VIETNAM DECOLLECTIVIZES: 
LAND, PROPERTY, AND INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE 
AT THE INTERFACE

by

STEFFANIE SCOTT

BA, Simon Fraser University, 1993  
MA, University of Guelph, 1995

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF 
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF 
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY 
in 
THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES 
Department of Geography 

We accept this thesis as conforming 
to the required standard

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA 

May 2001

© Steffanie Scott, 2001
In presenting this thesis in partial fulfilment of the requirements for an advanced degree at the University of British Columbia, I agree that the Library shall make it freely available for reference and study. I further agree that permission for extensive copying of this thesis for scholarly purposes may be granted by the head of my department or by his or her representatives. It is understood that copying or publication of this thesis for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission.

Department of Geography

The University of British Columbia
Vancouver, Canada

Date 1985/06/07
Abstract

This dissertation addresses the multifaceted process of decollectivization in Vietnam—the shift from collective to household production and the allocation to households of long-term land-use leases. The fieldwork-based study aims to outline the institutional changes within this process and assess their implications for livelihood vulnerability, particularly in terms of ethnic and gender differences. Two case studies from Thai Nguyen province in the northern midlands of Vietnam highlight the diverse outcomes of and responses to decollectivization. The reconfiguration of property rights created competition over access to resources, with land conflicts over inheritance emerging at the intra-family level and conflicts over ancestral lands at the inter-household and inter-ethnic level.

There are six broad conclusions that can be drawn from this analysis. First, interpreting decollectivization as institutional restructuring emphasizes the multiple and interrelated dimensions of changes underway—in property rights, the organization of production, scales of decision making, discourses of development, new stakeholders, and various forms of informal institutions. Second, the analysis points to frequent gaps between national policy and on-the-ground practice and to the need for greater attention to complexity in social processes. Third, in reestablishing the household as principal production unit, decollectivization and property rights restructuring in Vietnam have affected marriage and inheritance trends and, in turn, household and kinship relations.

Fourth, these processes of institutional change can be linked to new patterns of access to land and related resources, thereby shaping new patterns of vulnerability. Fifth, these patterns of vulnerability are mediated in part by formal institutions, exemplified by the loss of some support services formerly provided to farmers by agricultural collectives. And lastly, informal social institutions are a further factor mediating new patterns of livelihood vulnerability. Social networks operate differentially and can lead to discrimination for some women and ethnic groups.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................ ii

Table of Contents .......................................................................................................................... iii

List of Plates .................................................................................................................................. vi

List of Figures .................................................................................................................................. vii

List of Tables ................................................................................................................................... viii

List of Maps .................................................................................................................................... x

Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................................ xi

List of Acronyms ............................................................................................................................ xiii

Glossary and Units of Measurement .............................................................................................. xiv

## Chapter One. Positioning the Author: Experience and Method ..................................................... 1

Paths to Vietnam ............................................................................................................................. 2

Siestas, World Cups, and Other Contingencies .............................................................................. 4

Making Sense of Statistical Data ................................................................................................... 6

Making Inroads and Unearthing Data ............................................................................................ 8

*Formalities of Local Fieldwork* ................................................................................................... 13

*The Commodification of Research: Expectations and Incentives* ............................................... 16

*The ‘Typical’ Case: Resistance to Acknowledging Process and Difference* ............................... 17

*My Interpreter and I: Interpreter-Researcher Relations* ............................................................ 22

Synthesizing Complexity: Research Approaches and Data Analysis .............................................. 25

## Chapter Two. Study Aims and Research Design .......................................................................... 28

Aims of the Study ............................................................................................................................ 30

Organization of the Dissertation .................................................................................................. 31

An Overview of Methods ................................................................................................................ 35

*The Place of the Local: A Multi-level Analysis* ........................................................................... 36

*Studying Up, Down, and Around: Multiple Methods and Data Sources* ................................. 37

*Site and Case Study Selection* ..................................................................................................... 41

