

# **INFLUENCE OF SOCIO-CULTURAL FACTORS ON FOOD SECURITY OF THE THO PEOPLE**

## **(A Case Study of Ke Mui Village, Giai Xuan Commune, Tan Ky District, Nghe An Province)**

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### **1. Introduction**

Ensuring food security nowadays is not only the concern of each household and community, but also a concern of the nation. After re-joining the group of rice-exporting countries in 1990, Vietnam has been become a successful exporter of agricultural products. However, this has not completely alleviated the problem of food security in Vietnam. In mountainous and rural areas, there continues to be highest rate of food shortages among households, villages and communes in the whole country. The World Bank has anticipated that the attempt of poverty alleviation in Vietnam is becoming more challenging and will require more effective intervention and methods in assisting groups of vulnerable populations who are being excluded from the main stream benefits of economic development. Poverty still occurs and is concentrated more in remote areas; thus, adversely affecting ethnic minorities who suffer the most (World Bank 2004). Under the project "Coping Mechanisms of the Three Ethnic Minority Groups as Responses to the Food Shortage: A Study in the Uplands of Vietnam" implemented by the Institute of Anthropology, this study is carried out

in a community of the Tho in Nghe An province. Employing a socio-cultural anthropology approach, this study aims to examine the influence of social and cultural resources on food security, and examining the mechanisms used in response to food shortages by households and the community of the Tho. Based on the study findings, recommendations will be proposed for ensuring food security at the household and community level of the local people.

### **2. General Information of the Research Site**

#### **2.1. Patterns of Ethnic Minorities in Highland Areas of the Nghe An Province**

The mountainous area comprises about 79.5% of the total natural area of the province, including 10 districts; of which, five districts are located in highlands. In 2004, the total population of the province was 1.4 million people, which included seven ethnic groups: Kinh (Viet), Thai, Tho, Khmu, Hmong, O Du, and Lao. There are nearly one million people of Kinh descent, who live near and have access to main roads; contrasting with the rest of the population made up of about 410,000 ethnic minorities, who are

dispersedly in the remote highlands. Western Nghe An is naturally characterized by sloping terrain, uneven distribution of rainfall, and harsh weather conditions. In addition, this is the poorest region of the province where its residents constantly suffer from food shortages.

In this region, there are 115 communes that experience particular difficulty. This consists of 13,000 households and 75,000 people, which most belonging to ethnic minority groups in the Tuong Duong, Ky Son, and Tan Ky districts. According to a report by the Provincial Committee of Ethnic Minority Affairs, the government provides at least 100 tons of rice used for relief to households of ethnic minorities in highland areas when a natural disaster occurs.

There are about 62,000 Tho people in the Nghe An province living mainly in three districts, Tan Ky, Quy Hop, and Nghia Dan. Aside from the Tho people, there are several other local sub-groups such as the Tay Poong and Dan Lai residing in the Con Cuong and Tuong Duong districts. According to a report by the Provincial Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs, the Tho is one of three ethnic groups within the province that have the highest number of poor households suffering from food shortages. In the past five years, they were given assistance by several government agencies and other institutions in order to help build local infrastructures and overcome poverty. In 2004, there was a severe drought in the mountainous area of western Nghe An. The government provided 50 tons of rice

as relief to more than 200 households of the Tho who lacked food. For example, the number of Tho people in the Tan Ky district, who were hungry constituted about 36% of the total among those households of the Tho.

In general, there are few social surveys conducted until recently, with most focusing on governmental development projects and international organizations' assistance in building infrastructures. There is a dearth of research conducted and information available that investigates poverty and food shortages situations among the Tho in the Nghe An province. We decided to select the Ke Mui village (which locals refer to as "xom" Ke Mui) for the research site of this study. It was selected based on three main reasons: 1) suggestion of the Provincial Committee of Ethnic Minority Affairs; 2) suggestion of the local authorities of the Tan Ky district and Giai Xuan commune; and 3) based on the research project "Coping Mechanisms of the Three Ethnic Minority Groups as Responses to the Food Shortage: A Study in the Uplands of Vietnam.". The Ke Mui village is comprised of of Tho households who all fall under the national poverty line.

## 2.2. Natural Characteristics and Socio-economic Patterns of the Ke Mui Village

Ke Mui village, previously called Ke Bui<sup>1</sup>, belonging to the Giai Xuan commune, Tan

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<sup>1</sup> According to local elders, Ke Bui is the former name of Ke Mui; the term *Bui* may have been mispronounced by the Kinh in Nghe An [ the term *Mui* is the name of canary which has *bui* (buttery) taste. This Omispronounced term was used in documents during the French colonial times and is still used today.

