

**COPING MECHANISMS OF THE ETHNIC MINORITIES IN UPLAND AREAS  
OF VIETNAM AND THE LAO-PDR AS RESPONSES TO THE FOOD SHORTAGE:  
STRENGTHENING CAPACITY AND COLLABORATION IN STUDYING  
BETWEEN THE INSTITUTE OF ANTHROPOLOGY (VIETNAM)  
AND THE INSTITUTE FOR CULTURAL RESEARCH (LAO-PDR)**

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### **1. Introduction**

Before the food crisis, about 800 million people had daily food shortage throughout the world (World Food Summit, 1996). Until now, together with the food price which increases twofolds in 2008 compared with previous years, food security is problematic, especially for the ethnic minority uplanders and vulnerable people. Although Vietnam, as a multi-ethnic country with 50 ethnic minorities living in the upland of the total 53 ethnic groups, is the second largest rice exporter in the world, food shortage is relatively widespread in ethnic minority groups (UNICEF, 1996; Nguyen Van Nam, 1999; MRRD, 2001; Vuong Xuan Tinh, 2002a; Bui Minh Dao (ed.), 2003). In Northern mountainous regions, some Hmong households had food shortage for between 5 and 6 months per year (Vuong Xuan Tinh, 2002b). In Bac Kan province, some ethnic minorities in the lowland did not have enough food for their households for between 3 and 4 months a year (Renovation in the mountains: land use changes and farmers livelihood strategies in Bac Kan Province, Vietnam, 2004). Although the Central Highland of Vietnam has prospect of cash-tree cultivation (such as coffee trees, cocoa trees, etc.), many

households in this area suffered from food shortage between two and four months per year (Vuong Xuan Tinh, 2001; Bui Minh Dao (ed.), 2003). Similarly, food scarcity exists in the Lao PDR. Although Laos is self-sufficient in food, 50 percent of the total households were poor. Ethnic minority uplanders in some villages lack food for some months in a year. This caused children to be malnourished and adults to be weakened (ADB, TA No. 5794-REG, *Desk Study*, Lao-PDR, 1999).

In terms of the implementation of governmental policies relating to ethnic minorities, both Vietnam and Laos have had great achievements. However, ethnic minorities in these countries still face some difficulties and challenges in the context of the current innovation, development and integration. One of the difficulties that should be solved is food security for the uplands of both Vietnam and Laos.

What are ethnic minorities' coping mechanisms in response to food shortage? How do socio-economic, cultural and ecological factors affect food security? What measures do ethnic minorities take to ensure food security? Answering these questions has both scientific and practical significance not only in ensuring food security for ethnic

minorities, but also in solving similar problem at national and regional levels.

To contribute to answering the above-mentioned questions, the Institute of Anthropology in Hanoi (Vietnam) implemented a project on Ethnic Minorities' Coping Mechanisms in Upland Areas of Vietnam and the Lao-PDR as Responses to Food Shortage: Strengthening Capacity and Collaborative Research between the Institute of Anthropology (Vietnam) and the Institute for Cultural Research (Lao-PDR), which lasted from September 2005 to September 2008, funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. The project has the following objectives:

1. Share information of food security between ethnic minorities in two countries (Vietnam and Laos);

2. Train knowledge relating to food security and professional skill training for young researchers from Vietnam and the Lao-PDR;

3. Establish a collaborative research between the two countries in order to find solutions to food scarcity among ethnic minority uplanders;

4. Put forward strategies to ensure food security for ethnic minorities in the upland;

5. Workshops and publications to share research results between two countries.

When implementing this project, there were research questions, as follows:

1. What was the reality of ethnic minorities' food sources in the upland of both countries?

2. How did ethnic minorities in both countries cope with food shortage?

3. Was there any similarity and dissimilarity in coping mechanism among ethnic groups? If there were, how did they manifest?

4. What were similarities and dissimilarities in response to food shortage among different household groups (rich and poor, old and young, male and female, etc.) in every ethnic region?

5. Which aspects explained similarities and dissimilarities in coping mechanism to overcome food shortage among different ethnic groups, and different groups of the same ethnic community?

## **2. Methodology**

This research - done at the household level - has focused on 5 variables (capitals/assets of the households). Food shortage has direct and indirect impacts on different households' capitals and vice versa.

