

POVERTY AND POVERTY REDUCTION AMONG ETHNIC MINORITIES IN VIETNAM: CURRENT SITUATION AND ISSUES*

BUI MINH DAO

Poverty among ethnic minorities is a global issue. It is prevalent in multi-ethnic nations around the world. Ethnic minorities in Vietnam number at a little over 10 million people, or about 14% of the national population, and often reside in large mountainous areas covering more than two thirds of the national territory. These areas are nationally strategic in terms of economy, politics, defense security and environment. Because of the effects of living in a natural setting, and the need for social development, poverty reduction in ethnic dominant areas will be a long and hard struggle. Poverty reduction for ethnic minorities has become a top priority under the context of national policies for industrialization and modernization in Vietnam.

From an anthropological perspective, this paper will present an anthropological perspective on the current situation of poverty, and issues of poverty reduction, among ethnic minorities in Vietnam.

1. Overview of the Current Situation

Among three geographical categories of area in Vietnam, urban, rural plain and rural mountainous, the latter is home to most ethnic minorities. Out of the three areas, the rural mountainous area also experiences the lowest levels of poverty according to measurements of poverty rate, income, material life, infrastructure, health and education.

The World Bank estimates, based on the poverty criterion of income under 2,100 calorie/person/day that the rate of poverty for poor ethnic minority households in Vietnam was 86% in 1993 and 75% in 1998, while that of the Kinh was 54% and 31% respectively (Working Group of the Government, Donors and NGO Experts, 1999, p. 32). Poor ethnic households account for only a little over 13% of the national population, but for 20% and 29% of the ethnic population in 1993 and 1998 respectively (Working Group of the Government, Donors and NGO Experts, 1999, p. 32). Two ethnically concentrated areas, the Northern Highlands and the Central Highlands, are the poorest in the country. The following data based on food poverty conducted by the Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA) indicates similar results. A survey on current livelihood of 2,104,478 households in 11 mountainous provinces from 1998 to 1999 shows that poor households account for 23% of households in the survey and that 51.2%, or twice as much as the overall rate, of households in the survey are from ethnic areas (The Ethnic Council of the National Assembly the 10th, 2000, p. 1039). The total population of the six provinces in the Northern Highlands (i.e. Bac Giang, Phu Tho, Hoa Binh, Son La, Lao Cai, and Yen Bai) accounted for 17% of the national

* This article was issued in the *Anthropology Review*, No. 5 in 2002 in Vietnamese.

population in 1993 while the poor households of which the poor ethnic households were 95%, make up 28% of the national poverty (Neil, Jamieson, 2000, p. 3). The sampling survey by MOLISA in Yen Bai in November 2001 indicates that the poverty rate among the Nung was 33.55%, the Yao 51.27%, and other ethnic minorities 35.22% while the national rate was more than 10% (The Office of the National Program on Poverty Reduction and Employment, 2000, p. 1). Poverty varies even within an ethnic group depending on geographical and topographical settings of their inhabitation. For instance, the poor households of the Gia-rai in the same Gia Lai province were, according to a survey by the Institute of Anthropology in 1999, 25 - 35% in Pleiku and 70 - 80% in Ia Graih district; or, 42% of the Thai minority were poor households in Muong Trai commune while 68% of the Thai poor households was found in Nam Don commune of the same district, Son La province. The gap between the number of poor households of the Kinh and the ethnic minorities is big. In 1999, the poor households in Lai Chau province accounted for 35% or four folds of that of Hung Yen province (8.7%); the number of poor households in the mountainous areas of Phu Yen province was 40% or four times more than that of the overall provincial rate of 9.6%; the poverty rate of the Northern Highlands was 18.9% or 2.6 times higher than that of the Red River Delta (The Ethnic Council of the National Assembly the 10th, 2000, p. 1118). In 2000, the poverty rate among the Si La in Lai Chau province was 93.7% or 20 times more than that of the

Kinh (14.5%) in the same province (The Ethnic Council of the National Assembly the 10th, 2000, p. 1143). Serious poverty was found in 2,325 third zone communes in poor areas, which are home to ethnic minorities. Most of those communes have about 60% or more households under poverty line (Hoang Duc Nghi, 2001, p. 220). In general, the poor households among the ethnic areas have been accounting for 50% or more over the past decade while the national rate was just 20.3% in 1995, 19.23% in 1996, 17.7% in 1997, 15.66% in 1998, 13.1% in 1999 and 11% in 2000.

