

Khmer ethnic people's participation in building new rural areas in the Mekong Delta: Current situation and raised issues

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Abstract: *Current theoretical research on development, guidelines and policies of the Party and State of Vietnam emphasize promoting the participation of ethnic minorities in all fields of social life, especially in development policies. Utilizing the results of a practical survey conducted in 2022, the article highlights the current status of Khmer ethnic people's participation in building new rural areas, and analyzes some issues related to their involvement in the process in the Mekong Delta.*

Keywords: Khmer Ethnic People, Building New Rural Areas, Mekong Delta, Vietnam

1. Introduction

The participation of Khmer people in the development of new rural areas means the behaviors and activities of the community through institutions and mechanisms in order to influence the decision making of related issues and work in the process. To ensure the rights of ethnic minorities, modern development theories emphasize the participation of ethnic groups in policy development. While conventional development theories misrepresent the significance of external resources to the development of ethnic groups and the top-down approach, the modern theories underscore the internal potency of ethnic groups by promoting full participation of communities.

On policies for equality, unity, mutual respect and assistance among ethnic groups (CPV, 2011), the Party's guidelines and the government policies prioritize the enforcement of democracy regulations at the grassroots level to ensure the effective participation of ethnic groups in general and the Khmer in particular. Resolution of the 7th Plenum of the 9th Central Committee specifies ethnic affairs as promoting the potency of ethnic groups, their self-reliance, and self-dependence; enforcement of grassroots democracy; active and proactive participation of communities in the making, implementation, and supervision of local policies, programs, socioeconomic development plans, and national security and defense; publicization of policies,

programs, projects, investments, etc. to increase community awareness, participation, and supervision (CPV, 2003). Decision 1719/QD-TTg dated 14 October 2021 by the Prime Minister approving Phase 1 (2021-2025) of the National Target Program for Socioeconomic Development Plan for Mountainous Regions and Regions with Ethnic Minorities 2021-2030 underlines one among key principles and solutions to the Program which is ensuring openness, democracy, and promotion of rights and proactive participation of communities and people and the striving spirit of ethnic minorities.

We conducted a survey¹ to obtain a practical understanding of the participation of the Khmer in the development of new rural areas in the Mekong Delta. The survey covered five priorities of the program in areas with the Khmer residents, namely (i) planning for new rural areas, (ii) construction and development of socioeconomic infrastructure, (iii) economic development and production planning, (iv) sociocultural promotion and environmental protection, and (v) development of political structure. These five priorities also ensure the principle of “people know, people discuss, people implement, people review, people supervise, and people benefit”.

2. Participation of the Khmer people in the development of new rural areas

2.1. Upsides

The positive results from the survey regarding the Khmer people's participation in the new rural program are as follows:

First, planning for new rural areas: 56% of the respondents confirmed their awareness of the draft plans; among those public servants at the village and commune levels accounting for 98.9%, households who provided feedbacks to the draft plans at the commune levels making up of 57%, and households with voluntary relocation for the construction of new rural areas taking up to 62%.

Second, construction and development of socioeconomic infrastructure: 63% of the respondents knew about the projects for power and road connections, construction of schools, medical stations, and cultural and commercial facilities. Respondents from households who provided feedbacks to the project priorities and implementation schemes accounted for 69.5%; households who contributed resources (funding, land, labor) to the realization of the projects accounted for 72.5%. Other households either offered the management of finished public works for the villages and communes (40%), or planned to renovate their houses for their families (79.5%).

