

## THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL SECURITY AND POVERTY ON THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF ETHNIC MINORITIES (Analysis of the Southern Khmer people)

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1. The Cửu Long (Nine Dragons) river delta is one of vast size, inhabited by many ethnic groups, the Vietnamese, the Khmer, the Hoa, the Cham, and many others. These groups came to the region at different times, but they pool their efforts to build villages and dwellings. Having lived in the region for hundreds of years, communities inherit long standing traditions, and also bring new customs into existence, thus contributing to the making of a rich cultural area. In an era of industrialization and modernization, one in which we strive for “prosperity, democracy, equality, and civility”, the Cửu Long river delta struggles to undergo sustainable development, for it is not just subject to the difficulties that plague the whole country, but also to its own difficulties, those that are unique to a highly culturally diversified region. Of all those difficulties, poverty is perhaps the most alarming, and needs special attention.

Over the past years, we have participated in projects and scientific, cultural, and religious researches on

poverty reduction in remote and inaccessible regions that are home to ethnic minorities. We’ve also written papers on the growth of the labor force comprised of ethnic minorities (11, 12). In this paper, we discuss the relation between historical and societal characteristics and the sustainable growth of ethnic minorities, particularly the southern Khmer.

2. Due to numerous historical factors and due to prolonged diaspora, the vast majority of ethnic minorities in Vietnam are agricultural workers, and as such they live in the countryside. And not just any countryside. We are talking about the highlands and remote regions, which face increased difficulty in undergoing economic growth. Hence, the economies in such regions is still feeble and slow to grow, which means that they are far behind the rest of the country’s economy. To emerge from this predicament and to relieve themselves of having to be self-sufficient, the people in these areas must learn how to supply

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more than what is demanded and must find a market for their offerings.

Two major observations can be drawn from the agricultural growth of the Khmer people that inhabit the Cùu Long river delta. They do not pile up undesirable land or merchandise. Rather, they produce practical things that serve day to day functions and that are not prone to accumulation. In times past, the Khmer people, who are not after making profit, were satisfied with production that aimed only to serve the needs of their rustic selves. Nowadays, in light of the rampant market economy, things have certainly changed for the Khmer. Exchange is the catalyst for production and growth in a market economy. However, this stimulus is in conflict with the customs and habits of practically all ethnic minorities, not excluding the southern Khmer.

Domestic and foreign banks and organizations have made efforts to grant credit loans on a small scale to ethnic minorities at low interest rates to promote production. While implementing the Vietnam - Canada cooperation project which lasted from 1998 to 2003, we conducted a research that showed that using funds borrowed at low interest rates was not as effective as desired. Most loans made for production purposes did not yield favorable results. Some entities borrowed money without knowing the reason, and some return borrowed money immediately upon receipt for fear that they would be unable to repay their debts. Others yet store money

somewhere safe, for they are afraid to spend it. It's quite common for banks to be unable to recollect their debts. This is not so much because people intentionally choose not to pay, but rather because they do not know how to or are unable to use borrowed funds. Recent studies have given way to a new perspective. Khmer households do borrow money at low interest rates, but due to poor investment decisions, they experience losses and default on their loans, thus becoming "problematic clients" (4).

The apportioning of assets is still largely done from a socialist standpoint. The slowdown of economic growth clearly impacts the growth of human resources among ethnic minorities. Moreover, ethnic minorities in Vietnam are still much accustomed to rustic ways of life. The village, hamlet, commune still play pivotal roles in the lives of the people. Though the law still applies in each and every one of those villages, their inhabitants live on the basis of equality and under the direction of the village elders, clan chiefs, or priests.

To the Khmer, religion plays a very important role in the community. People live in harmony and affection. Their society is a collective one. Hence, the sense of collectivism has been engrained in their minds. They live for each other, die for each other. They also are unwilling to be away from their communities to partake in courses. It can be said then, that in a traditional society, those values made the bonds within a community stronger. In a modern

society, however, they impede human resources development among ethnic minorities.

However, in recent years, due to a lack of land, losses, ineffective investment, significant debts, and insufficient jobs available, a number of Khmer people have opted to leave their homeland in search of job prospects elsewhere. According to a number of assessments done by local authorities, there are approximately 60% to 70% of local households with members working in distant locations (4). The reason for this is that not only is there a lack of farm land, but also an increase in usage of agricultural machinery that lessens the need for manual laborers. In addition, since the Khmer are mostly poorly educated, they find themselves unable to cope with a life that gets increasingly difficult (6). Being void of unsteady jobs means being void of a stable life.

In addition, poverty still plagues many ethnic minority communities, which also hampers the growth of human resources. There are proportionately more ethnic minorities living below the poverty line than there are ethnic majorities. Curbing poverty among ethnic minorities is a long and arduous undertaking for developed and developing countries alike.