Ethnic livelihood and income remain lower than that of the national and the Kinh. The following data compares the average national income in the mid-1990s of more than 250 USD/person/year or 2,800,000 VND/person/year or 230,000 VND/person/month. According to the living standard survey conducted by the Committee of Ethnic Minorities and Mountainous Area in April 1995, the households earning less than 60,000 VND/person/month were 65.85%; the households suffering food shortages in 3 to 6 months were 33.6%; the households having fixed assets of less than 1 million VND were 90% in ethnic areas of the Northern Highlands. In 1998, more than 50% of the ethnic households across the nation had an average income of 55,000 or less VND/person/month (Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs, 1999, p. 93). In the same year, nearly 50% of the households in the 1,715 poor communes had per capita asset of 200,000 VND (Hoang Duc Nghi, 2001, p. 220) and the gap between the Kinh

and the ethnic minority income remained quite high. According to the statistics of the General Department of Statistics, the average income of a Muong, Thai, Hmong, and Xo-dang were 59%, 55%, 41%, and 30% of that of an average Kinh respectively (Hoang Duc Nghi, 2001, p. 230).

Also in the same year, the material infrastructure of ethnic areas remained short in quantity and poor in quality. By 1995, bamboo houses accounted for 82.6%, households lacking drinking and production water were 66.8%, and communes having automobile roads to the commune centre were 56% and 59% in Lao Cai and Lai Chau province respectively (Vu Dinh Loi et al., 2000, p. 14). The rate of Northwestern communes having their own markets is 37%; of which some provinces have a low rate of markets, namely Lai Chau province (11%), Son La (19%) and Hoa Binh (28%) (The Office of the National Program on Poverty Reduction and Employment, 2000, p. 6). The illiteracy rate among the Si La and Mang was 96% and among the Chut 94%... (Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs, 1999, p. 93). In 1997, nearly 500 communes in the Northern Highlands did not have an automobile road to the commune centre; more than 600 communes having no healthcare centers; more than 2,500 communes having no market; more than 1,500 communes having no electricity; more than one third of the households having no clean water (Vu Dinh Loi et al., 2000, p. 67). In 1998, out of the 1,568 third zone ethnic communes of the whole country, nearly 400 had no automobile roads, nearly 900 had no market, 800 had no healthcare centers, and

most of them had no electricity networks and 70% of the households had rickety houses (Hoang Duc Nghi, 2001, p. 221).

Though the government has been paying attention somewhat, health care services in ethnic minority areas remain weak. Diseases such as malaria, diarrhea, and basedow remained widespread (Hoang Duc Nghi, 2001, p. 221). In the Northern Highlands and the Central Highlands, the infant mortality rate in the early 1990s was 5.5% compared to the national rate of 3.6% and three times higher than that of the Southeastern delta of the South and the Red River delta (National Centre of Social Sciences and Humanities, 2002, p. 555). While the total national birth rate reduced sharply from 3.8% in 1989 to 3.1% in 1999 and 2.7% in 1996 and 2.3% in 1999, the total birth rate in the Central Highlands was 4.4% in 1996 and 4.68% in 1999 (National Centre of Social Sciences and Humanities, 2002, p. 555).

By 1998, education in ethnic areas remained difficult and under-qualified as compared to educational standards maintained in areas inhabited by the Kinh. Throughout the country, the number of students of the Kinh and ethnic minorities are 93.3% and 82.2% at the primary level, 66.2% and 36.5% at the lower secondary level, and 39.1% and 8.1% at the upper secondary and 10.5% and 1.1% at post secondary level respectively (Working Group of the Government, Donors and NGO Experts, 1999, p. 34). The illiteracy rate was very high in remote and innermost areas. For example, the illiteracy among the Si La and

the Mang was 96% and among the Chut 94.8% in 1998 (Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs, 1999, p. 93). By 2000, 60% of the population and 50% of their commune chairpersons and party secretaries from third zone communes were illiterate (Hoang Duc Nghi, 2001, p. 221)...

