



Rural People's Livelihoods - A Case Study in a Commune at Mekong Delta, Vietnam

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Abstract Within the context of the Doi Moi period in Vietnam, rural people's livelihoods are more diversified and also vulnerable depending on the policy and other factors. This study seeks to understand the dynamic of rural people livelihoods in relationship with the changes in social and economic context. The general objective of this study is to describe the livelihoods system of rural people and identify the livelihoods strategies adapted by rural people and describe patterns/models of sustainable livelihoods options. This study is descriptive in nature. In order to draw a comprehensive range of information, the study make used of a variety of research methods. More particularly, the study used the participatory research method, combining both quantitative and qualitative techniques (i.e., secondary data collection, interviews, households' livelihood analysis and the like).

Keywords rural people's livelihood, sustainable livelihood, participatory, Mekong Delta

INTRODUCTION

Vietnam is an agriculture-based country with about 80 percent of the total population living in the rural areas and 75 percent of the nation's labor force is in agriculture. Since 1986, the Vietnamese Government committed itself to a policy of renovation known as the Doi Moi. The core objective of this policy is to liberalize and stabilize the economy using strategic policies towards all economic sectors (i.e., state-owned business entities and nonstate-owned business entities). In order to implement this policy, Vietnam opened its doors to foreign investors and successfully achieved significant development. More attention is paid now to the expansion of all forms of business enterprises. With the renovation process, Vietnam has undergone a dramatic transformation and vast changes in both social and economic aspects. The economic transformation from a centralized-planned economy system to a market oriented economy led to profound changes in society. With the context of the Doi Moi period, people's livelihoods are more diversified and also vulnerable depends on the policy and other factors. This study seeks to understand the dynamic of rural people livelihoods in relationship with the changes in social and economic context. A community at Mekong Delta was selected as a case study.

METHODOLOGY

This study aims to understand how people in a commune change their livelihood strategies. Thus, a simple descriptive case study design was applied. Data for the study have been collected and analyzed simultaneously. More particularly, the study used the participatory research method. The data that have been collected come from secondary and primary sources. The following techniques were applied: 1. Semistructured interviews (SSI). This was conducted with 50 key informants. With the use of interview guides, the researcher collected data on the commune, such as socioeconomic characteristics, land use, socioeconomic infrastructure, development policies, natural resources and sociopolitical structure; 2. In-depth interviews (IDI). This was conducted with 30 households to generate understanding of household characteristics, particularly the difficulties and opportunities related to livelihood and strategies employed to overcome the

difficulties; 3. Focus-group discussion (FGD). This provided information on current household situations and helped in identifying the better off and worse off households. The FGD also helped gather data on the difficulties and advantages encountered by people in their livelihoods.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

About the study site

As shown in Fig. 1, Long Thuan commune is located at northern part of the isle of Cai Vung river in Hong Ngu district. Long Khanh A commune borders in the north, Phu Thuan A commune borders in the south, Phu Thuan B commune borders in the east and An Giang province borders in the west (Cai Vung River). The center of village is located about 5 km away from the center of the district and 17 km away from Vietnam-Cambodia border.

Surface land area of the commune covers about 2,010 ha (Statistical data in 2003) occupies about 6.05% area of the whole district. Of this, 78 percent is household-individual managed land, 22 percent is commune-managed land, and land devoted to economic and social institutions. Households and individuals manage most of the agricultural land.

The commune is composed of five hamlets which are named Long Thanh, Long Hoa, Long Hung, Long Thoi A and Long Thoi B. Long Thuan is strategically located in the isle. Therefore, the commune has many favorable conditions for agricultural development.