Ky district, Nghe An province, is about 140 km westward from Vinh city. Ke Mui is one of 10 villages of the commune (nine other villages include Van Xuan, Van Long, Long Tho, Bau Khe, Bau Sen, Quyet Tam, Nuoc Xanh, Doi Che, and Xuan Tien). In 2004, this upland commune had the total natural area of 55.39 km<sup>2</sup> and 1,443 households with 7,730 people; on average, there were 139 people per km<sup>2</sup>. The commune was established after the August Revolution of 1945; Since its establishment until 1963, the commune belonged to the Nghia Dan district. However, it now belongs to Tan Ky district

since the end of 1963. The co - operatives of Giai Xuan were operating from 1976 to 1986, including four co-operatives (Xuan Tien, Quyet Tam, Mai Tho, and Van Xuan). During that period, Ke Bui (Ke Mui) belonged to the Mai Tho co-operative. Since the Contract No.10 is currently in effect, Ke Bui has become an independent village with its own management board – including a village head, vice-head, and a secretary under the supervision of a Communist Party's cell and a subdivision of the People's Council of the commune.

Table 1: Households and Demography of Giai Xuan by Ethnicity and Sex

Village	House hold	Population		Ethnicity			
		Male	Female	Kinh Household	Pop.	Tho Household	Pop.
Van Xuan	165	445	419			0	3
Van Long	137	382	322			4	11
Long Tho	132	326	351	0	45	132	632
Ke Mui							
- Total	173	445	471			171	919
- % of total	11,95	13,19				17,35	18,12
Bau Sen	46	119	120	8	31	38	208
Doi Che	129	303	345	26	179	103	469
Xuan Tien	168	370	459	62	267	106	562
Bau Khe	111	282	309	10	55	101	536
Quyet Tam	148	370	407	25	113	123	664
Nuoc Xanh	240	533	568	21	94	219	1069
<b>Total</b>	<b>1447</b>	<b>3357</b>	<b>3607</b>	<b>152</b>	<b>784</b>	<b>997</b>	<b>5073</b>

Source: The People's Committee of Giai Xuan

During this study, Ke Mui had 171 households, 919 people with 430 main laborers (223 males and 207 females). The total natural area of the village is 407.5 ha,

including 243.5 ha of agricultural land where 109 ha was devoted to wet rice. Ke Mui is one of two villages in the commune where all residents are of Tho descent (see

Table 1). Since 1954, the villagers of Ke Mui remained relatively close in comparison with other villages that were co-inhabited with the Kinh. In general, the Tho in the Ke Mui village has a long standing relationship with other villages of the commune and other areas (such as Long Tho, Van Xuan, Tan Xuan, etc.). More recently, the Tho people in Ke Mui expanded its relations with the Kinh in the Tan Ky town and other ethnic communities of the Nghia Dan and Qui Hop districts. However, the Tho in Ke Mui maintain marriage exchange mainly with other Tho people within the same as well as different villages. In terms of production, uplands cultivation has been the main activity of the Tho in Ke Mui. There were a few other supporting economic activities, such as some households that made hammocks made of hemp. The kermis (market) was still absent due to limited surplus of agricultural and forest products. According to some retired staff of the district authorities, Ke Mui was still considered among the poorest village until 2004. Since the nation-wide implementation of the “Doi Moi” reforms, the traditional patterns of socio-cultural life has not changed much for the Ke Mui village despite of relationships cultivated with the outside world..

Since 1998, owing to the system of dams (*Va* and *Bet* dams), the villagers of Ke Mui and three other villages have been able to grow new rice varieties and cultivate two rice-crops per year. New rice varieties that resist drought are also applied to uplands cultivation. The yield of rice is gradually

increasing, for example, the average yield was three tons per ha per crop in 2004. At the time of this study, besides organic manure, such as rotten dung and green manure, the villagers of Ke Mui also used chemical fertilizers for cultivation. For example, one ha of wet rice would require about 130 kg of nitrogenous fertilizer, 300 kg of phosphate, and 40 kg of potassium fertilizer. New varieties such as VN50 and peanut L14 substituted local ones. According to estimations in this study for 2004, the average income from agriculture (not including husbandry<sup>2</sup>) is about 173.5 kg rice per person per year after deducting productive and other expenses, whereas the average food equivalent to rice in the mountainous districts of Nghe An province is approximately 254.3 kg per person per year (People’s Committee of Nghe An, 2003). In the past two years (2003 and 2004), the most important income of Ke Mui villagers come from sugarcane cultivation because the materials used in the production for the Song Con Sugar Company is located in Ke Mui. The area of sugarcane is expanding, from only six hectares in 1999 to 130 ha in 2000 to 508 ha in 2004. More benefits were reaped when switching from crops such as dry rice, corn, and cassava (manioc) to cultivation of sugarcane. Not only did this change the farming habits of the local people, but the farming methods also

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<sup>2</sup> In 2004, the Ke Mui village has 330 buffaloes and cows (enabled by a credit program for poverty alleviation), 123 pigs; the number of chicken is unknown due to bird flu.

evolved with application of technological advancements in production activities. Currently, sugarcane is playing an important role in income-generating activities, and thus, changing the economic structure of the Ke Mui village, in particular, and the Giai Xuan commune as a whole. A commune's leader remarked that sugarcane was the leading crop in the attempt of poverty alleviation within the Giai Xuan commune, and will be especially beneficial for the Tho people who make up the poorest ethnic group in the commune. However, according to the local residents in that area, sugarcane cultivation is influenced by many factors, including but not limited to weather conditions, agricultural supplies and fertilizers expenditures, sale contracts, transportation costs, and fluctuation of domestic and international price of sugar. Therefore, the income from sugarcane can be unstable at times. In 2004, nearly two-thirds of the households in Ke Mui faced difficulties in sugarcane cultivation due to a drought; 46 households lost the harvest and could not repay the loan borrowed from the Song Con Company.

