

Employment of Environmental Migrants: A Case Study of Bao Hieu Commune, Yen Thuy District, Hoa Binh Province^(*)

Nguyen Quang Tuan

MA., Institute of Sociology, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences

Email: nguyenquangtuan9x@gmail.com

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Abstract: *Climate change has had huge impact on people's daily lives in many parts of Vietnam, including some districts of Hoa Binh province. Against this background, resettlement policy has been implemented to reduce impacts and damages caused by natural disasters to people. These resettlement programs, while designed to protect people's lives, pose a challenge of job creation to the resettled people in new residential areas. This paper investigates the employment situation of environmental migrants in Hoa Binh province with a case study of Bao Hieu commune, Yen Thuy district, Hoa Binh province and discusses some policy issues on accessibility to stable and sustainable jobs.*

Keywords: Employment, Resettlement, Climate Change, Hoa Binh Province

1. Introduction

Vietnam is amongst the countries that are jeopardized by natural disasters and climate change such as storms, floods, landslides, droughts, and so forth. The life and safety of people in many provinces and regions of the country therefore are greatly affected. Against the situation, there have been policies in place for

resettlement and other related issues in order to reduce the impact and damages caused by climate change. While relocation might bring new opportunities of livelihoods and improve the resilience of affected people, particularly ones with better economic conditions, it may also cause other constraints to poorer people, such as limited access to services, underemployment or lack of income opportunities, etc. (UN Vietnam, 2014). Hoa Binh is a northwestern province characterized by high mountains,

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streams with steep slopes, seasonal heavy rainfall together with the existence of hydroelectric reservoirs that pose high risks of flash floods and landslides. The recent damages from natural disasters of the province were indeed significant (Huu Trung, 2016). Thus, it has implemented resettlement programs for people from affected and disaster-prone areas.

Bao Hieu commune (Yen Thuy district, Hoa Binh province), the study location, is one of three resettlement sites (others including Yen Nghiep and Dong Tam communes in Yen Thuy district) for the people from Tan Mai and Phuc San communes^(*). There were two movements of a total of 75 households from these two communes to Bao Hieu.

Bao Hieu commune has an area of 28 km² and a population of 7,000 people, of which Muong ethnic group accounts for 85% and others are Kinh, Thai, and Dao people. Its poverty rate is 36%. The resettlement site in Bao Hieu is named Tan Phuc hamlet (from the two first words of Tan Mai and Phuc San). There were 77 households (with more than 300 people) in this hamlet as in May 2018. Each household is allocated a production area of 5,000 m² and a residential area of about 300-350 m² depending on the location the household picked^(**).

^(*) Tan Mai and Phuc San are two mountainous communes in Mai Chau district (Hoa Binh province) that suffered severe landslides due to natural disasters and climate change. They are about 100 km away from Bao Hieu commune.

^(**) Reported by the head of Tan Phuc hamlet.

What is the employment situation of the resettled people? What affects their employment and income? What is the difference between local and resettled people in accessing employment? The article will provide the answers for these questions based on qualitative data collected from 16 in-depth interviews with environmental migrants, local people, local officials, and mass organizations in Bao Hieu in May 2018. The author adopts the approach of social network theory for the data analysis.

2. Agricultural work of resettled people

a. Crop and livestock farming

The environmental migrants to Bao Hieu mainly rely on agricultural production (crop and livestock farming), which is subject to natural conditions, for living. They are small farming households with traditional farming practices^(*).

Land is one of decisive factors to the agricultural production since it is an essential production material. To develop the economy and promote social stability, land must be allocated to farmers (Dang Kim Son, 2017). Thus, agricultural land (including arable land and land for

^(*) Traditional farming practices should be apprehended as the production with low economic efficiency and just enough for self-consumption. And small farming households are those whose economic activities are agriculture-based with some market links through sales and purchases of inputs and outputs, and small loans in different forms of credits. The production of these households relies heavily on human power and farming experiences with manual techniques.

forestry) is of particular importance to resettled people whose living depends heavily on agricultural activities. Nevertheless, the resettled households are given small areas of arable and residential land of low soil quality. Their crop and animal husbandry, therefore, is greatly affected and only generate low incomes.