3. Ever since 1993, investigations have been conducted by numerous organizations in Vietnam to identify households in poverty (5). We, in particular, took Sóc Trăng under analysis, where there are three different ethnic groups. After studying the living

conditions of the Khmer in Sóc Trăng in 1993, we observed that 10.17% of households are above the poverty line, 22.35% are roughly on the poverty line, and 67.48% are below the poverty line. The two poorest districts of the province are Long Phú and Mỹ Tú, where poor households account for 72.02% and 72.65%, respectively. Thus, over two-thirds of Khmer households are deemed to be poor (7, 10). In 1994, Sóc Trăng conducted a study of 61,292 Khmer households, which suggested that Khmer households make up most of the poor population in the province's districts. In Thạnh Trị district in particular, 78.18% of Khmer households were living in poverty. In Mỹ Tú district, that number was 75.84% (7, 10). Studies of provinces in the vicinity of the Cửu Long river delta showed similar results: the poverty figure tends to be high in places where there are large concentrations of ethnic minorities (7, 10).

What is the correlation between poverty and the development of ethnic minorities? It could be said that in order to develop, a people needs to be educated. Poverty reduction and education depend on different factors, but are closely related to each other. Once poverty has been dealt with and education has been provided, human resources development is bolstered. A number of studies provided by OXFAM and the World Bank show that educational level is closely correlated to poverty. 20% of the poorest households go to school for an average of 20% less time than 20% of the wealthiest

households do. There is also a large disparity in literacy rates between these two groups of households. The studies also show that as educational level rises, poverty reduces. 90% of poor people are those who have, at best, just completed their high school studies. In contrast, rare are those who hold a university degree and are poor (7, 10).

The situation is similar in Vietnam. There are roughly more than one million Khmer, scattered across practically all southern provinces, but mostly in Sóc Trăng, Trà Vinh, and An Giang. In Sóc Trăng, the Khmer account for nearly 30% of the entire population. They make up over 50% of the population of 33 remote communes that are particularly poverty stricken. Studies on poor households conducted in 1992, 1994, and 1998 indicated that the percentage of poor households were on the decline (67.48%; 64.10%; and 33.10%, respectively). Regardless, it was still in excess of 30%. Out of the three ethnic groups residing in Sóc Trăng, the Khmer are proportionately poorer than the Việt and the Hoa (14). In recent years, the Khmer have seen lower rates of poverty thanks to the efforts of the local authorities and industries. Nonetheless, it is still relatively high. In Trà Ôn district (Vĩnh Long province), the Khmer constitute 5.63% of the population, but the percentage of Khmer households living in poverty is a whopping 61.7%, 4 times higher than the district's poverty ratio (15.26%) and 5 times higher than the province's poverty rate. In Cầu Ngang district, where the Khmer account

for 35% of the population, the situation is similar. "22.9% of the entire district is made up of poor households. The Khmer have a much larger percentage of poor households than do the Việt" (4). In An Giang, the Khmer also suffer from a high poverty rate. According to reports by the Departments of Agriculture and Rural Development of Tri Tôn and Tịnh Biên districts, where there are large concentrations of Khmer people, 50% of the households are below the poverty line (11, 12). As indicated by a survey done in 1989, 48.78% of the Khmer are illiterate, whereas this figure is 15.10% for the Mường, 13.38% for the Việt, 16.40% for the Hoa, and 23.80% for the Nùng. In seaside communes under the jurisdiction of Vĩnh Châu district, an even higher percentage (64%) of Khmer are illiterate. What is paradoxical is that even though the Khmer inhabit the plains, they have a much lower literacy rate than a number of ethnic minorities that dwell up in the mountains do. Only 12.30% of Khmer undergo schooling. Khmer that have reached at least secondary school account for a meager 0.18% of the entire population, whereas the Việt are associated with an equivalent figure of 1.31% (7).

Recent studies on education in Trà Vinh province have shown that there have not been significant changes. In Trà Ôn commune, 88% of households have individuals that have not finished pursuing their studies (14). Poor Khmer have low educational attainment. Most of the people above 40 years of age are either illiterate or became illiterate upon

graduation from elementary school. Our studies (10) have shown that poor households are those with low income and are lacking in a multitude of areas. Education is the key to escaping poverty. Still, children from poor families are not as free to undergo schooling as children from wealthy families are, partly because of the level of education of their parents. Poor households often have numerous children but poor income, so the tuition fees are often much too high for them to bear. Furthermore, the higher an individual advances up educational ranks, the more tuition must be paid. Hence, many families simply give up on furnishing their children with proper education. As an added insult to injury, poor people are especially susceptible to natural droughts, harvest risks, illnesses, bad debts... When money reserves are tight, poor families are compelled to pull their children out of school to lessen costs and to have them help out with family matters and contribute to earning extra income. This is very much a reality in the southeastern regions as well as in the Cửu Long river delta, where we had the opportunity to conduct our researches.