## Chapter Three. Conceptualizing Institutions, Property Relations, and Vulnerability .................. 45

Why Institutions? ............................................................................................................................ 45

Linking Institutions to Livelihood Vulnerability ........................................................................... 48
# From Vulnerability to Social Capital

- Ethnicity, Social Capital, Land and Identity
- Gendering Social Capital and Collective Action

# Gender, Property, and Land Rights

- Post-socialist Agricultural and Property Rights Restructuring
- The Doi Moi Reforms in Vietnam
- New Discourses of the Market Economy and Development

## Chapter Four. Land, Institutional Change, Rural Governance, and Development in Vietnam

- Land Relations and Institutions in Vietnam
- Symbiosis of Household and Collective Sectors
- The Seeds of Decollectivization
- Exercising New Land Rights
- Landholdings and Differentiation
- State Capacity for Implementation and Enforcement

## Chapter Five. Gender, Land, and Rural Livelihoods in Vietnam

- Vietnamese Gender Relations
- Vietnamese Family and Kinship Relations
- Socialism and Gender Equality in Vietnam

## Diversity among Female-Headed Households in Vietnam

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case Type</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A.</td>
<td>Female heads with resident husband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.</td>
<td>Female heads with husband absent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C.</td>
<td>Female heads abandoned by husband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D.</td>
<td>Widows, divorced or separated female heads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.</td>
<td>Unmarried female heads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F.</td>
<td>Special cases of vulnerable male-headed households</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Implications and Interpretations

- Ambivalent Implications of the ‘Reworking of the Household’
# Chapter Six. Livelihood and Ethnicity in Upland Vietnam and Thai Nguyen Province

The Making of Vulnerable Livelihoods in Upland Vietnam ........................................ 191
Characterization of a Diverse Region: Thai Nguyen Province ................................... 202
  *The Making of a Frontier Territory: Histories of (Re)Settlement, Ethnicity and Land Relations* ................................................................. 209
  *Land Relations and Collectivization of Agricultural Production* ............................ 215
  *Land Use, Land Allocation, and Rural Landholdings* ........................................... 221
  *Deforestation and Agro-forestry Programs* ......................................................... 227

# Chapter Seven. Reconstructing Ethnic Identities and Property Relations through Decollectivization ......................................................... 232

From Policies to Practices: Local Autonomy and Adaptations of National Policy ........ 233
What was Collectivization, de jure and de facto? ..................................................... 236
Allocation and Ancestral Land Claims: A Case Study ............................................... 238
  *Local Responses* ......................................................................................... 243
  *Implications and Interpretations* ....................................................................... 248


References ............................................................................................................. 260
  a. Statistical Data on Thai Nguyen Province ....................................................... 260
  b. Statistical Data on Vietnam ........................................................................... 260
  c. Newspaper, Magazine, and Journal Articles Published in Vietnam ............ 261
  d. Reports and Books by Vietnamese Agencies or Researchers Published in Vietnam 261
  e. Reports by International Agencies Published in Vietnam ......................... 262
  f. Films ........................................................................................................... 263
  g. Other Sources .............................................................................................. 263