The first variable is called "natural capital," which includes land and forest resources that are used by a household and how these resources are connected to their food status. In case of food shortage, householders have to sell or lease a portion or all of their land. Householders may have to change the way they use their land or change the type of cultivation in order to reduce investment in their agricultural production. They may have to go to the forest and exploit timber and non-timber products to replace the family's food supply. Some householders even have to eat food collected from nature. Changes in

capital use may lead to other impacts on their household living standard. Selling land means they not having land to cultivate in the future. It will seriously endanger their ability to earn a living.

The second variable is social capital. This source comes from relationships within the family and among other relatives, neighbors, friends, and colleagues, etc. and determines how these relationships contribute to a guaranteed food supply in the household. When a family is short of food, they may need help from one of these relationships. Help can mean direct food assistance or cash. With support from relatives and acquaintances, a household can move to a new location or another city to earn a living. This may bring about unexpected results, such as a household being unable to pay debts, or being placed into a worse living situation.

The third variable is human capital. This capital is assessed according to the following factors: professional skills, employment ability, education, and health conditions in connection with a household's food sources. In case of food shortage, household members have to use their knowledge to earn a living by doing different jobs such as woodworking, embroidery, and knitting, etc. A household may have to work for others in their community or in other places. Some households have to cut down on the number of meals in a day or reduce the nutritional value of each meal. This action may bring about serious side-effects. Work performance of each household member is weakened by overwork. They may also be

contaminated by social evils in their working environments. The reduction in meal number in a day and nutritional value in each meal may lead to the degradation of the family's labor force and shortage of Vitamin A, iodine, and iron among household members. This deficiency may cause serious developmental problems in young children, such as low weight, down syndrome, handicaps or other developmental problems. Malnutrition may also cause unpredictable diseases.

The fourth variable is financial capital. This concerns the spending and income of a household in relation to its food sources. When people lack food, they may have to find a substitute income source. They must accept any job, despite potential health risks. They have to cut back on spending and this affects some aspects of their lives. For example, owing to a modest income, they may tighten investment in their children's study, or even ask their children to give up their studies. When a family member is sick, they cannot afford the medical fees.

The fifth variable is physical capital. This capital refers to different kinds of valuable assets such as a house, furniture, and means of transportation, etc. In the case that the household lacks food, they must mortgage their house, production tools or furniture in order to get more money. This action will bring about negative effects. The household will have a less suitable residential location. Lack of production means will reduce the household's capability for work.

This study examines the changes in assets/capitals of the household in the context of household's food situation. These changes are assessed in both positive and negative aspects of the household's future economic development.

In each selected ethnic minority group, the study tries to find out how the community copes with food shortage. To understand this problem, different groups of households (rich and poor, men and women, etc.) are selected and studied to identify differences and similarities in their reactions to food shortages.

At the community level, this study focuses on two groups in two different areas of every country. The study applies an analytical matrix with the same indicators (such as the diverse income, migration, etc.) to compare one ethnic group with the others in order to identify the models and dynamics of similarities and differences between ethnic groups.

The study researched how the households and communities of different ethnic groups change their capitals/assets to cope with food shortage. In neither country, two case studies were carried out to know exactly what the household's advantages were, and what they did to survive food shortage.

This research used the analytical framework of sustainable livelihood created by DFID (1998), which focused on five kinds of household capital, and therefore applied interdisciplinary approaches. Specialists in anthropology, agriculture, economics, and health are

involved. Within their project scale, all researchers in different specializations worked together as a team.

### **3. Research Sites**

The selected research areas included upland villages of ethnic minorities in Vietnam and Laos. One of the project objectives was to select ethnic minority groups that have lived in both Vietnam and Laos.

In Vietnam, the two selected research sites were Pieng Pho Village (of the Thai) belonging to Pha Danh Commune and Binh Son 1 (of the Khmu) belonging to Ta Ca Commune, Ky Son District, Nghe An Province.

In the Lao-PDR, the two selected research sites included Na Toum Village (of the Thai) belonging to Muang Kham District and Din Dam Village (of the Khmu) belonging to Nong Hed District, Xiang Khouang Province adjacent to Nghe An Province of Vietnam.

### **4. Main Activities**

The project had the following main activities:

#### ***4.1. Setting up Interdisciplinary Research Groups and Selecting Research Areas***

The project used interdisciplinary approaches involving experts in different fields of the project. Four main specialists' groups were set up to carry out the project.

The first group included anthropologists. The members of this group were mainly from the Institute of Anthropology (Vietnam) and the Institute for

Cultural Research (Lao-PDR). This group focused on social and cultural aspects (such as social and human capital) relating to the household and community food security.