2. Causes of Poverty

There are many causes of poverty in ethnic areas. Apart from general causes also found in rural plain areas across the country such as: lack of farmland, poor quality farmland, lack of production investment, lack of drinking and production water, lack of labor, overpopulation, severe weather, natural disasters, and storms, there are particular causes of poverty that ethnic minorities experience. These may include geographical and topographical isolation, under-qualified communication, and limited perception that lead to limited access to development services, wasteful expenditures, or lack of plans. The main causes of poverty of the rural plain areas and the rural mountainous areas are quite different. In plains areas inhabited by the Kinh, the main causes of poverty are poor soil, severe weather, and lack of production investment. In mountainous areas inhabited by ethnic people, the main causes of poverty are the decrease of resources and limited access to economic, educational, social and health services. The Kinh people have become stable and rich after 10 years though ethnic people have remained poor and hungry for thousands of years.

3. Government's Poverty Reduction Programs and Projects

Since the late 1980s, the national poverty in general and poverty in ethnic areas have been officially considered by the Party and the government as national social issues to be solved. The Resolution of the 7th National Party Congress (1991) asserted that poverty was present in many areas, especially serious in ethnic, remote areas of the country. Poverty reduction was officially put in the resolution of the 8th National Party Congress (1996), which stated poverty reduction must be considered an urgent task of the whole Party and nation in the coming period. In light of the two resolutions, struggles against poverty in ethnic areas have been gradually operated. Since 1992, the government has officially conducted a national project to support poor, ethnic people within the *National Target Program on Poverty Reduction*. For the first five years under the project, the government issued a series of policies for ethnic areas: credits without mortgage given by the Agriculture and Rural Development Bank to the poor; afforestation improvement of bare hills and land in connection with permanent resettlement and sedentary farming (PRSF) in mountainous ethnic minorities areas (Program 327, September 1992); PRSF in connection with land and forest assignment to locals for management and protection (Decision 202/TTg, 1993); Socio-economic development of the Central Highlands period 1996 - 2000 and 2010 (Decision No. 656/TTg, September 1996); Socio-economic development of the northern mountainous provinces period 1996 - 2000 (Decision No.

960/TTg, December 1996); Development of mountainous inter-commune centers (Decision 35/TTg, January 1997). In July 1998, the Government's *National Target Program on Poverty Reduction 1998 - 2000* was officially launched to reduce the poor households from 17.7% in 1998 to less than 10% in 2000, supporting socio-economic development in special poor communes with priority given to investment in infrastructure, production boost, and improved access to basic social services. The poor in ethnic minority areas are the important beneficiaries of this program. Also in July 1998, an important poverty reduction program for ethnic areas under Decision No. 135 TTg of the Prime Minister - *the Socio-economic Development for Special Difficulty Communes in Mountainous and Remote Areas, also called Program 135* - went into operation. With the investment of 400 million dong per commune per year in two phases: 1998 - 2000 and 2001 - 2005, the program focuses on investment in some basic material infrastructure such as roads, schools, and health clinics for special difficulty communes in mountainous and remote areas.

The programs above resulted in considerable and encouraging achievements, which have been much mentioned by the authorities (Hoang Duc Nghi, 2001; The Ethnic Council of the National Assembly the 10th, 2000; The Office of the National Program on Poverty Reduction and Employment, 2000). Apart from such successes, the programs also revealed their limits: Instability of permanent resettlement and sedentary farming, re-migration and shifting

cultivation of the Hmong, the Yao, and other ethnic groups in the Northwestern areas and of the Gia-rai, Ba-na, E-de, Xo-dang in Central Highlands, and free migration of the Tay, Nung, Thai, Yao, Hmong, and Muong. In mountainous and remote areas, which required priority in poverty reduction, living standards were very slow to change and poverty remained stable, or even increased. Forests are continuously cut down to make room for farming in mountainous and remote areas. Slash and burn farming continuing at this rate could amount to tens of thousand hectares cut down a year. In general, the results of these programs did not match the money and effort put into them. Poverty levels remained higher than the national and the Kinh's standards.

