

**EFFECTS OF SOCIAL AND CULTURAL FACTORS
ON FOOD SECURITY OF THE THAI COMMUNITY
(Study in Pieng Pho Village, Pha Danh Commune,
Ky Son District, Nghe An Province)**

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1. Rationale

Food security is a topical issue in many areas of the world. Although there has been remarkable development in economy and food production in the last decade, poverty remains serious in many countries. According to the estimation by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), 841 millions of people in developing countries are suffering from hunger. Vietnam is the country where people's living standard is classified as poor with the average income per capita ranking 121 among 174 countries in the world. Within 3 areas including urban, lowland rural and mountainous rural areas, where the majority of the people are ethnic minorities and food insecurity is most serious. For this reason, a study on coping strategies in order to ensure food security in areas where ethnic minority people are living is urgent.

Within the framework of the project *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), this study was carried out in the Thai community in Pieng Pho Village, Pha Danh Commune, Ky Son District, Nghe An Province. The objective of the study is to apply the anthropological/cultural anthropology approach to understand the coping mechanism against the food scarcity through the influence of human capital and social capital on the food situation of household groups and the Thai community, and to make recommendations for sustainable food security for this community.

2. General Information on the Study Area

The Pieng Pho Village belongs to Pha Danh Commune, Ky Son District, Nghe An Province. Ky Son is a mountainous district in the west of Nghe An Province, about 300 km from Vinh City. The West, North, and South of the district are all adjacent to the Lao People's Democratic Republic with the border line of 192 km. The East of the district is bordered with Tuong Duong District. The total natural area of the district is 1791.1 km², of which

the area of natural forest land accounts for 29%, the plain land area is only about 300 ha, and the rest is open land and barren hills. The total population of the district is 65,538 people belonging to 4 groups of Hmong (38%), Khmu (32%), Thai (28%), and Kinh. All 20 communes and one district are covered under the Program 135. The number of poor households accounts for 82% (Ky Son District People's Committee, 2006).

Being one of 21 communes and towns of Ky Son District, Pha Danh Commune is situated in an extremely disadvantaged mountainous area with the poverty rate of over 80% (according to the new poverty line - income less than 200,000 VND/capita/month). However, the commune still achieves satisfactory results in husbandry, forest protection, disease prevention etc., for which the contribution by the Thai community in Pieng Pho Village is not small.

By 2007, the village had 36 households with 187 people. The natural area of Pieng Pho Village is 2,500 ha, of which the area of agricultural land (upland field) is 120 ha (including land for cultivating rice, maize, and bananas). The area of enrichment forest is 165 ha, of fish pond is about 1 ha, of graveyard is 2 ha, of residential land and home garden is 3 ha. The village is bordered with Huoi Nhuc Village to the East, with Ta Ca Commune to the South, with Nam Can Commune to the West, and with Pieng Hom Commune to the North.

3. Study Results and Discussions

This part is prepared based on information gathered from group discussions and in-depth interviews information as well as questionnaire survey with local households. These sources of information have reflected the effects of social and cultural factors on food security and coping strategy against poverty and hunger of the households and the Thai community in Pieng Pho Village.

3.1. Traditional Social Organization and Food Security

In this part, we focus mainly on the analysis of the roles of different family types and family lines in food security of the Thai Community in Pieng Pho Village.

3.1.1. The Role of the Family in Food Security

Thai families in Pieng Pho Village were of patriarchy form and nuclear families (consisting of the couple and their own children), accounting for 80.5%, the rest are extended and modified nuclear families. The family size in Pieng Pho Village was small - with 4.83 people (compared to the average family size in northern mountainous and upland areas from the General Statistics Office, 1999, pp. 15, Table 1.0, which is 4.97 people). There were 1 household with 2 adults; 7 young households that had just separated from their big families, each had 3 people; 7 households with 4 people each; 11 households with 5 people each; 5 households with 6 people each; 3 households with 7 people each; 1 household with 8 people; 1 household with 9 people (see Table 1).

Table 1: Household size in Pieng Pho Village

Number of members	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Number of HHs (n = 36)	0	1	7	7	11	5	3	1	1
Percentage (%)	0.0	2.8	19.4	19.4	30.5	13.9	8.3	2.8	2.8

Source: Project Survey, 2007.