Inadequate education or illiteracy will directly affect an individual's ability to advance in society over the long term. From another angle, these impediments also hinder a people's development. Poor people who are poorly educated do not possess sufficient scientific or technical skills and are inept at absorbing information. Hence, to make a

living, the poor Khmer must rely predominantly on manual labor, agriculture, or employment (very common). Income from these forms of work is often very low, which is why such people are particularly vulnerable to risks.

Among the Khmer and other ethnic minorities, those who have non-agricultural jobs that require advanced knowledge and technical skills earn much higher incomes than those who are agricultural workers (a study conducted in Khánh Hậu, Long An province indicated that the commune went from having 17% of its population without land to 36% due to economic structure changes. Income here is 3 times higher than the average provincial income and 5 times higher than the average income in the Cửu Long river delta). Alas, poorly educated people have very few chances to change careers for the better.

It is clear that poor people are trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty and are deprived of opportunities to learn, to enhance their competitive edge. Poor people who do not have the means to go to school, are technically unqualified, and ultimately resort to manual labor are likely to remain poor and famished.

Low educational attainment is also a major barrier to entry of information. Poorly educated people experience great difficulty in taking in new information, branching out, and expanding their social network. Lack of social interaction and poor Vietnamese skills further cause poor people to be segregated from the rest of their

communities. Khmer people have few social contacts because the degree to which they interact with outsiders and Vietnamese is remarkably low. Being inadequately educated, poor people have a hard time grasping knowledge and information transferred through such media as books, newspapers, the radio, and television. These factors, in conjunction with their frame of mind, is a major cause for their reluctance to partake in meetings and seminars that are aimed at elevating knowledge. Thus, the poor are unable to take advantage of the opportunities presented before them to escape from poverty.

Moreover, as if to give up hope, poor people often rely on unofficial institutions like relatives, neighbors, creditors, etc. The poor seemingly do not have good access to official support from the government, and as such do not benefit from this support much. BIDV bank and poverty reduction funds focus on helping the poor. But oddly enough, in our experience, it is mostly rich people that borrow money from such funds.

Why is this the case? Because the poor do not have many opportunities to approach local authorities and are not well aware of policies. Being illiterate, they have no idea how to do the procedures necessary for making loans, payments, and getting a mortgage. To make matters worse, these procedures and regulations are complex, which makes it even more difficult for them to be understood by the poorly educated Khmer.

For ethnic minorities, notably the Khmer, education is correlated to wealth. To eliminate poverty and to achieve sustainable growth, it is necessary to promote higher education. Poor education maybe the cause for many socioeconomic problems, one of which is the poverty of the Khmer people, among others. Elevating the Khmer's and other minorities' educational level and cultural understanding would be breakthrough step that would allow them to better grasp opportunities for the betterment of their standard of living. This is an important element to the minorities' achieving stable development.

Sustainable development requires the development of human resources, which entails the labor productivity, willpower, and physical strength of a people. In order to promote the growth of the human resources of our nation's ethnic minorities, we need to approach them in a more extensive manner and we also need to have more effective solutions.

4. The cultures of Vietnam's ethnic minorities are the result of hundreds upon thousands of years of inheritance. Those cultural values have helped to enrich Vietnam's overall culture and are the driving force behind the Vietnamese people's ability to relentlessly overcome giant obstacles in times of war and hardship to achieve peace. Over time, cultural values do undergo change. There are values that have been exalted in times past, but are now deemed to be irrelevant or even a hindrance to development.

For ethnic minorities in Vietnam to develop and undergo sustainable growth, they must adapt to change. In order to adapt, they must be better educated. To be educated, they must rid themselves of poverty. Hence, there is a correlation between wealth and development. If poverty is not dealt with, it is extremely difficult to provide an impetus for development, let alone sustainable growth. However, the mistakes of any given people must be analyzed from a scientific standpoint to come up with remedial measures.

We deem it to be the case that it is an unspoken rule of development for cultural and societal changes to transpire at a slower pace than economic changes do. Scientific advances were tremendous in the wake of World War II. Science and technology continue to play an increasingly vital role in our everyday lives, but they do not necessarily impact culture. Up until now, agriculture continues to be the main sector of the economy. Thus, the Khmer make a living off of agricultural activities (over 90%). The process of industrialization in the Cửu Long river delta is a slow one, and therefore bears little impact on the lives of this region's inhabitants, which include the Khmer. The educational levels and skills of the Khmer are not up to par with the demand for development. This is a barrier, an obstacle that must be overcome if sustainable growth is to be achieved by the Khmer of the Southern regions.

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