In terms of services and trading, Ke Mui is undeveloped in comparison with other villages in the same commune. There are only four shops in Ke Mui, and one of which has a total capital of 40 million VND and operates as a general store selling daily necessities, agricultural supplies, construction material, clothing, telephone service, etc.. The remaining three shops sell small miscellaneous items.

In Giai Xuan, an inter-commune market was built under the Program 135, but only 140 households registered for a trading license in the market. Furthermore, most of these households are of Kinh descent and mainly trade daily necessities, agricultural supplies, construction material, and clothing as well as provide services, such as grinding and transportation.

Within the Giai Xuan commune, there are varying levels of socio-economic status. The effects due to socio-economic renovation have some impact on the life of local residents. According to the survey of households, the composition of the Ke Mui village by occupation consists mainly of three groups: farmers - 54 households (90%), local government staff - three households (5%), and people who are retired - three households (5%).

Additionally, there are about 48.6% poor households, 41.4% average households, and 10% households who are better-off in the village (based on the Guidelines for Re-evaluating Poor Households of Nghe An, poor households typically have an average income of under 200,000 VND per month). In 2005, the rate of poor households in the Ke Mui village is 1.7 times higher than that of the entire commune (35.6%), and 2.7 times higher than that of the district (18.9%).

### **3. Findings of the Study and Discussion**

The analysis of this section is based on the data examining influencing social and cultural factors on food security, and

mechanisms used in response to food shortages by households and the community of the Tho people.

### 3.1. Traditional Management Institutions and Food Security

In this section, we will assess food security of the Tho in the Ke Mui village by focusing on the role of family, clan, and other informal institutions .

#### 3.1.1. Family Structure and Food Security

The family of the Tho people is characterized by matrilineal patterns. During the co-operative period, the family is not economically independent. Since the Contract No.10 was implemented particularly in recent years, the household-family has become an independent production and trading unit.

The size of a Tho household in 2005, it consisted on average of about 5.48 persons. This size is slightly larger than that of the commune as a whole (5.1) and compared to other Tho communities in the Giai Xuan commune (5.09). In Ke Mui, the household usually consists of six to seven persons; the smallest size household can range from two persons to the largest size of 10 persons. Extended family members in Ke Mui can be comprised of three generations. For instance, there are families made up of parents and siblings (58.54%), nuclear family composed of a husband and wife with their unmarried children (38.1%), and the rest are widowed families (3.36%). Recently, a transformation of the family structure from

extended to nuclear families has become a common phenomenon in the Ke Mui village due to the improving socio-economic environment. However, in this process of transformation, another form has evolved of a more moderate family structure. In genera, a couple is considered legally separate from their parents' household, however, due to the lack of land and housing, they may agreed to still reside with their parents in the same compound. In Ke Mui, young couples mainly constitute the make up of nuclear families. The lack of land availability forces many of them to build their temporary shelter on the uplands reclaimed by their parents in the 1990s, and used for reforestation under Program 327. These lands are being disputed with the Youth Pioneer Group (see Box 2). Besides cultivating on small upland areas, these couples also work as hired laborers, such as weeding corn and sugarcane fields, harvesting and transporting sugarcane, hauling dirt, and planting sugarcane.

The transformation of families from extended to nuclear reflects changes in family structure and its functions, even among households with limited material resources. The nuclear home is close-knit and members share responsibilities. Moreover, because of being legally separated, these households can benefit more from development programs of the government for the area of special difficulty.

From the current economic situation of households in Ke Mui, most of the nuclear

families who are poor recently separated, or have their children who work faraway and have not yet returned with contributing income. Nearly all of the extended families are usually considered average or well-off. Influencing factors on family structure include capital, labor, investment, trading ability, and planning patterns of each household, but even more so, there is a direct relationship based on local poverty and extent of food security.

Based on statistics from the village management board, demographic information on the household living standards in Ke Mui is as follows:

- Poor households: 89 households, (50%) of which 20 are extremely poor and suffer from hunger year round; 69 households lack food for a period of about three months;
- Average households: 61 households (35.26%);
- Better-off households: 18 households (10.40 %).

The structure within poor households vary. For instance, 14 of the 20 extremely poor households have a nuclear family-type, while 35 of the 69 households that lack food for three months, are of an extended family-type. Two have widowed family-households. When comparing household types, the nuclear family-households seem to be more advanced in terms of labor and educational level. In reference to Ke Mui, land availability, production experience, and agricultural

skills still remain the main factors that facilitate higher income-earning capacity.