The remaining 5% were extended and modified nuclear families. The whole village had 36 households with 187 people. There was one Kinh/Thai couple; the wife came from another area, and the man was a local. Most of the families in the village were related to one another through the paternal or maternal side. In comparison to other Thai villages, Pieng Pho was a young community established in February 1985, after 6 displacements from Huoi Xa Village of Mai Son Commune (Luon Mai), Tuong Duong District. Although they moved to Pieng Pho in several stages, all the families received initial assistance in material through the support of Mr. Lo Van Panh and other families that had settled there. They were provided a good condition for their future. The nuclear family type in Pieng Pho was mainly found in households whose owners were young, knowledgeable, and healthy. There was an increasing tendency in household separation, because in Pieng Pho there were many young people going away and working as teachers, village nurses, etc. However, in terms of family relationships, they maintained close ties with their parents; they also shared responsibilities for their families.

To overcome the shortage of agricultural land, local people had long been

taking advantage of 4 ha of land along the stream to grow bananas. Almost every household grew some plot of bananas and twice a month they could sell unripe bananas to traders from Vinh. Their average income was from 150,000 to 200,000 VND/HH/month. Local people's income was fairly good. The number of households earning from 3 to 6 million VND/year accounted for 41% of the total number of households in the village; of which, young families at the age of 30 years-old having their income from farming and husbandry activities ranging from 3 to 6 million VND/year accounted for 42.9%. The number of households above the age of 30 having income from 3 to 6 million VND from other activities, such as carpentry, motorbike taxi... accounted for 37.5%. The whole village has 30 motorbikes. Some households even had 2 or 3 motorbikes. 13 households in the village had televisions. 100% of the households have small-scale hydro-electricity generators and radios. The whole village had 10 rice mills. The noteworthy thing to mention was the program to train local farmers in science and technology (in coordination with the district extension station); in 2006, 6 training courses were organized for 300 turns of local people (94.1%) (see Table 2 and Table 3).

Table 2: Household classification by economic situation in Pieng Pho Village

Socio-economic groups	Number of HHs	Percentage %
Better-off	2	5.9
Middle	21	61.8
Poor	9	26.5
Food-poor	2	5.9
Total	34	100.0

Source: Project survey, 2007.

Table 3. Number of households suffering food shortage

Duration of food shortage	Number of households	Percentage %
From 1 to 3 months	6	17.6
From 4 to 6 months	2	5.9
Do not suffer food shortage	26	76.5
Total	34	100.0

Source: Project Survey, 2007.

In general, food security in Pieng Pho was fairly ensured thanks to the diversity of occupation and livelihood strategies, and agricultural produce. Therefore, households could overcome the lean months with off-farm sources of income or the support of their relatives. The situation of interminable food shortage no longer existed here.

3.1.2. The Role of Family Ties and Lines and Community in Food Security

Family ties play an important role in production activities and help to ensure food security for the Thai Community in Pieng Pho Village. Pieng Pho Village was established on the basis of the family line of Mr. Lo Van Panh and the family line of his

wife - the Luong family. Most of the households in the village had brothers, relatives or relatives by marriage to Mr. Lo Van Panh's family - the founder of Pieng Pho Village. In 1984, after retiring from his position of senior and deputy director of district police department of Ky Son, Mr. Lo Van Panh asked for permission from the district People's Committee to bring 8 Thai families (Tay Thanh) from Huoi Xa Village, Mai Son Commune (Luon Mai), Tuong Duong District to Pieng Pho Village and settle there. Together with the expansion of marriage relationships and continual residence displacement of other households, by now the whole village had 36 households with 187 people belonging to 6 family lines.

Of which, the Lo family had 15 households, the Luong family had 12 households (with 150 people), and the rest 9 households belonging to Hoang, Kha, Lu, and Ngan families (with 37 people).

Although the households moved to Pieng Pho Village at different stages, their displacement had been well planned (prior preparation of residential and farming areas as well as the support of Mr. Lo Van Panh family and the households who had moved there earlier). This was a prerequisite for Pieng Pho community to become a solitary community which ensures that the community could cope with and easily recover from the food shortage shock.