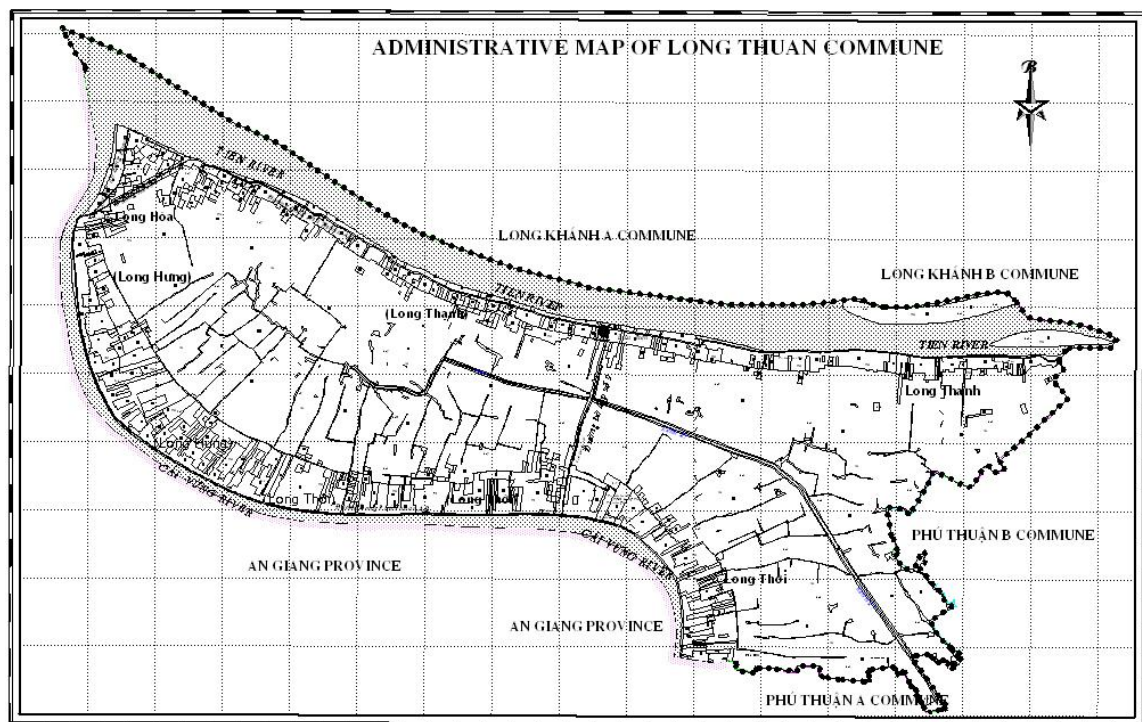


Fig. 1 Map of Long Thuan commune

Livelihood strategies

From the last years, the livelihoods of the peasant households of the community were linked to broader markets through an expanding group of rice-trading middlemen and rice-millers. Production was almost exclusively devoted to rice among Long Thuan households while some families engaged in both market oriented fruit growing as well as rice cultivation. Although relying increasingly on a money economy for their livelihood, these households were sustained by patterns of subsistence production, using local food resources as a basis for household sustenance. In the

recent years, however, there was a shifting in pattern of livelihoods, people follows diversified livelihood strategies that include both on and off farm activities. Productive assets such as agricultural tools and machinery differ from household to household depending on the types of land owned and used. On-farm activity diversification varies in terms of whether crops or livestock are raised, or have a mixed system. Off-farm strategy secures the income of many households. There are significant differences occur in the percentages of income derived from on-farm and off-farm activities. Those who have access to roads and market (physical capital), off-farm income plays an important role and vice versa.

Many households earn some income from the farms but also earn substantial income from other sources. Certain members of the households may have part-time or even full-time employment off the farm, or engage in cottage industries at home part of the time. The principal activity is small-scale farming while livestock serves to reduce risks. For some households, livestock raising, particularly dairy cow, has become a reliable income source.

The practice of diversifying the households' occupation into various nonagricultural sectors could be seen as a strategy of survival as much as status acquisition and maintenance. Nonetheless, the adaptation and the ability to diversify occupation and sources of livelihood of people in the commune are very different for particular groups. Those who have more assets can diversify their source of livelihood from among the three economic sectors such as industry, services, agriculture, or a combination of these sectors. Thus, It can be stated that the better the ability to access capital, the better the adaptation.

Research in the commune has brought to light cases of both successes and failures. In terms of livelihood opportunities, landed households have a wide range of choices. They can either continue to engage in farming with additional income from small services, or they can decide to sell land and totally become nonagricultural households. Otherwise, they can sell part of the land and invest the money in animal husbandry and intensively cultivate the land with new varieties and techniques. In contrast, land-less households or lack of natural capital, in general, are unable to take advantage of this opportunity. Clearly, their livelihood depends, for individual households, on the ability of its members to obtain other forms of livelihood.

New environment also provides new opportunities for households to move up. More jobs are being created in and around the commune. Nevertheless, new job opportunities are not being created at a sufficient rate to provide employment for the expanding labor force in the commune and the increasing income needed to support large households. Thus, migration to other areas in search for work, especially manual work, becomes an option taken by a growing number of households.

To obtain a secure livelihood, in the context of the commune, people are forced to choose a livelihood strategy that combines agriculture and services sectors. Most, if not all successful households or households with secure livelihood in this area, do not depend exclusively on agriculture for their livelihood. Services and trading provide additional sources of earnings for local residents. It should be noted that occupational diversification has a long history. The trend towards occupational diversification within lower-income households more recently is the result of an expansion of livelihood possibilities accompanying changes in the commune's economy. It is important to acknowledge that the process of occupational diversification is one in which households play an active part.

Non-farm and off-farm activities are becoming increasingly critical for people's livelihoods. Moreover, non-farm and off-farm occupations often offer individuals and households better income. It constitutes the key foundation for economic advancement, generates different effects on people's livelihoods, and determines to a large extent contemporary patterns of differentiation among households. The availability and the accessibility of assets, tangible or intangible, basically regulate the differentiation among households.

By analyzing the livelihood strategies of selected households, the study found that the success or failure of households in the commune depends on a composite of personal and nonpersonal or institutional situations. On the personal level, it means the ability of the individual or household to acquire the basic necessities of life such as food, shelter, and clothing. On the nonpersonal level, it means the ability of the State and other socioeconomic institutions in providing assistance to people

in terms of access to education, vocational training, health, information (including labor market information and urban planning information), job attainment and loans, among others. Good personal ability combined with a favorable institutional situation would likely provide people with better and more secure livelihoods and vice versa. The absence of one of these two components would cause difficulties for households in obtaining a secure, sustainable livelihood.

In the process of adaptation to the new environment, there is a general pattern easily observed in the commune; that most farmers have low level of education, are of old age, and have no technological skills so that they face more hardships. Occupational training for farmers in the process of transformation also has many difficulties. Interviews with KIs have shown that many young people lack the education and skills needed to benefit from new economic opportunities. Farmers are particularly ill-equipped for the new environment; the market economy.

CONCLUSION

Land is the principal economic asset of people, and the incomes of most agricultural households depend largely on access to land. While human capital and social capital are of some importance, the most significant capital is natural capital, more particularly, ownership and control of land. Agriculture has, and continues to mainly contribute to the revenues of the commune, and this is likely to remain in the near future. However, at the household level in the study area, the role of agriculture in supporting livelihoods is slowly declining with the availability of other non-farm opportunities. Also, the significance of agriculture in terms of its role in supporting household livelihood is determined by the capacity of the households' landholdings, their access to labor and capital inputs, and the market. When access to land, labor, and market is restrained and new opportunities from urban employment are obtainable, the role of agriculture is likely to be weakened.

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