population

| District | Number of households | Number of people | Number of relocation sites | Density (on average) |
|--------------|----------------------|------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| Tuong Duong | 485 | 2,321 | 7 | 331 people per site |
| Thanh Chuong | 2,137 | 9,893 | 30 | 329.8 people per site |
| Total | 2,622 | 12,214 | 37 | 330 people per site |

Source: Report on the results of the resettlement policy implementation for the BVHP in Tuong Duong district, Nghe An province (2023).

22/1998/NĐ-CP dated 24 April 1998 and Decree 197/2004/NĐ-CP dated 3 December 2004. There are also Dispatch 1174/CV-NLKD dated 16 March 2004 for the short-term regulations on compensation, relocation, and resettlement under the Ban La (now Ban Ve) Hydropower Project, the 1993 Law of Land, the 2003 Law on Land, and other documents by the Nghe An Provincial People's Committee in different periods for the compensation and support to resettlers due to land acquisition in Nghe An province.

Thanks to the regulations, the quality of some physical infrastructure works at the time of relocation (2005) were equivalent or even better in the resettlement areas, as in the words of the officials in Tuong Duong district (at the meeting with the research team) and the resettled communities (through interviews). Previously there were no concrete roads and people from many out of 31 villages in 8 communes had to travel on dirt roads, which were challenging to cross under the rain. One resident shared that the rain made the roads “harder to walk on, let alone travel

by motorbikes or cars as currently” (Mr L.X.T., 67, Ban Ve village, Yen Na commune). At the moment, most of the roads in resettlement areas are classified as the B type for rural areas, covered with standard crushed stone, connecting all households in the resettlement areas.

Since the roads were improved, people bought motorbikes and cars for better travel and transportation. Goods from the lowlands become more available and people also have more options for their necessities. Investors not just

developed infrastructure in resettlement areas but established connectivity between districts where communities resettled. In Tuong Duong district, for example, the Management Board of the Hydropower Plant 2 constructed a road of 14.5 kilometers linking the Plant with Cua Rao 2 village in Xa Luong commune, upgraded the public road from Cua Rao bridge to the construction sites, and built the bridges of Cua Rao and Khe Ve. Local transport thereby has much improved (Tuong Duong District People's Committee, 2023).

There are 50kVA transformers at almost relocation sites. People previously had no electricity but now enjoy power at home, except the case of communities in Ca Moong village, Luong Minh commune, Tuong Duong district due to the nonexistence of a transformer here. The life of people changes as they now can use radio, TV, cell phones, smart phones, internet, fans, fridges, milling machines, etc. for their life and production. People have access to different sources of information on societal, politics, or best practices of

production, farming models, and disease handling, etc., which helps improve their resilience against potential risks and losses in life and production. As reported by the People's Committees of Tuong Duong and Thanh Chuong districts, there is stable domestic water supply in all resettlement areas to secure people's healthy living and production activities. In addition, irrigation in a few resettlement areas is upgraded to enable local production.

Public works such as kindergartens, community houses, and primary schools were also built by the investors in advance of the relocation. In Tuong Duong district, the Management Board of the Hydropower Project 2 had constructed and handed over six kindergartens, six community houses, six classrooms in six resettlement areas to Tuong Duong district authorities over the period of 2007-2009 (Tuong Duong District People's Committee, 2023). The availability of preschools and primary schools helps promote children's school attendance and reduce dropout rates (which used to be high due to long distance and difficulties traveling from home). Adequate education secures a better future for local children as many young adults, who were school children in the resettlement areas 15 years ago, have obtained secondary or high education and could now generate decent income to support themselves and their families.

Aside from remarkable results, some other community works are in need of improvement and upgrade. Several community houses and schools, despite being spacious, lack of supporting facilities such as toilets, water tanks, concrete courtyards, fences, etc., which

causes inconveniences for local residents, teachers, and students.

As for healthcare, there is a well-equipped and standardized health station at the resettlement site in Thanh Chuong district. The medical staff here, including six physicians but no doctors yet, are qualified healthcare providers. There are also medical teams in villages providing medical examination and treatment for people. The District Medical Center and the Provincial General Hospital are respectively 25 kilometers and 60 kilometers away from the resettlement area, at shorter distances compared to the previous residential area, and more accessible thanks to the improved transport infrastructure. This was affirmed by the majority of the surveyed respondents during the field study (FGD with the people in Tan Tien village, Thanh Son commune, Thanh Chuong district).

On housing, resettled people often preferred two options: accepting resettlement compensation for their construction of their own houses, or moving into houses prefabricated by the investors. In Tuong Duong district, among 537 resettled families of 2,667 people, 405 families (75.5%) opted for the former and 132 families (24.5%) for the latter. Most people, when moving in, thought their new houses in the resettlement areas, regardless being own-built or prefabricated, were better than their old ones because of the attentiveness of investors. In the Vietnamese culture, secured dwelling is the first thing to start a new life, as the old saying "settling then thriving".

Nevertheless, there are also housing issues in resettlement areas like those in Khe O and Khe Choong. Many newly built houses here, only after their few years of use,

are in a state of deterioration with either subsided foundation, cracked walls, or nearly collapsed pillars. The construction of these houses was contracted by the Management Board of the Hydropower Project 2. Some families living in the constant fear of house collapse, like Mr Lo Van Hung's, had proposed to return their houses. The contractor, however, was no longer operating in the locations while the Management Board of the Hydropower Project 2 could yet be able to locate their financial resource to tackle the problems. Local governments, on the other hand, have no project management authority to be able to offer stronger interventions (Quang Long, 2005).

Several families in other resettlement areas have not yet secured their housing. In Khe Chanh village, for example, a number of people suffer from house subsidence or collapse and have to seek rent-free or paid accommodation. There were previously two resettlement sites on both the stream banks in Ban Ve village, but now only one left. Three years ago, 43 households at Khe O relocation site had to abandon their houses because of landslides; three families remain at the place. The resettlers living by the stream at Ban Ve are constantly nervous of landslide incidents, which occurred in three recent years, resulting in the moving of some households to the other side of the village. People's life is still at risk with sporadic fallen trees, landslides, or falling boulders. "I have to currently stay with my daughter, especially at night I always sleep at her house, only occasionally returning home to handle some work, because my house suffered landslides at night for several times, especially during storms",

said Mrs L.T.H., 56, who is living at the edge of Ban Ve village.

4. Conclusion

In brief, the infrastructure in resettlement areas have basically satisfied the people's needs for electricity, water, and roads that connect villages, schools, community houses, and medical stations. The improved living conditions are critical for people to stabilize and thrive. At the same time, the unresolved problems in several particular places have put the local people's life at risks. It requires more attention and timely responses from the Management Board of the Hydropower Project 2 and local governments in Nghe An province in order to help people settle down and promote production □

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(continue to page 24)