For crop cultivation, sugarcane is the most popular harvest together with some other cash crops. "Most of the people cultivate sugarcane and ash pumpkin" (Male, Kinh ethnic group, 43, commune official). "Some households are working both in agriculture and forestry, but 80% of them working in agriculture" (Female, Kinh ethnic group, 40, representative of the commune Farmer's Union). Since the soil quality are not suitable for short-term crops, a number of households have turned to growing perennial trees like pomelos or oranges. "[We] initially had different crops, but they were not productive. The annual cash generated was just less than ten million dongs due to poor soil quality. More people are growing Dien and Green Skin pomelos, which seems more profitable, so [we] decided to grow pomelos" (Male, Muong ethnic group, aged 34, migrant).

Besides, irrigation is another factor affecting the crop production, particularly crop switching and diversification. "Sugarcane is the main crop here since there is no water for growing other crops. There is often drought in this area while no regular source of water for cultivation.

So, no other alternative rather than growing sugarcane" (Male, Dao ethnic group, 48, head of the resettled hamlet). For livestock farming, most of the migrant households raise buffalos, cows, and chickens but on a small scale due to limited area of residential land and the absence of animal waste treatment system. "There is no space for livestock farming on residential area due to close proximity between houses" (Male, Kinh ethnic group, 43, commune official). "Main cattles are buffalos and cows. Pigs are not suitable since this is the concentrated resettlement site with no wastewater treatment system. Chickens are raised only for self-consumption. A household can raise a maximum number of five to seven cows while the average number of cattles for each household is two (Male, Dao ethnic group, 48, head of the resettled hamlet).

The incomes of resettled people from farming production remain very low. "[Income] varies by household but the average net income is 10 to 15 million dongs per year. It is not enough to cover the family living costs so [they] have to do other work. Cattle raising serves family need only" (Male, Dao ethnic group, 48, head of the resettled hamlet). Loans are therefore the important source for investment in agricultural production. Resettlers are able to access credits for farming activities to improve their living conditions. "Thanks to bank credits this hamlet could develop like today. Previously there were only temporary houses but now 80% of

them are permanent. Credit channels in general are accessible” (Male, Dao ethnic group, 48, head of the resettled hamlet). Some households want to expand their crop and animal husbandry but do not have enough money to invest, or either face difficulties in finding markets for their products (through contracting with enterprises for example). Their production is still fragmented and spontaneous rather than following the value chain. “The leadership is seeking marketing solutions, but it is difficult because of fragmented small-scale production. Farmers should coordinate for what to grow and for larger production scale. Last year, for example, the sale price of ash pumpkin was higher but much lower this year. Some households suffered loss due to unstable market” (Male, Dao ethnic group, 48, head of the resettled hamlet).

Nguyen Quang Thuan (2017) attributed the limitations of the current household production model to fragmented allocation of land, manual labor farming practices, and lack of coordination within the value chain. Particularly, the linkages and coordination between local authorities, enterprises, and farmers are not strong enough for input and output market development and for the application of modern technology and new cultivation techniques.

In comparison with local people, the production activities of migrants are more challenging owing to the differences in the allocated areas of residential and

arable land, economic background, and farming practices. “By comparison, local people are doing better since their farming techniques are more scientific” (Male, Dao ethnic group, 48, head of the resettled hamlet).

Nevertheless, after some time settling in the new place, resettlers have gradually applied new farming practices that are more suitable to the local terrain characteristics thanks to the sharing of local residents on production techniques and household economic development methods. Their living conditions therefore have been somewhat improved. “Local residents and resettlers often exchange experiences of sugarcane and cash crop production” (Male, Kinh ethnic group, 43, commune official). Some people also learn cultivation techniques on the Internet. However, many of them realize the big gap between the online knowledge and the real situation that limits the applicability of those techniques.