Food shortage among households in Ke Mui can be detrimental. To overcome food shortages, three strategies are often employed: working as hired laborer, borrowing from others, or buying food on credit from the Kinh. Furthermore, households comprised of young couples (n=26) sometimes earn their living by working as hired laborers. Households suffering from hunger buy food on credit with a high interest rate, and usually pay back in full) in one lump sum with the harvest of corn or sugarcane. Other households face more hardship in debt repayment. They only are able to pay the interest and still owe the principal amount, while continuing to borrow or purchase food on credit.

We conducted interviews with four of 14 households of young couples who moved to live in the uplands, which is an area in dispute with the Youth Pioneer Group. Their shelters are makeshift – camps where very little furniture is used and available. Each household has about 1000 m<sup>2</sup> of cultivated land. They work as hired laborers year round. The lack of rice and fresh foods is an everyday concern. The main daily meal typically consists of wild vegetables that are boiled or fried. Due to the nature of being a hired laborer, their income level is unstable; sometimes they have to get paid in advance from the employer, but should there later be bad weather or they become ill, they do not have immediate funds saved in order to make ends meet.

### 3.1.2. *The Role of Clan in Food Security*

In Ke Mui village, kin groups play a role in production activities and lives of its residents. In this village, there are two main clans, *Nguyen* and *Truong*. Other minor clans originated in the village through marriage. Before the Contract No.10, kin relations were relatively loose. After the 1990s, these relations have been restored and reinforced. Kinsmen contribute money to help upgrade the ancestral shrine at the clan head's house. The pool of money is recorded in detail by the clan head, and the amount money not yet used for ceremonies can be lent out as usury.

We aimed to investigate the cooperation, alliance, labor exchanges, and reciprocity among kinsmen in regards to food security. First, this can be seen through the exchange of animal power (using cows and buffaloes). In Ke Mui, the number of cows and buffaloes is limited; therefore, kinsmen borrow animals from each other. This is a common practice among the poor and average households. These households are also not able to take a loan from the bank to purchase cows or buffaloes. The case with the *Nguyen* and *Truong* clans are typical examples.

In 2005, four households of *Truong Van* sub-clan, 4 households of *Truong Cong* sub-clan, six households of *Nguyen Van* sub-clan, and eight households of *Nguyen Cong* sub-clan borrowed animals frequently from each other within their sub-clan. The households that borrowed an animal often have a close relationship with the animal's owner, either affinal or marital relations (among parents and

children, siblings, and in-laws). There are two types of borrowing: (1) the borrower does not need pay anything; this happens between married children who house separately and their parents or among siblings, (2) the borrower has to pay back through providing some type of labor, such as weeding fields, transporting sugarcane, or helping with the rice harvest of the owner in exchange for use of the animal. In all 23 observed cases, 17 among them were with married children who borrowed from their parents.

The cooperation and reciprocity of labor in sugarcane cultivation (such as land preparation, planting, harvesting, and transporting) are most common among kin households in the Ke Mui village.

From among 20 interviewed households that belongs to four clans, 12 households cooperate and reciprocate with other kin households or their neighbors in terms of labor exchange.; of which three households have this type of arrangement with their neighbors, and nine households with their parents.

After the Contract No.10, kin relations in Ke Mui have been reinforced through social and religious ceremonies, such as weddings and funerals. The clans also raise money and set up a fund covering the cost for different events, such as funerals, accidents, serious illness, or helping the widowed and homeless. Among kin households, many exchanges such as labor and animal power exchanges in cultivation are commonly practiced. Kin relations in Ke Mui are limited to the traditional exchange of labor or animal power, and do not extend to other forms of exchanges,

such as use of money and agricultural supplies. These exchanges mainly occur between parents and their married children who have just separated. Furthermore, better-off households rarely lend money or rice to poor households. This pattern of local kin relations is not surprising because almost all of the households in the village purchase food by the money earned from selling sugarcane. This also help explains the errors in the questionnaires that 90% of the surveyed households have self-identified as facing food shortages. A household is considered to encounter food shortages when there is an average annual income of less than 200,000 VND per person per month (the criteria is set by the Ministry of Labor, Invalids, and Social Affairs).

### *3.1.3. Informal Institutions*

Besides socio-political mass institutions such as the Women's Union, the Farmer's Association, Veteran's Association (there is a sub-division of each at village level), various informal institutions also have been developed with many forms and functions in Ke Mui since the implementation of Contract No.10. These institutions are formed voluntarily among people who share similar characteristics, such as gender, interests, life experience, and age. These institutions have clear regulations, objectives, and a particular way of operating. Some institutions limit their members only to a kin circle, such as mutual exchanges during weddings and funerals. Others include members from both inside and outside a kin circle, such as the Money Association. In general,

almost all of the members of current informal institutions in Ke Mui village are from average or well-off household. Sometimes within a family, the husband is a member of one association, while the wife and children are members of another. For example, members of the household headed by Nguyen Van Th. (vice-head of the village) have membership with four different associations: Money Association, Association for weddings and funerals, Association of schoolmates, Aged group. Associations of buffalo herdsman are formed mainly by young people in the household. This type of linkage is formed at two out of three residential sections of the village. In general, a member of an association of buffalo herdsman contribute 500,000 VND per year. The annual fund for each group is only available to one new young couple who recently moved out on their own in order to help deal with any food shortage problem and provide for some urgent domestic needs. The money granted will be used to purchase rice, domestic items, or animal breeding stock. These informal institutions are unstable in terms of both duration and operation, and are often in a state of "loose fusion and fission." However, besides the role in maintaining the cohesion among social groups in the village, these institutions also play a role in economic reciprocity between community members. Thus, this type of arrangement helps improve the economic status of average households, and provides an outlet to resolve food shortages for poor households.