The second group consisted of agronomists. This group examined the issues relating to the household agricultural activities (the natural capital).

The third group encompassed economists. All members of this group studied household income and expenditure in a year, especially when the household faced food shortage. They also quantified how the household changed their spending habit while facing food shortage.

The last one was the medical group. Members of this group were medical doctors highly experienced in health problems and diseases caused by food shortage. These medical experts were responsible for nutritional evaluation as well as examining its link to the health of the target household and community food security.

An experienced researcher was in charge each group. All four groups were under the leadership of the project management board.

As soon as the research groups had been set up, up to March 2006, both Vietnamese and Lao teams their completed their selection of research areas as expected.

#### ***4.2. Holding the Inauguration Workshop***

The inauguration workshop was held in Vientiane (Laos) in May 2006 with the participation of five project members from Vietnam (representatives of the project management board and consultants in

anthropology and agronomy), the Lao research team and the representatives of the Rockefeller Foundation in Thailand. The objectives of the workshop were to identify the research issues and to discuss the plan of action.

#### ***4.3. Training***

In combination with the inauguration workshop, Vietnamese experts trained the Lao team on theoretical issues relating to food security, research methods and technical skills (participant observation, making participatory maps, in-depth interview, group discussion, collection of secondary data, comparison of different data and skills and writing papers, etc.). Afterwards, similar training was arranged in Hanoi for the Vietnamese research groups.

#### ***4.4. Desk Study and Fieldwork***

From August 2006 to February 2007 desk study and fieldwork were carried out in both Vietnam and Laos. All research groups collected secondary data and documents, including policy papers, books, newspapers, magazines, journals, development project papers and reports on local socio-economic situations relating to food security, and then analyzed them.

When conducting fieldwork at the local level, the researchers used set questionnaires to identify household food shortage and its influence on the five above-mentioned capitals. This survey also examined different household's ways of coping with the food shortage. In addition to the questionnaires, some households were selected for in-depth interviews to find similarities and dissimilarities between

different groups of households' coping mechanism, especially to understand the reasons for such similarities and dissimilarities. The selection of households was based on criteria of wealth, poverty, and gender (men and women) to examine the difference in coping mechanism between different households and household members.

At community level, researchers facilitated group discussions for mixed groups, men groups and women groups. Some participatory rapid appraisal (PRA) tools (such as farming calendar, community map, timeline, assessable matrix, etc.) were used to learn about food shortage and ways of coping with it.

#### ***4.5. Presenting Research Results at the District (Province), National and Regional Workshops***

All data collected from secondary sources, PRA, interviews and household surveys in the research areas were analyzed. Initial findings were presented at the provincial workshops (Laos) or at the district workshops (Vietnam) (in July and in September 2007) in order to feedback from participants regarding these findings. Research results presented at the workshops were the final reports on households' food security situations, different household groups' coping mechanisms as responses to food shortage and factors leading to those differences. Local authorities at different levels (provinces, districts and communes), members of organizations, that provide people with commodities and services (cultivation, husbandry, agricultural

extension, etc.) and local people involved in the workshops. The feedback from participants established important data to check the findings; it was also basis for comparison between communities in the later stage.

In the Lao-PDR, all the reports completed at the provincial level were presented at the national workshop held in Vientiane in August 2007. Many participants, including policy makers, took part in this workshop in order to share food security information and lessons learned from coping mechanism to address food scarcity among ethnic minorities. The feedback from the participants made the research results rich.

In Vietnam, an international workshop was combined with a national workshop on coping mechanism developed by three different ethnic minority groups to address the food shortage: A case study in the upland of Vietnam, applying the same theories and research framework into practice, funded by the Rockefeller Foundation (September 2007).

The project results of the researchers from the two selected countries were presented at the regional workshop "Food security among ethnic minorities in mountainous areas of Vietnam and Lao PDR" held in Hanoi (Vietnam) in October 2007. Apart from the project members, there were participants from some research institutions, government agency representatives and other partners. The participants discussed issues relating to upland ethnic minorities' food shortage in

both Vietnam and Laos. Key theoretical and practical issues were put forward together with recommendations and solutions in order to collectively address upland ethnic minorities' food shortage in two countries.

#### **4.6. Publishing Research Results in a Special Issue of the Anthropology Review (the English Version)**

As soon as the reports were revised and edited based on the feedback of the workshop participants, they were translated into English and published in the Anthropology Review as a special issue on the project. We hope that the project contributed to establish a theoretical basis of food security among ethnic minorities in both Vietnam and Lao-PDR.

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