Investigating family relationships of the Thai people here, we found an outstanding feature: family relationships were also community relationships. Therefore, the unity was naturally and durable. The households always cared for and helped one another when needed. In cases of misfortune, bad harvest or death, family and community unity was one of the factors helping Pieng Pho people cope with food shortage. These relationships were also integrated into Party organization, local authorities and mass organization. Therefore, in production activities as well as daily life, households facing difficulties can rely on support from the community in two forms: 1) The village management board took over the overall coordination role; 2) Households negotiated with one another on how to provide assistance.

The way Thai people in Pieng Pho Village coped with food shortage, in many

cases, also reflected their deal with yearly risks and shocks when natural calamities affected their crops and income. In 1988, the drought lasted for 3 months without, the whole village had to grow cassava, beans, and vegetables; and raise chicken, ducks, and pigs; and catch fish in rivers and streams. After that, cassava and beans were exchanged for rice and wheat flour from the district food store; vegetables were sold everyday in the district market to get more money. The not so poor households helped poorer households; local people protected and helped one the other so that no one starved to death, and children could still go to school. Here, the community and family lines formed a safety-net helping people to overcome misfortune.

In 2000, the drought lasted for nearly two months. However, as the people had already experienced calamities already, they had prepared food reserves, so they were more proactive in coping with this situation. Local people grew green beans, sweet potatoes and cassava; raised animals; and collected firewood to sell in Muong Xen Market. The spirit of mutual help in the family and in the community was once again promoted. Local people share their rice, maize, and sweet potatoes with one another so that no household would miss a meal and children would not have to leave school.

Mutual help in the family and among households in the village during harvesting season when someone was sick, when new households moved in, when houses were built, towards wedding or funeral etc., had become Pieng Pho Village lifestyle. Mrs. Lo Thi Loan's case is one example. In

production, Mrs. Loan's household received help during harvesting season from the children of Mr. Lo Van Bien (her husband's uncle), the children of Mr. Lo Van Duc (her husband's brother) and her father's sister. When her husband (Mr. Lo Van Quy) was sick, her household received a lot of support from their brothers and sisters and her husband's relatives. In 2000, when Mr. Quy had to go to the hospital for a long time, her husband's brother, Mr. Lo Van Duc, gave them 700,000 VND; her husband's younger sister, Mrs. Lo Thi Phuong, gave them 700,000 VND and lent them 400,000 VND (this amount had not been paid back). In addition, many other people in their family, like Mr. Lo Van Bien, Mr. Lo Van Hung, and Mr. Lo Van Xuan, often visited them and gave Mr. Quy sugar, milk and candies.

3.2. The Effect of Traditional Cultural Factors on Food Security

3.2.1. The Effect of Farming Habits

When still staying in their native land, Thai people mainly grew wet rice, and they acquired the tradition of intensive wet rice farming. When they moved to Pieng Pho Village, although they had to change to upland rice, they applied the wet rice planting techniques, such as selecting good seeds, sowing in the right season, frequent weeding, etc., therefore their rice productivity had been ensured.

The gardening habit of the Thai people was also promoted. Most of the households in Pieng Pho Village had gardens safely fenced, and they planted many kinds of vegetables and legumes. Thai people in Pieng Pho often planted vegetables between

rice crops; in the same garden they grew different kinds of vegetable, including spinach, lettuce, French beans, onion and garlic. The vegetables were well looked after therefore people not only had enough to eat but they could also sell their surplus at Muong Xen Market. The household of Mr. Lo Van Bien, Lo Van Toan, etc. often had surplus vegetables to sell; some days they can even get 70,000 VND for them. Thus, the vegetables contributed substantially to local people's incomes, and helped to improve their meals. In addition to the garden, every household had a fish pond. The ponds were at one end of the village or along streams. The fish were new breeds, such as black carp, carp, tench bream and mud carp. However, in recent years, the stream water became too muddy as the result of road construction at the water source, fish productivity was reduced.

3.2.2. Spending and Eating Habits

Unlike many other ethnic minority communities, the Thai people in Pieng Pho Village did not have the habit of excessive drinking and drinking every day. They only used wine on special family events, such as wedding, funeral and building houses. Therefore, in this village, there was no one addicted to drug or alcohol. There was also no social evils. This provided Pieng Pho with a healthy social environment.

Most of the households were thrifty. Every household had a rice and maize reserve. Some households even put aside some rice bags for special event during the year. In general, local people could ensure that their spending was reasonable. They

also spent a large amount on their children's education: the number of households spending 3 - 6 million VND/year on education accounted for 36%. Whereas, up to 60% of the households spent only less than 1 million VND/year on festival and holiday events.

