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The Common Good for the Few: Double Marginalisation in Ethnic Minorities in Vietnam

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Introduction

Vietnam comprises 54 ethnic groups, of which the ethnic majority Kinh makes up approximately 87% with the remaining 13% divided into 53 other ethnic minorities. The minority groups are notably characterised by remoteness, language barriers, degraded infrastructure, high poverty rate, poor education, low social status and limited access to public services and political power (van de Walle and Gunewardena 2001). Since *doi moi* (renovation) in 1986, an array of policies, programmes and projects have been implemented to empower people, in particular ethnic minorities. One of the most widely-reported applauded achievements is the reduced poverty rate from over 60% in 1990 to less than 10% in 2010 nationally. Nevertheless, ethnic minorities remain poorer and more disadvantaged than the majority Kinh community, elucidated by their lack/lower return of endowments and/or community characteristics (Baulch et al. 2007).

This paper examines Vietnam's ethnic minority communities who live in such marginal situations (see further Gatzweiler et al. 2011). It focuses on the relation between internal community structure and power relations, and development outcomes on ethnic minority villagers by examining three cases covering two of Central and Southern Vietnam's most underprivileged ethnic communities - the Pahy and the Khmer. Following the presentation of research methods, the research findings and discussions are structured respectively into three cases. The paper concludes with implications for development interventions and research in the future.

Methods

Ethnographic case study is the primary approach taken in this research¹. Data used in this paper was a part of a data set collected in two fieldtrips during 2010-2011. The first fieldtrip was carried out in July 2010 in Khe Tran village - the residential area of the Pahy community in Phong Dien district, Thua Thien Hue province, Central Vietnam. The second fieldtrip was undertaken in March 2011 in the Mekong Delta provinces, with two Khmer communities in Tri Ton district, An Giang province and Cau Ke district, Tra Vinh province. Determination of the chosen case studies was rationalised by the large proportion of minority population, and geographical and socio-economic vulnerability of the communities. Participants of the research were purposively selected, including local government officials, village leaders and both minority and Kinh villagers. Data from interviews were triangulated and complemented with observations

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and group discussion outputs. A total of 35 digitally-recorded one-hour interviews, carried out mostly in Vietnamese and in some cases with the assistance of local interpreters, were used for this analysis.

Rum Soc's agricultural club: Our club, whose voice?

Rum Soc village in Cau Ke district of Tra Vinh province is demographically dominated by Khmer people, and is one of the most disadvantaged villages. In May 2002, Rum Soc village's agricultural extension club was established with the approval by the local authority. The club functions as an organised and recognised group of local farmers, with a mandate to receive, apply and further diffuse new technology and knowledge in rice and agricultural production among members and towards the wider minority community. The club comprises of 71 members, with 32 Khmer farmers registered. At all levels the government and its professional agencies such as the provincial plant protection department, have provided intensive agricultural development projects to local ethnic farmers via the club. The club has also become a reliable demonstration site of up-scaling experiments by research institutes and universities, for example the transformation from triple rice to double rice plus one corn crop or introduction of bio-insecticides. Several club members were funded by the local authorities to participate in long term training courses and study tours organised by researchers. Now most of the club members can produce verified rice seed to meet local demand and provide other localities by orders. New technical adoption has led to better savings from input cutdown, higher productivity and accumulative income for club farmers.

Frequently mentioned as minority-based, the village club however comprises a group of high productivity farmers coalesced and led by a Kinh farmer. As a result, the club's growth has consolidated the inherent leader positions of the Kinh and their premier role in making decisions related to collective issues of the club. No Khmer members have taken any positions in the management board. Such absence was blamed by Kinh managers for the limited communication abilities and low education of Khmer farmers. From the club leader's perception, it has already been a success of the club to encourage the membership of Khmer farmers. Selected farmers who participate in long term training courses, learning tours and higher level conferences are thus solely individuals from the management board. Ultimately, it is Kinh managers who prominently represent and make decisions for the majority of Khmer farmers. Khmer members are only passive participants within the club intended to make their collective voices to be raised and heard.

The argument is not meant to disappreciate the role of the club and achievements it has brought to rural minorities in Rum Soc. Nevertheless the outcome of substantial technology transfer projects that ignore the Kinh-driven formation history and power structure of the club seems to detract from the overall objectives and priorities of minority-centred development. Indeed, such projects have further internalised the long-standing, hierarchical positions (cf. Schad et al. 2011:95) and "knowledge as power" practices of the Kinh managers into the Khmer-focused group.