Many reputable people from the Khmer community have played their part in mobilizing and contributing voluntarily resources for the development of socioeconomic infrastructure. An example is the Abbot of Thanh Gia Pagoda in Hoa Thanh hamlet, Dinh Hoa commune, Go Quao district, Kien Giang province who had called for contribution (in forms of labor, land, and cash) for the construction of more than 200 concrete bridges and rural roads (The Fatherland Front Committee of Dinh Hoa Commune, 2023). A family in Vien Binh commune, Tran De district, Soc Trang province donated more than 300 square meters of land for the building of

¹ A sample of 500 questionnaires for the Khmer people in three provinces of Soc Trang, Tra Vinh, and Kien Giang, with three villages in three communes of three districts in each province.

concrete roads and also mobilized nearly VND500 million for eight bridges and about VND600 million for dredging 14 irrigation canals (The Fatherland Front Committee of Vien Binh Commune, 2023). *Third*, economic development and production planning: 86% of the respondents shared their family representatives had provided comments on the plans for economic development and crop and livestock transformation at the hamlet and commune levels. Among the respondents, 85% supported and responded to the communes' crop and livestock transformation plans and 55% made effort in increasing non-agricultural income. Also 67.5% of the respondents said they would look for jobs if they had been unemployed. *Fourth*, sociocultural promotion and environmental protection: 50% responded that they had been informed of the local plans for sociocultural promotion and environmental protection; 78% said their families had received information on the elimination of illiteracy, universalization of preschool, primary, secondary, and high school education; 72% encouraged their children and family members to enroll in primary, secondary, and high schools. About 77.5% of the respondents had health insurance; 45% participated in cultural and artistic activities in their living areas; 70% joined humanitarian and charitable work and provided help to the elderly, children, people with meritorious services, people with disabilities, homeless people, and people with difficult living conditions; 65% reported there were volunteer groups for environmental protection in their hamlets [*áp*, *phum*, *soóc*] and 47.3% of those respondents participated in these groups themselves.

Fifth, development of political structure: 86% people in the survey had voted in the most recent elections for People's Council deputies at all levels and for the Hamlet Development Board and 93.3% among those believed voting was their individual right and responsibility. Also 82% of respondents said their family members contributed comments to the Party Committees, local authorities, people's organizations, and commune public servants and officials. These families provided comments mostly at the hamlet meetings (95.1%) and occasionally through private meetings (1.4%). More than half of respondents (54.5%) shared that their family members joined sociopolitical organizations like Youth Union, Women's Union, and Veterans Union. In addition, 60% of them confirmed their reports to local officials of illegal activities and 80% said they themselves or their family members had attended hamlet-level meetings for discussion and decisions on issues related to the rights and interests of households.

2.2. Downsides

The survey results also revealed the limited participation of the Khmer people as follows.

First, on planning for new rural areas: There are significant proportions of the Khmer people who did not know about (44%) or did not provide comments to (43%) the draft plan for new rural areas. Only 52.5% of the respondents said they voluntarily relocated and spared land for the local realization of new rural areas.

Second, on construction and development of socioeconomic infrastructure: 37% of the surveyed people were not aware of the construction plans for electricity, roads, schools, health stations, cultural

and commercial facilities in their hamlets and communes; 30.5% of them did not provide comments to the implementation of socioeconomic infrastructure projects; and 33% reported that their families were not invited to discussions on financial contribution to the projects for electricity, roads, schools, and health stations in their hamlets or communes. The number of families contributing to the development of socioeconomic infrastructure in terms of land and funding remained small while a higher number of those who provided limited labor or none. There were also 20.5% of the surveyed households who did not set goals or roadmaps for improvement of their current housing conditions.

Third, on economic development and production planning: 14% of respondents said their household representatives did not provide comments on the economic development and crop and livestock transition plans of their communes and hamlets; 15% did not support nor respond to these plans in their communes; and up to 32.5% of the Khmer people would not have an active job search if they were unemployment. The number of people who are members of agricultural cooperatives and production and business associations among the Khmer remains low. Up to 79% of households did not join in cooperatives or any production models. The underrepresented participation of the Khmer in economic development and production planning is one of the barriers to promoting economic development in their living areas.