Table 2: Informal Institution in Ke Mui Village

Name	Number of Insts.	Number of Member	Living standard	Age	Objectives	Amount /member	Term	Membership Extent
Money Association (male)	5	27	Average and better-off	40-45	Pooling to build houses, enhance productive activities	1 million VND	One/6 months	Extended, beyond kin circle
Money Association (female)	2	4	Average and better-off	40-45	Pooling to enhance production activities	500,000-1 million VND	One/6 months	Occupation related, in the same village
Association for weddings and funerals	3	14	Average and better-off	40-45	Pooling to help one another deal with the needs of cash and food	1 million VND	One/a year	Inside a kin circle
Association of buffalo herdsman	2	9	Poor	28 - 30	Reciprocate one another to deal with food shortages, cash need, labor, other difficulties	500,000 VND	One/6 months	In the group of tending buffaloes during childhood
Aged Group	4	23	-	45 or above	Exchange social and production information	100,000 VND	One/a year	Born in the same year, share relatively similar life style
Association of Schoolmates	2	8	-	40-45	Exchange social and productive information	50,000-100,000 VND	One/a year	In the same village, studied together in primary, secondary, and high school

### 3.2. Influence of Traditional Culture Factors on Food Security

#### 3.2.1. Influence of Cultivation Habits

Since 1999 to present, the Giai Xuan commune has switched from rice and manioc (cassava) to sugarcane cultivation under the contract with the Song Con Sugar Company. In Ke Mui, the difference between poor households and the other

type of households (average and better-off) is the approach to technological application of new varieties of sugarcane. Group discussions and individual interviews were conducted with persons from extended families, between the ages of 30-45 years, having a primary school education level, who are poor and above average. Data indicated that although

having the same training of technological applications and using supporting materials for cultivation, the poor households (especially those who had people over the age of 40 years) still cultivate in the traditional manner and are more reluctant to using newly learned techniques. According to two of five households interviewed, the reason for this problem is that the people in the households who often take part in the training are not the same persons who do the cultivation. In other words, men participate in the trainings but women are the ones in the fields. Conversely, the above average households adhere more to what is required of learned techniques from the

training. For instance, although women are not participants in the training, the men usually share what they learn with the women and also take part in the cultivation.

According to the management board of Ke Mui, 20 of the poorest households in the village are having difficulty in changing crops structure due to limited cultivation land. On average, each of these households has less than two *sao* (each *sao* equal to 500 m<sup>2</sup>) of land; the largest being five *sao*. In addition, most of the land of these households is being disputed with the Youth Pioneer Group. Therefore, they are only able to cultivate corn, cassava, or bean in order to address food shortages, however, do not grow sugarcane unlike other households.

#### Box 1: Change of Crops Structure in the Giai Xuan Commune

*Since 1999 under a formal contract directed towards changing crops structure by the provincial authorities, Ke Mui has convinced its people to switch from upland rice and corn cultivation to sugarcane cultivation. The contract-granted household must ensure that it will provide 200 tons of sugarcane to the Song Con Sugar Company. The contract has to be approved by the village management board, and has the guarantee from the commune authorities.*

The tradition of rice or corn cultivation in the uplands area is used to prevent food shortages where there is a lack of land availability or unstable land. The problem is that this tradition becomes the main driving force behind 20 households who lack food year round not being able to change their crops and thus, not reap the benefits from new technological advancements in cultivation.

#### 3.2.2. Habits of consumption and spending

Housing is one of the most significant differences between Ke Mui and other villages in Giai Xuan, especially within the Kinh community. In the villages, the houses belonging to the Kinh people look better than that of the Tho. This can be attributed in great part due to the better economic situation for the Kinh, as well as

spending and consumption habits. The poor households in Ke Mui often are built from dirt or brick sand have roofs of cement tiles. In reality, the Kinh in Nghe An often try to “tighten their belt” to save money towards building their houses, whereas the reverse is true for the Tho. Among the Tho in Ke Mui, a big feast is organized to celebrate after a house is built. Kinsmen and neighbors are invited to join the celebration, and often brings along

with then two chickens and a liter of wine as gifts.. This is considered an important event in the life of the Tho people. Although it is not as costly as a wedding or funeral, it can be a financial hardship to fund considering the Tho are already poor and struggling. Depending on economic resources of the household and the size of the new house, the amount spent can range from 800,000 to two million VND.