3.2.3. The Role of Women in Ensuring Food Security

Thai women in Pieng Pho Village formed the important workforce, helping to ensure food security for their families. They were the key labourers undertaking about 70% of the weeding and caring for rice, husbandry, firewood collection, forest vegetable collection, home garden vegetable cultivation and harvesting. Regarding access to credits, women accounted for over 80%. During the years 2005 and 2006, the Village Women's Union borrowed nearly 100 million VND from the Vietnam Bank for Social Policies and the Vietnam Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development for production development following the crop patterns conversion program. In the village, there was a very encouraging program of commercial development and market access promotion, which was the establishment of the brocade group consisting of 50 women members. This group managed to sell many products such as scarves, skirts and handbags in the district and province markets, making a monthly income of 150,000 VND. Household income was increased thanks to incomes from vegetables, fruits, and brocade. Therefore, the role of women in their families and in society was gradually promoted.

3.3. The Effects of Educational Level, Occupation, and Policy Accessing Capacity Factors on Food Security

3.3.1. Educational Level and Occupation of the Household Heads and Food Security

According to the survey data of the Project, there were 6 households (17.6%) whose heads were under 30 years old; 15 households (35%) whose heads were from 41 to 50 years old. Of which 14 household heads had completed primary and lower secondary education levels (former Level I, II) (accounting for 41.2%); 10 household heads had completed the upper secondary education level (former Level III) (accounting for 29.4%). Therefore, young and knowledgeable households in Pieng Pho accounted for a high proportion. This was a favourable condition for them to improve productivity and investment effectiveness, through access to science and new technology. For example, the cultivation of hybrid maize had resulted in high productivity (10 kg of seed result in 250 kg of corn/crop while there were two crops per year). The application of new technology and breed in fish farming had brought about good profit. Some households gained 5 quintals in 2005 (in 2006 they lost all the fish owing to the flood). Four young household heads had managed to access the market by commercial fish farming to sell fish to caged fish farmers in Nam Mo River. Other households could earn high profit by raising black chickens and wild pigs.

Pieng Pho Village had 67 people working in other areas. Their households

members often received support in cash, and their lives were stable. Therefore they could even invest in production and livestock development. For example, the daughter-in-law of Mr. Lo Van Bien was a primary school teacher receiving a salary of 2 million VND/month which was used to invest in livestock development. Every 6 months, they produced litter of 8 pigs. Therefore, the family income was substantially improved.

3.3.2. Access of Local Households to Land Management and Policies

Regarding land management methods. Households with 165 ha of natural forest in Pieng Pho Village were classified as poor people with very few rare timber. The forest was managed by the village community. Villagers were allowed to harvest branches for firewood, timber for building houses, and to collect non-timber forest products. Upland fields (*din lanh*) were also managed by the village community in a traditional way. It was regulated that the growing of perennial trees was not allowed in the field. The households were not allowed to sell or transfer the area of land allocated to them. If they do not continue their farming activities on that land, the land would belong to the village. People from other villages were not allowed to use the land of the village. By 2007, land allocation (land use certificate) to households had not yet been carried out owing to financial and technical difficulties. However, no land conflict was found in the community.

Access to programs, projects, and policies: Being supported by the Program 135, Pieng Pho Village was receiving

significant investment from the State. By 2006, many programs and projects had been implemented, which brought about direct effect on ensuring food security in the village. Below are some of those programs and projects:

- The program “*Running water*” implemented from 2004 with 4 water tanks built. All households had clean water for their daily use.

- The program “*Elimination of temporary houses*” helped two poor and labor less households to have pieces of sheet cement roofed houses.

- The subproject “*Community house*” under the “*Community-based Rural Infrastructure Project*,” completed in 2007 provided the village with a common place for meeting and cultural activities.

- Program 134, implemented in 2005: Households with temporary houses were the beneficiaries of this program. By 2007, in Pieng Pho Village, there had been 4 households receiving support in cash to build their houses (6 million VND/household).

- *Audiovisual Program* under the national television footprints program of Vietnam Television (implemented in 2005) provided the village with a set of television and pan antenna, to help local people receive current information on events and the state of socio-economic situation of the nation as well as the world.