Causes of those inefficiencies vary and include, most noteworthy, a lack of creative application of policies into practice. The policies were not wrong but remained only on principle. There remained a gap between policies and practice which can be seen in the weak application of those policies into practice by different institutions and at different levels. Many policies were applied in the same way for areas of different natural settings and development levels. There was a lack of concentration and consistency in management and direction. Poverty reduction required priorities to be placed on improved income and living standards while some poverty reduction programs and projects focused only on construction of material facilities while paying insufficient attention to investment in promoting

production. Most of the programs and projects did not make use of local knowledge or facilitate local participation in the project-making process, focusing instead on the academic knowledge of central managers and experts. Influences of ethnocentrism remained heavy in project establishment and implementation. The slogan of “Making the mountainous areas catch up with the plain ones” is understood to be an imitation of the plains which can be seen in the permanent resettlement and farming over the past decades. Investment and instructions of new production techniques, especially special plants in mountainous and ethnic areas were inappropriate and impractical. Technicians presenting new production techniques did not follow specific forms and steps for introduction that were suitable for recipients with low literacy rates. It was common for technicians to only give perfunctory demonstration to locals and then return to the district or province they came from. This method resulted in failures, financial wastes, and loss of trust of locals in new techniques. Financial distribution also remained problematic with average and widespread investments without clear periods and no focus on the leading target of production development.

4. Towards some Viewpoints and Solutions for Poverty Reduction

Poverty reduction must be based on consideration of local socio-economic characteristics. Unlike in the plains, poverty reduction in ethnic and mountainous areas tends to be more complicated and time consuming. There must be specific steps and

solutions suitable for locals facing low literacy rates and other barriers such as language, traditions and customs that differ from those of the people who are aiding in poverty reduction.

The targets of poverty reduction: Compared to the targets of poverty reduction in rural plain area and urban area, poverty reduction in ethnic areas has its own needs beyond just production development and improved income. Additional needs include, but are not limited to: improved access to new social and economic services and protection of forests, natural resources and environment.

Poverty reduction must be connected to the implementation of Party and Government's ethnic policies. Geographical and literacy differences result in gaps between economic, social and cultural development of the Kinh and other ethnic minorities communities. Ethnic areas were once revolutionary bases during the resistance wars against France and the U.S. Therefore, poverty reduction must be connected to the implementation of Party and government's ethnic policies based on the three principles: solidarity, equality and mutual support. The basic content of this requirement is to provide priority policies and solutions on cadres and capital sources to accelerate the poverty reduction in ethnic areas.

Capacity of policy evaluation and project formulation of cadres and locals must be built through participation methods. Giving ethnic people a “fishing pole” is not enough. They also need help finding the

most suitable ways to “fish.” Local ethnic officials, therefore, need the guidance to formulate and evaluate their own policies and projects.

Production, especially plants and animals, must be diversified to suit income sources based on local ability level. Two current trends in ethnic areas of high poverty rate must be improved: slash and burn farming or growth of long-term industrial trees. A significant long-term solution for poverty reduction, using local input, is the diversification of production activities and incomes to settle redundant laborers and improve living standards. Contents of production diversification may depend on different settings and include: development of intensive and extensive wet rice farming, development of industrial plants such as cotton, *boi loi* trees, cashew, fruit trees, or raising cattle and pigs of new breeds. Consideration can be made for forestry jobs and secondary family jobs for both subsistence livelihood and commodities. There are many solutions for income and production diversification included in the *promotion of farming and forestry extension*. Additional solutions to be considered are: irrigation development, the introduction of new breeds of animals such as cattle and pigs, the introduction of new crops such as rice, corn, cassava, beans, oranges, lemons, grapes, coffee and pepper, and the organization of training courses on techniques for farming and raising livestock.