**Table 3: House Classification by Living Standard**

Unit: household

Living standard	Type of housing			Total
	Good	Average	Makeshift-house	
- Better-off	1	2	0	3
- Average	3	16	1	20
- Poor	0	13	11	24
- Starving	0	3	10	13
<b>Total</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>60</b>

Source: Survey of Households, 2005

For weddings in Ke Mui, this often is a two-day feast at the groom’s house followed by an one-day feast at the bride’s. The average cost can be from eight to ten million VND. Funerals also are costly events, but are cheaper than a wedding; requiring about three to four million VND. People invited to these events are mainly kinsmen from within the village and from other villages. Organizing a feast during the clan-ancestors worshipping ceremony

is another added financial burden (covered by the contribution of kinsmen).

All of these events are important but yet yield a hefty price tag, and even more so for poor villages like Ke Mui where income levels are low. I estimate that the total income is of the entire village in 2004 was equivalent to 1.682 billion VND. This amounted to the average income per person was 150,000 VND per month. This

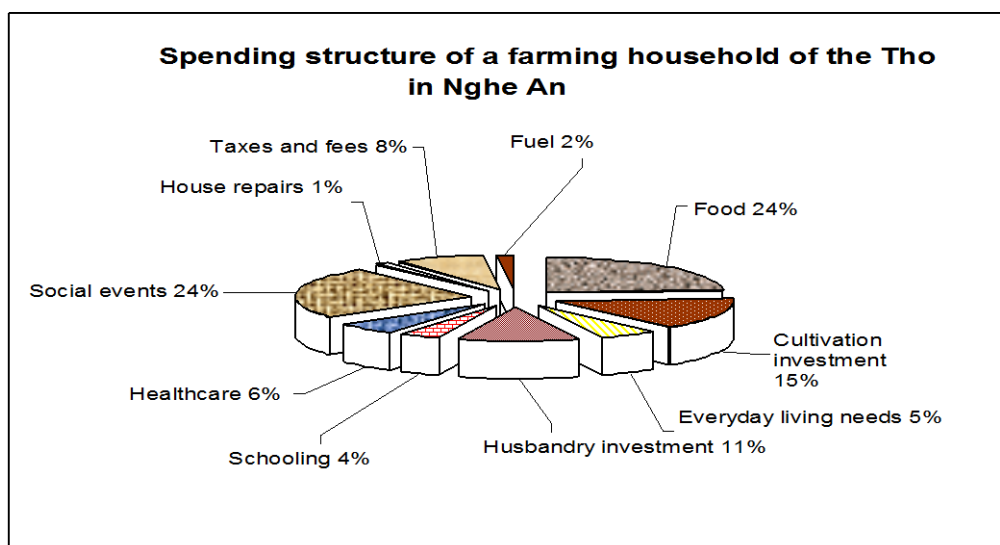
amount was just sufficient to cover cash gifts for five weddings. The portion spent on drinks makes up one-third of the total costs of a feast. During a wedding, guests always give wedding presents in the form of cash. For funerals, the guest will offer cash to the deceased. However, it is estimated that the host of the wedding or funeral would need to typically pay for 50 to 60 tables for the event; thus, these type of expenditures accounting for 30 to 40% of the annual income in an average household compared to 60 to 70% in a poor household.

Additionally, more money is spent to satiate the habit of males in the household drinking wine on daily basis. One shop owner claimed that people who become inebriated were usually from poor households. Although their families are unable to purchase fresh meat or fish, they still buy wine from the shops based on credit.

Looking at the data from the household

surveys (Figure 1), it can be reported that the amount allocated for food purchases annually is just as much as money spent on social and religious events. The expenses vary depending on the size of the household, but in general, there is a difference between extended-family and nuclear households. In an extended family household, spending on social events typically is greater, especially when the head of household is the eldest male. When comparing living standards, there is a distinct difference between the two types of households; the better-off household spending about 2 to 3.5 million VND, whereas the poor and the starving households spend around two ranges: 500,000 to 700,000 and one to 1.2 million VND per year on social events (the composition of surveyed households includes: better-off households 5%, average 33.3%, poor 40%, and hungry 21.7%).

Figure 1: Spending Structure of the Tho



Source: Project Survey, 2005

### 3.2.3. *The Role of Women in Ensuring Food Security*

Ensuring food security within the household and community is directly related to the role of females in the household.

On average, the agricultural land of Ke Mui village per person is 265m<sup>2</sup> (whole commune is 273.7m<sup>2</sup>). According to the estimation from local authorities, if reclaimed agricultural land increases 50% and the population growth rate is at least 1.5% per year, the average agricultural land per person will remain the same within the next ten years. Together with pressure on population, the need for land availability for cultivation is urgent since many forestlands were completely destroyed in the 1990s. Due to outdated cultivation techniques, poor land protection, and land erosion, the land in Ke Mui continues to become exhausted. Currently, an estimated 75% of uplands in this village is categorized as exhausted. Thus, women encounter great difficulties to surmount in accessing and using natural resources.