- Loans to local people from the Vietnam Bank for Social Policies (with preferential interest of 0.45%/year provided poor and socially disadvantaged households

with important capital to improve their living standard. For example, in 1999, the household of Mrs. Lo Thi Loan borrowed 5 million VND from the bank to buy a calf and 4 pigs. After two years, her household made 3.3 million VND in profit.

- *The Program “Annual Relief”* (under the umbrella of the Program 135), providing: rice, salt, vegetables, domestic animal breeds such as crossed-bred cows, pigs... helped local people to overcome hunger when there were natural calamities or epidemic diseases.

- The Program “*Forest Protection Contracts*” brought about 4 million VND/year to the village fund. At the same time, local people could also benefit from harvesting of timber to build their houses (with the approval of the village management board) and collection of dry firewood for use.

Loans from the bank brought considerable benefit. Five households (29.4%) borrowed from 5 to 10 million VND and 12 households (70.6%) borrowed over 10 million VND from the Vietnam Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development. Fifteen households (83.3%) borrowed from 5 to 10 million VND from the Vietnam Bank for Social Policies. These sources of fund enabled local households in animal and crop patterns conversion, retrieving and developing the traditional brocade trade. Therefore, household income was improved and, it contributed to poverty reduction. Many households in Pieng Pho Village, thanks to the bank loans, managed to set up good businesses and escaped poverty (for example, Mr. Kha Van Hung’s

household). Low interest loan enabled local people to make use of their available fields, gardens, fish ponds; develop their household economy; and change their farming habit from self-sufficiency to commodity production. They now learned how to apply advanced technology in production and husbandry. All the households enjoyed equal access to and benefit from bank loans. Many households learned to use fertilizers for their crops and to grow two maize crops, like the household of Ms. Khuyen who used all her upland fields to grow two crops of hybrid maize. In 2006, the productivity of the hybrid maize grown by her family was: 300 kg of maize produced from 10 kg of seed. According to Ms. Khuyen, hybrid maize brought higher profit than rice while the time spent for weeding was less; each quintal of maize could be sold for 220,000 VND. It could be said that, the banks became the “midwife” for the household economy in Pieng Pho Village.

4. Comments and Recommendations

4.1. Comments

Based on the study of the effects of social and cultural factors on food situation and the coping strategy to ensure food security for the Thai community in Pieng Pho Village, we have offered the following comments:

1. Thai people in Pieng Pho Village have formed a young, knowledgeable and skillful community. Therefore they could easily access science and technology; diversify agricultural produce; and change occupations to have stable incomes.

2. The special characteristic of this newly-established village is that the founder, family and community have created an extraordinary bond among the villagers. This bond has helped the Thai community to stabilize, develop and ensure food security.

3. The Thai women have played an important role in their household income, in accessing social benefits, and in establishing investment and production development plans.

4. Investment program and project have been carried out effectively in Pieng Pho Village, enabling local people to escape from poverty and ensure food security.

4.2. Recommendations

During the study period, we highly appreciated the success of Thai people at Pieng Pho in ensuring food security. However, there are still potential difficulties: the limited reserve of farming land; the village tendency to make long term development plans for the allocated land; the increase in husbandry diseases caused by concentrated residence and construction of breeding facilities; local people's increasing dependence on the market economy; the changes of streams and rivers which might break the fish pond system and threaten village residential areas; despite its short distance to the district centre, the village has not yet been connected to the national electricity grid. Examining this reality, we put forward the following recommendations:

1. Gradually transfer the model of land management by the community to the model of land management by households.

2. Organize the reclaim of terraced fields in areas with high potentials by mobilizing community own force with the support from the government and other agencies.

3. To reduce the spreading of diseases to domestic animals and increase the values of traditional animals in the market economy, special attention should be paid to traditional breeds and breeding methods while new breeds are introduced.

4. Additional skill training for farmers to include fund management, marketing and business accounting in order to access and integrate in the market economy and to gradually reduce their reliance on outside traders.

5. Motivate community own force, following the scheme "The State and the people work together" to build the Loi River Dam, in order to obtain water for the fish pond system and construct village electricity line. Develop employment training when the village is connected to the national electricity grid.

6. Develop a replication plan of Pieng Pho Village development model and food security in other villages in Ky Son District.

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