In brief, compared to the previous location, environmental migrants enjoy better living conditions at the resettlement site like more convenient transportation, more secure environment, more stable power supply, and better access to employment. However, their agricultural production remains restricted, particularly for large households, due to small areas of arable land. “Generally speaking, transportation here is more organized and convenient. People do not have to worry about life-threatening rain and flood. However, it

is difficult when there are many laborers available but little land distributed, only 5,000 m². People have to seek paid jobs or turn to livestock farming which is not easy either due to hygienic problems” (Male, Dao ethnic group, 53, migrant). Yet, agricultural production here is still more advantageous and profitable. “In Mai Chau [the previous living area] people were familiar only with growing clumping giant bamboo^(*), just enough to get by, not be able to advance at all. It was hard to find any side jobs - no one hired you, even for cutting down bamboo trees. Here people know how to grow sugarcane, ash pumpkin, melon, or fruit trees. If the prices are high, their income is much better than [the income] from growing bamboo” (Male, Muong ethnic group, 34, migrant).

b. Paid jobs in agriculture

The market economy has transformed the social and economic nature of peasants. They used to work for themselves only, but now also for other farming households of larger scale (farm owners). However, there are not many paid jobs for resettlers in Bao Hieu since most of households are small ones and labor demand stays low.

Some paid jobs that migrants take on for extra income while maintaining their farming activities include weeding sugarcane and cassava fields, harvesting sugarcane, help jobs in chicken farms, and so forth. “Local people hire or introduce migrants for the work such as planting

sugarcane, peeling sugarcane leaves, or harvesting sugarcane, etc.” (Male, Kinh ethnic group, 43, commune official). In particular, there are few households in the migrant community that are able to invest in agricultural machine for service provision. This has helped create jobs for other migrant laborers. “I have a sugarcane weeding machine for rent at 400,000 dongs per thousand meters square” (Female, Dao ethnic group, 49, migrant). However, the resettlers’ wage from agricultural paid jobs is still low. “The daily wage for peeling sugarcane leaves is 120,000-130,000 dongs. The maximum daily wage is VND 150,000 dongs” (Female, Dao ethnic group, 49, migrant).

Migrant workers mostly seek jobs through their friends, relatives, or other people rather than official channels by local government and private agencies. “They often find jobs through friends who are working or by words of mouth. They then get to know further about the job before deciding to take it. Few jobs are referred by recruitment agencies” (Female, Dao ethnic group, 49, migrant).

The research results thus show the significance of social capital via the expansion of social network for resettled people’s access to employment. It is in line with the studies by DaCosta and Turner (2006) and ADPC (2003) in which resettlement helps enhance local social network. When a new hamlet is formed, its members are supported by not only their relatives but local people,

^(*) The scientific name is *dendrocalamus barbatus*.

local government agencies, and social organizations as well.

3. Non-farm work of resettled people

Under the influence of the market economy and industrialization, the economic activities of farming households have changed from purely agricultural production to different types of jobs to improve their living conditions. Nevertheless, this changing process happens slowly in the migrant community in Bao Hieu.

Resettlers, in addition to agricultural work, also engage in off-farm production activities such as help jobs, working in companies or factories, in services sector, or running business.

Although there are several enterprises in the area, their low demand of labor could not meet the labor supply. Thus, many people of working age have to seek jobs far away from home to improve their income and secure their family living. Most of them are young adults working in industrial parks. "The jobs here are mainly offered by the timber plant but quite limited. Many young adults of 18-27 years old have to work afar in industrial parks in Ha Nam and Bac Ninh provinces. It is hardly to find them at home. The main jobs for men are in production of aluminum, timber, plastic, and leather shoes while women work in toy and clothing industries" (Male, Kinh ethnic group, 27, member of the commune youth union). The non-farm employment of resettlers, however, is often unskilled, temporary, and low-paid jobs.

Besides, a number of migrant households have turned to doing business such as opening convenient stores, motorbike repair shops, and selling glass and aluminum products. However, investment loans and the convenience of business location are the issues that restrict the number of business households. "Some households open convenient stores. My son also runs a motorbike repair shop" (Male, Dao ethnic group, 48, head of the resettled hamlet). "Some people are doing very well with selling glass and aluminum products or providing motorbike repairs" (Male, Kinh ethnic group, 27, member of the commune youth union). Local people tend to invest in business more than migrant households in recent years. "A lot of [local] households have switched from farming to running business during the last three years" (Male, Kinh ethnic group, 34, local resident).