Women, especially those who are from poor households, face challenges in receiving and using credit. For example, the Women's Union of Giai Xuan commune took out a loan of 200 million VND from the Bank for Social Policies and the Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development as an effort to extend this money in the form of loan to its subdivisions for the purposes of changing crop structure. However, the sub-division of the Women's Union of Ke Mui decided

to only borrow 5 million VND (0.25%). Furthermore, the two movements initiated by the Women's Union, entitled "Planting one tree, rearing one child" "Women help each other develop household economy" mainly had an impact on average households. Part of this reason why the efforts did not trickle down to the ones who need the most assistance is due to limited participation in meetings and big demand on women's time to work away from home during crop season. Thus it is not surprising that members of poor households often lack the knowledge and availability to access credit programs.

After the harvesting of corn and sugar, a large part of the income of poor households, especially ones who are starving is devoted to paying off debts and making various payments for rice storage, payment for daily goods that were purchased on credit from private traders, and payment for different general public fees. Women bear the brunt of the burden when it comes to managing household finances. On top of their familial responsibilities, they sometimes have to work as a hired laborer, as well as gather wild vegetables and firewood from forest so they can later sell them in order to have enough money for food.

### 3.3. Influence of Education, Work Skills, and the Ability in Approaching to on Food Security Policies

#### 3.3.1. *Educational Level and Work Skills of Household Members Pertaining to Food Security*

Based on the surveys conducted in the Ke Mui village, the number of people in

the household that fall in the age group of 30 to 40 years constitutes about 50% of the total households surveyed, and the age group from 41 to 60 years made up 38.83%. The overwhelming majority (90%) of households highest educational level was primary and secondary school (based on previous educational system), while the remainder (10%) received up to a high school education. In particular among the household which the head is a male (n=54), 33.3% have finished primary school, 59.3% have completed secondary school, and only 7.4% have graduated from high school. So, what do these numbers of the random surveyed sample indicate? First, not only is Ke Mui a poor village, but the educational level is low. Among the 60 surveyed households, 59.3% have attained up to a secondary school level. Furthermore, this village is also comprised of young people, where 50% are under the age of 40 years. This indicates a possible relationship between educational level and household income levels.

A possible explanation for this relationship can be attributed to the transformation of the family structure from extended to nuclear families. Extended families, which consist of three generations, have a different organizational structure. Parents were previously the head of the household, but now their children have moved out and become their own heads of households. They gain new independence, as well as responsibilities where they have to make their own decisions affecting all activities in the household. The number of

young households (consist of two generations under the age of 30 years) is growing, where host heads of the household have higher educational levels (secondary and high school levels, based on previous educational system).

In general, the households who have higher level of education often have better chances in successfully engaging in income-generating activities. However, this was not the case in this study. Almost of the poor and starving households in Ke Mui are comprised of young couples who recently moved out of their parents' homes despite having a higher educational level. They have limited work skills, production experience, and lack access to land for cultivation and capital for initial production despite having a readiness to work. Therefore, they often end up working in the capacity as a hired laborer. In addition, they try to grow corn and cassava on disputed lands in hopes that it will partially address the food shortages. According to the head of Ke Mui, 12 poor households of the village tried to reclaim the disputed land for cultivation in early 2006. This is about one-fourth of total number of poor and starving households in the village during the previous year (see Box 2).

However, there are many extended-family households that are allocated some upland area but unfortunately these lands are exhausted. Thus, this does not alleviate their food insecurity problem and they remain poor and hungry. For many years in the uplands, they have grown rice, cassava, corn, bean, and peanut, but yields

were very low. In order to supplement their income, they had to work as laborers. For example, the household of Nguyen Xuan L. is located at residential section 3 in the village. In 1998, they grew one *sao* (500m<sup>2</sup>) of rice and 200 m<sup>2</sup> of peanut. This harvest was valued two and a half times as much as the value of its investment (including the cost of fertilizer and varieties). Mr. L. claimed that if tax and fees were included, the value of labor would not be profitable.

### 3.3.2. Approach of Household Policies Land Policies

The policies of forestland allocation and official land certificates granted to farming households have great influence on the socio-economic life of Gai Xuan residents, and particularly in Ke Mui. Cultivated land, especially rice paddies, have become a valuable commodity. For poor and starving households, the land is highly valued since it can dictate one's livelihood since the majority of one's income is derived Box 2: Land Dispute in the Gai Xuan Commune.

In the Gai Xuan commune, there are seven villages (50 households) involved in the land dispute with the Youth Pioneer Group No. 4 of Nghe An province, including Van Xuan, Van Long, Long Tho, Doi Che, Quyet Tam, Xuan Tien, and Ke Mui. Under a provincial policy, the Youth Pioneer Group No. 4 was

approved to exploit land plots No. 841, 848 and 849 in the Gai Xuan commune. The problem was that these lands were reclaimed by the villages mentioned above in the 1990s. Under Program 327, the specified land was slated for reforestation. Due to the poor management and limited results of the reforestation program by the forest plantation, local people started to use the land by cutting down trees in order to grow corn and cassava. When the provincial authorities granted permission to the Youth Pioneer Group No. 4 to exploit these land plots, 50 out of 171 households from seven villages who were using the land agreed to send one member of each household to join the Youth Pioneer Group No. 4. Each household was allocated two hectares of land for growing fruit trees and sugarcane under the plan. However, not every household had a young member to send to job in the group. Most of these households just wanted to continue to cultivate the land they previously reclaimed.