Fourth, on sociocultural promotion and environmental protection: 22% of the survey participants said they were not aware of the information on illiteracy

eradication and universalization of early childhood education or primary, secondary, and high school education; 28% did not pay attention to promoting and encouraging the study of their children or family members; 22.5% did not have health insurance cards (of those 40.9% found health insurance unnecessary to buy). The majority of respondents (66.5%) said they did not provide comments on the development of regulations at their villages and hamlets; 30% did not join charity and humanitarian activities for the vulnerable groups (the elderly, children, people with meritorious services, homeless people, people with difficulties). On environmental protection, most of them thought the level of compliance with environmental protection regulations of the other households in their living areas was average; 36.5% reported that there were no local voluntary teams for environmental protection in the Khmer hamlets.

Fifth, on development of political structure: 14% of the respondents did not vote in the most recent election of deputies to the People's Councils and the Hamlet Development Boards; 18% did not contribute opinions to party committees, party organizations, authorities, people's organizations and commune officials and civil servants. Nearly half of surveyed people (45.5%) said they were not members of sociopolitical organizations like the Youth Union, Women's Union, Farmers Association and Veterans Association. They also shared their families did not report to local officials about illegal activities and evil acts (40%), neither attended the hamlet meetings for discussion on matters related to the rights and interests of their families (20%). Also 70.5% of the survey

participants said their family members did not join the commune or hamlet militia groups and up to 72% reported no family members participated in local voluntary security teams.

3. Discussion

First, promoting the active participation of the Khmer people in the development of new rural areas is essential for inclusive and sustainable development and ensuring the Khmer people's rights. Nevertheless, their involvement in this process has not yet met requirements for the Mekong Delta region in terms of access to information and discussion, self-management groups, monitoring and supervision roles, particularly regarding the five key activities of the new rural area development program. How to promote better the Khmer people's active role is a critical question.

Second, the internal advantages and resources of the Khmer people for their effective participation in the process is another issue. The active role of a group of people requires a certain level of capacity and conditions to allow them to have actual contribution to different sectors and development policies. Although the intellectual capacity and socioeconomic role of the Khmer people have been significantly improved in the process of reforms, there persists barriers such as multidimensional poverty (38.2% in 2017), illiteracy among the population of 15 years old and above (24.4%), low level of tertiary education (around 1%), unskilled labor (97.7%), unemployment (5% in 2009 and over 4% in 2022) (Ha Thi Khuyet, 2022). These are influencing factors to the participation of the Khmer in the development of new rural areas.

Third, it requires institutional mechanisms and policies that foster the participation of the Khmer community. Good designs of institutions and policies help address effectively fundamental issues and encourage the Khmer's self-reliance and advancement. Despite improvement of policies on ethnic minorities and the Khmer, there are still shortcomings as current policies promote external support rather than internal strength and resources within the community. The Khmer's unique identities are embedded in their culture, architecture, religion, art, music, and dance, as well as their community institutions, especially the role of accredited people. New thinking approach to those heritages and cultural values is important for promoting economic, cultural and social development and building capacity among the Khmer community. Existing policies and mechanisms, however, have not been synchronized and not taken into account these significant values. It therefore requires more proper policy designs to promote the cultural values of the Khmer people.

Fourth, the quality and efficiency of the local political system in the Khmer resided regions is another determinant to the participation of this community in the development of new rural areas. Despite the improvement during the reforms in the areas with ethnic minorities in general and the Khmer people in particular, the political shortcomings persist. The leadership capacity of party committees and party organizations remains limited for the implementation of ethnic policies and the promotion of democracy, especially at the grassroots level. The changes in the ways of working for the

Fatherland Front and civil organizations seem not yet to respond adequately while the number of the Khmer officials and civil servants is still low. To resolve these issues is the next step to be considered straight away.

4. Conclusion

The participation of ethnic minorities in general and the Khmer people in particular in the implementation of development policies as well as building new rural areas not only contributes to ensuring the rights of ethnic minorities, but is also an important requirement for a sustainable development and sustainable new rural areas. However, despite some positive results, the participation of the Khmer people in building new rural areas in the Mekong Delta remains inadequate. It therefore necessitates more attention to address the above mentioned issues to promote further the participation of the community □

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