Land issues of ethnic minorities must be settled through flexible and suitable

policies in conjunction with traditional customs of local land ownership. The Land Law (1993) on the one hand paved the way for appropriate and effective use of land resources throughout the country, but on the other hand is an indirect cause of problems and conflicts of land ownership and usage in ethnic areas. The nature of land issues in ethnic areas lies in the conflict between the traditional communal ownership practiced by the local community and the private ownership regulated by the state. The Land Law resulted in limited residential and farming land area that forced ethnic communities to move into jungles as nomads and to practice a kind of shifting cultivation that lead to more poverty and negative relations with the government. To settle this issue, suitable land policies must be issued for mountainous areas, which aim to ensure local land ownership as well as immediate and long-term sufficient farming areas for ethnic minorities.

Capital distribution must be reasonably calculated for poverty reduction targets. Among the investment items for ethnic areas, priorities must be given to production and income diversification based on primary production development and then development infrastructure such as electricity, roads, stations, drinking water and other civil constructions. Investment can otherwise at least be given at the same time to both the targets of production and infrastructure development. Investment must be concentrated on mountainous and

remote areas and former resistance bases which are experiencing high poverty rates and not be given access to new social and economic services.

Levels of equality must be reached in ethnic areas, particularly regarding issues of production, expenditure, infrastructure and market information. Gender equality also needs sufficient attention. Women in ethnic areas currently have less power than men. They have to work more than men do while do not have land ownership nor equality in enjoying basic social services nor opportunities to participate in social activities.

Minimize vulnerability to poverty in ethnic areas: illness, social evils, man-made and natural risks. Specific solutions are: development of a healthcare network, maintenance and enhancement of social order and national defense and security, proper implementation of social aid policies, socialization of prevention of flood and fire, and promotion of forest and vegetation system protection.

Education and training of ethnic cadres must be appreciated and promoted. Because of the typical features of ethnic community socio-economic development level and literacy, education plays a critical role in the process and long-term results of poverty reduction in ethnic minorities areas. The training of human resources and investment in education must be considered as investment in economy and economic values. Together with popular education for long-term training of people, training of

local ethnic cadres must be paid attention to. Currently, local cadres in ethnic areas are few and under-qualified. The practice of the past years shows that cadres in ethnic areas are premises of success or failure in development in general and in poverty reduction in particular. Therefore, among the series of solutions for poverty reduction in ethnic areas, the training of local ethnic cadres should be considered a significant prerequisite to poverty reduction solutions.

References

1. Vu Dinh Loi, Bui Minh Dao, Vu Thi Hong (2000), *Land Ownership and Use in Central Highlands Provinces*, Social Science Publishing house, Hanoi.
2. Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs (1999), *Training Material for Provincial, City and District Cadres Working on Poverty Reduction*, Hanoi.
3. National Centre of Social Sciences and Humanities (2002), *Some Issues of Socio-economic Development in Villages of Central Highlands Ethnic Minorities*, Social Science Publishing house, Hanoi.
4. Neil, Jamieson (2000), *Overview of Socio-economic Situation of the Northern Highlands and the Project Area* (Submission to the World Bank), Vietnamese version.
5. Hoang Duc Nghi (2001), *About the Ethnic Work in 10 Years of Renovation (1990 – 2000)*, National Politics Publishing house, Hanoi.

6. Research Centre for Resources and Environment, Hanoi National University (1999), *A study on Sustainable Development in Mountainous Areas of Vietnam*, Agriculture Publishing house, Hanoi.

7. The Ethnic Council of the National Assembly the 10th (2000), *Party and Government Policies and Laws on Ethnicity*, National Culture Publishing house, Hanoi.

8. The Office of the National Program on Poverty Reduction and Employment (2000), *Some issues of poverty reduction in ethnic minorities areas*, Summary Records of Conference: *Some poverty reduction issues for ethnic minorities*, Project *Poverty Reduction for Provinces in Vietnam*, Hanoi.

9. Working Group of the Government, Donors and NGO Experts (1999), *Vietnam Attacking Poverty*, Workshop of Consultative Group of Donors for Vietnam.



Transplanting rice seedlings among the Hmong in the northern mountainous area of Vietnam.

Photo: Doan Dinh Thi