An Loi: "Model" village versus normal village

An Loi in An Giang province is characterised by the typically unfavourable conditions of a remote ethnic minority village. The determinants that have made this Khmer community attract the attention and support of upper authorities and agricultural extension workers include its easy-to-access geographical location, high concentration of skillful farmers and wide network of retired higher-level cadres. Agricultural technology projects have thus prioritised farmers from the village to participate in building farming models. The village has been recently designated as one implementation site of a national project promoting an alternative approach in agriculture

extension. With the support of the commune, an agriculture extension club was established on the same principles as in the Rum Soc case. Our interviews indicated that local farmers, especially the club members, have acquired and adopted the latest farming technologies promoted in the delta. A village farmer proudly explained “This village is taking the lead in high productivity agriculture in the district thanks to numerous training courses and support by the government” (interview, 11.03.2011). The village became widely known after several local farmers were commended as nationally “good” farmers. The village has therefore received disproportionately large knowledge, technology and financial transfers from minority mainstreamed projects in the region. An Loi has been labelled a “model” village, an example of minority development success within the administrative area where local authorities and agricultural officials have concentrated their efforts.

Ta On is an adjacent minority village. Contrasting with An Loi, households in Ta On are economically poorer and socially marginalised. Their main source of livelihood, agricultural production such as rice and vegetable cultivation and fish rearing, is dependent upon natural conditions and traditional farming techniques inherited from their parents and developed through their own experiences. A young local farmer expressed his satisfaction with his current rice productivity during our interview; however such a yield is seemingly a failure in comparison to many An Loi applicators of advanced cultivation technologies. Ta On villagers have obtained few chances to join in agricultural extension and research activities. Despite our few observations that new farming techniques are diffused from the “model” village to other farmers in neighbouring fields, new knowledge seems to stay within the “model” village’s boundary.

The discussion has unravelled an unequal distribution of development project sources between “model” and “normal” minority communities. Such practice has been braced by the hierarchical structure and top-down decision-making approach of local governments and unconnected development projects whose managers fixedly look for successful outcomes.

Khe Tran: “A new modern era has begun but my family has lagged behind”

Officially established in 1990, Khe Tran is a poor remote mountainous ethnic minority community located near the Vietnam-Laos border area. Over the past two decades, especially since its listing as one of the most nationally disadvantaged villages in 2005, a multitude of development projects initiated by the government and international agencies have been implemented, shaping a new face for this Pahy’s village. Various projects of house construction, concrete roads and bridges, water supply system and electricity connection have ensured infrastructure to promote the socio-economic development of the village and the surroundings. Forest planting, income diversification and micro-finance projects have resulted in remarkable improvement in the economic conditions of local men and women.

Such brilliant brushes hardly represent the whole picture. Reported changes are only limited for a small group of better-off and more influential households in the village. They are prominently mixed Kinh-Pahy families² settled in the flat areas of the village which are edaphically appropriate for crops and rubber development. Stronger in economy and power, these households contribute more decisive voices to community’s issues. Our analyses of the village’s kinship network and leadership patterns over time have further demonstrated that most of the households

² Around the 1980s, Pahians changed from a nomadic lifestyle to settled agriculture using the area where the upper part of the village is at the present time. In the same period, a group of Kinh people from the lowland came to the current lower part of the village to claim new land and improve their livelihoods. Khe Tran was established on the basis of the combination of the two village parts and interaction between the two ethnic groups: the Pahy group and the group of successful Kinh migrants.

are tied by kinship within three big Pahy families and that power in the village has for a long time been centred in a few households in the lower part of the village. In one of the most powerful and well-off households in the village, both husband and wife continuously have taken different leadership positions in the village for a long period of time. The large majority of villagers are still poverty-circle trapped in lack of livelihoods initiatives and production capacity development.

The case of Khe Tran village explains power negotiation seems to be impossible for households outside the network; and even among those within the network, power is exercised in a hierarchical structure based upon kinship, and thus embedded, is extremely difficult to change. Equity in economic growth and community development in order to be achieved cannot ignore existing kinship-based power structures in the village.

Conclusions

It is concluded from our analysis that the benefits of minority development projects, in the name of the common good, are reaped by just a few powerful elites. In Rum Soc village, the case of the agricultural club illustrates how Kinh managers prominently represent and make decisions for the majority of Khmer farmers. The development story in Tri Ton district presents a contrasting picture of two neighbouring Khmer villages: while one village became a regional “model” of development through a disproportionately large receipt of knowledge, technology and financial transfer, the neighbouring “normal” village continues to confront harsh modern-day challenges with their backward farming techniques. Whereas, Khe Tran village provides a good example of the momentous changes brought about by 20 years of governmental projects, yet a close investigation reveals that the beneficiaries are just a few powerful Pahy-Kinh households with the majority lagging behind. Poorly designed and monitored development projects that ignore power relations vigorously back up and strengthen the local-level structural power inequity. This pushes ethnic minorities to the second layer of marginalisation.

It is not the intention of this paper to contradict positive outcomes of ethnic development efforts in practice. The findings are to suggest that specialised development interventions should aim local empowerment and ownership and create dialogical and learning spaces for those who are involved. Participation of local heterogeneous groups should be integral to planning, implementation and evaluation processes. Future research in Vietnam can explore the dynamics of ethnic development practices that spans socio-economic, political, inter-cultural and inter-regional dimensions, or the formation and involvement of strategic groups (see Evers and Gerke 2009) in (re)distributing development resources supposed to improve the well-being of inclusive ethnic minorities.

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