From an agrarian lifestyle. The village has 243.5 ha of agricultural land, of which rice paddies make up 23 ha (17 ha of one rice-crop, and 6 ha of two rice-crops), however, there still remains 164 ha of cultivated lands in the uplands that have not

been allocated to households. Almost all of the newly headed households by young couples within the past two or three years do not own any land for cultivation; among the ones who do, it is in areas that are being disputed (see Box 2).

*Credit Access*

There are some differences between households in terms of accessing credit programs. The poor households mainly are able to access credit for sugarcane cultivation from the Song Con Sugar Company. A loan granted in advance is equal to a sufficient amount of money that the household uses to buy sugarcane varieties, fertilizers, and insecticide. Out of 20 poor and starving households, three took loans from the Poverty Reduction Fund in order to buy buffaloes (each household borrowed about 2.5 to three million VND, with the guarantee from the People's Council and Women's Union. However, five households decided not to borrow, while the rest (n=12) households were deemed ineligible. Under new regulations, the guarantee instructions state that the loan must be granted unkind for production purposes, such as varieties, breeding stock and fertilizers, instead of cash as before. According to the village's management board, the borrower is neither exempted from normal interest rates nor the loan is debt-rounded when animals are stricken and die from diseases or if the harvest is ruined due to control beyond one's control (including drought and frost).

Average and well-off households have better chances to reach support using the credit system. Aside from the annual loan from the Song Con Sugar Company and is guaranteed by the village head, these households also can borrow credit from other sources: poverty reduction credit for purchasing buffaloes and cow, credit for development of husbandry managed by the

Women's Union, and credit from the Farmer's Association's fund. According to the village's management board, these households can easily access different credit sources because they have available collateral. These households use the loan mainly for production purposes, as opposed to poor households who would use the funds for purchasing goods and food and paying off debts. According to local residents, it is very difficult for the poor to borrow credit in order to buy buffaloes and cows, or to invest in cultivation. One household complained that due to being so poor, constantly being hungry, and having access only to exhausted land, the capital invested in cultivation would be very risky. It would be too difficult to invest in husbandry due to their lack of experience, particularly with the threat of bird flu (H5N1 strain) and cattle diseases occurring in the area.

*Other Social Policies*

As an official commune under the Program 135 of the government, Giai Xuan receives an annual amount of 400 million VND from the State Fund to support building local infrastructure and developing production. The amount is transfer from the district's Department of Ethnic Minority Affairs to the commune. The spending of this fund is transparent and discussed in detail at publicly meetings held by the management board of the Ke Mui village. Discussions are held about how much was spent for the entire community and how much was allocated to the poor and others with special circumstances. Under Program 134,

households that have a dilapidated house are given three million VND in support from the State Fund and one million VND from the local fund to build a new house.

#### **4. Comments and Recommendations**

##### **4.1. Comments**

Basing on the analysis of the influence of socio-cultural factors on food security and the mechanisms employed in response to food shortages among the Tho people, we have the following comments:

i) Although food situation in Ke Mui has improved after the change in crops structure and when sugarcane was introduced as an industrial material, food shortage is still common and poses a serious threat for a large portion of the population.. From our findings, we see that poor households respond differently to food shortages, an have varying ability to address this problem.

ii) Although family and kin relationships, as well as informal institutions recently have been revived and strengthened, they still play a minor role in the lives of the local residents. Their role is limited to activities such as providing food support for those who are hungry, labor exchange, and informal credit exchange without interest.

iii) Women play an important role in managing the household finances and helping to overcome food shortages. On the other hand, they also have a limited role in the decision-making process related to household plan in investment and development.

iv) Due to the lack of available land for cultivation, poor households have to cultivate in areas where lands are being disputed. This makes ensuring household food security vulnerable and unstable.

v) Employment as hired laborers and borrowing credit from usurers are strategies employed in response to preventing food shortages.

##### **4.2. Recommendations**

In order to improve the food security situation for households and the community in Ke Mui, we would like to present the following recommendations:

i) To develop more effective policy and program interventions to help poor and starving households related to poverty alleviation, which can include helping them access information about policies and credit programs.

ii) Local authorities and other formal institutions need to cooperate with the Song Con Sugar Company in order to build and carry out credit programs to assist poor and starving households become more involved in the cultivation of sugarcane.

iii) Promotion of the creation of professional associations or co-operations related to sugarcane production and industry.

iv) Local authorities need to settle the dispute over land plots between local people and the Youth Pioneer Group No. 4 in order to stabilize cultivation in the area.

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**Sugar-cane field of the Tho in Nghe An province**

Photo: Source of the Project funded by the Rockefeller Foundation