In general, environmental migrants have better access to employment in the resettlement location. "It is easier to find a job in Tan Phuc than in the previous place" (Male, Dao ethnic group, 48, head of the resettled hamlet). "The income sources there [the old living area] were not regular, but here they are more stable" (Female, Dao ethnic group, 49, migrant). Although the income from non-farm jobs is still low, it is much higher than from farming work. "Running a convenient store or motorbike repair shop or working in factories can generate at least five million dongs per month. A longtime

worker could earn an average monthly income of seven to eight million dong” (Male, Kinh ethnic group, 43, commune official). Switching to non-farm work has helped improve the living conditions of households but has increased also the gap between rich and poor in the migrant community. Non-farming households often have better economic conditions than agriculture-based ones. “Some households, such as garage service providers, concrete mixer sellers, or small business households, are having much better economic conditions” (Male, Kinh ethnic group, 43, commune official).

Young people are more likely to have better access to off-farm jobs than the middle-aged or old people. They often look for employment themselves, through friends and relatives or via social networks like Facebook. Local people prove to be more active and responsive than resettlers in the search for work. It is because the environmental migrants have limited formal schooling and working experience, particularly at the beginning stage of the life at the resettlement site. Yet, resettlers are gradually becoming more adaptable for non-farm work thanks to the experience sharing of local people and their own initiative in getting to know such types of work. The connections with businesses in the area and the surroundings have also given people greater opportunities for non-farm jobs. “In 2017, Hoa Binh’s Job Placement Center started their operation at the

office of Bao Hieu commune People’s Committee to provide job counseling to local laborers” (Male, Kinh ethnic group, 43, commune official). However, the limited provision of training for non-farm jobs still restricts the accessibility of resettlers to non-farm employment. In brief, the shift of labor and occupational structures in Bao Hieu commune in general and in the resettlement area in particular has taken place. It is clearly observed among young male laborers and tends to quicken in recent years but remains at slow pace. The study by Nguyen Duc Vinh et al (2015) also reflects the situation when the shift of labor and occupational structures does not depend on economic structural change only but also demographic factors, such as age structure and educational background.

4. Conclusion

A study by Nguyen Hong Thai (2016) shows that resettlement programs have positive impacts on people from disaster-prone areas. In general, infrastructural conditions, such as transportation, health care and educational services, are much better at resettlement sites. However, a number of people have less access to employment and income sources.

Our study results also confirm the improvement of infrastructure and living conditions for resettlers in the resettlement area of Tan Phuc, Bao Hieu commune, like better access to electricity, education, and health care as

well as more convenient transportation. Farming and non-farm production activities remain challenging but seem more promising in the new place. The economic life of households has been more stable and resettlers have been gradually acquainted with local customs and production practices. Nevertheless, the income from agricultural production is still low and paid jobs in agriculture are also limited due to the small scale and fragmented production without links to product markets. In comparison with local people, resettlers face more difficulties in agricultural production due to smaller areas of land distributed with poor soil quality and their poorer farming skills.

It is noticeable that non-farm work has become more popular to resettlers. They are switching from farming to working in factories, working freelance, or doing business. However, this transition is still at slow pace and the jobs are mostly unskilled and not permanent. Resettlers have exchanged production knowledge and job searching experiences with local people. This has helped environmental migrants adapt better to the new environment and living area for their improvement of economic conditions.

Based on these results, it is necessary for resettlers to carry out land reclamation activities and coordinate with each other in production planning for more effective agricultural production. Besides, there should be stronger

promotion of cooperation between farmers and enterprises for agricultural product consumption together with favorable credit policies for households to expand their farming production or trading and service business. Local authorities should also cooperate with enterprises for more employment and job training to enhance people's awareness of employment and income generating activities □

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