Appendix: Statistical Narrative on Thai Nguyen Province .................................. 274
Rewriting the Map: Administrative Shuffling ......................................................... 274
Demographics, Sex Ratios, Urbanization, and Ethnicity ....................................... 276
Collectivized Agricultural Production and State Agricultural Enterprises ............. 279
Agricultural Production Trends and Use of Forest Products ................................... 280
Development Indicators and Rural-Urban and Regional Disparities ....................... 286
Education, Health, and Recreation ......................................................................... 287
GDP, Economic Growth, and Employment by Sector ........................................... 289
List of Plates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plate</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plate 1</td>
<td>Rounding Up the Wagons on an Excursion with Friends</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 2</td>
<td>Interview in a Multi-generational Household</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 3</td>
<td>Discussing Local Legends over a Cup of Tea</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 4</td>
<td>Women with Shoulder-poles Carrying Goods for Sale</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 5</td>
<td>Mechanization and Large-scale Agriculture as Shown on a 200 Dong Bill</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 6</td>
<td>Fences as Markers of Private Property</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 7</td>
<td>Postcard: ‘Being Ready for the Battle to Protect the Revolutionary Base’ (1966)</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 8</td>
<td>Protecting Herself from the Sun, An Urban Woman Sports a Motorbike</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 9</td>
<td>A War Invalid Leading a Literacy Campaign among Ethnic Minorities (painting from National Art Museum)</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 10</td>
<td>Site of a Resettled Hmong Village in Thai Nguyen Province</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 11</td>
<td>Postcard Image of ‘Uncle Ho’ with Female Labourers on an Agricultural Collective in Dai Tu District, Thai Nguyen Province</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 12</td>
<td>Evidence of a Growing Market Economy: A New Rural Store</td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 13</td>
<td>Deforested Slopes Cleared by Dao People Who Were Not Allocated Paddy Land</td>
<td>245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 14</td>
<td>Women Bringing Crops by Bicycle to a Recently-established Commune Market</td>
<td>281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 15</td>
<td>Hmong Women Selling Gourds in a Nung Village Market</td>
<td>281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 16</td>
<td>New Tea-drying Technology in Thai Nguyen Province</td>
<td>283</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Figures

Figure 1. Institutional Development for Economic Transition ........................................47
Figure 2. The Articulation of the Three Modes of Production.........................................71
Figure 3. Evolutionary Theory of Land Rights...................................................................78
Figure 4. Distribution of Total Land and Irrigated Annual Cropland by Region in Vietnam, 1992-93..................................................................................................................108
Figure 5. Existing Distribution Structure: Channels of Non-Wood Forest Products from Cho Don District to Provincial and Hanoi Markets..................................................................................................................230
List of Tables

Table 1. Number of Interviews Classified by Type of Interviewee .............................................. 40
Table 2. Components of a Rural Livelihood .................................................................................. 49
Table 3. Asset Vulnerability Matrix ............................................................................................ 53
Table 4. Spatial Dimensions and Levels of Mediation for Analysis of Vulnerability ..................... 57
Table 5. A Trade-off Matrix of Alternative Policy Stances for Addressing Underdevelopment ....... 72
Table 6. Results of Agricultural Decollectivization and Distribution of Farm Land in Central and Eastern Europe and Former Soviet Republics ...................................................... 74
Table 7. Average Farm Size by Organizational Structure in Central and Eastern Europe and Selected Former Soviet Republics ............................................................................. 75
Table 8. New Trajectories of Development through doi moi ........................................................ 82
Table 9. Stages and Scales of Collectivization in Vietnam ............................................................. 92
Table 10. Chronology of Land Policy Reforms for Decollectivization .......................................... 100
Table 11. Average area of land per capita of the Poor and Nonpoor in Rural North and South Vietnam, 1992-93 (m²) ........................................................................................................ 107
Table 12. Average area of land per capita in Rural Vietnam by Region, 1992-93 (m²) ................. 107
Table 13. Agencies Dealing with Land Allocation and Upland Development ............................... 113
Table 14. Reconfiguration of Household Status and Functions through Property Rights Reforms in Agricultural Production .................................................................................. 126
Table 15. Production-related Functions of Various Institutions in the Periods of Collectivization and Decollectivization ..................................................................................... 127
Table 16. Ambiguous Discourses: Interpretations of ‘Household Reworking’ for Intra-household and Gender Relations ......................................................................................... 162
Table 17. Demographic Statistics of Types of Female-Headed Households in Vietnam .............. 175
Table 18. Proportion of Female-Headed Households Disaggregated by Age of Female Head (percent) .................................................................................................................. 175
Table 19. Characteristics of Female-Headed and Uxorilocal Households Surveyed ..................... 182
Table 20. Poverty Rate by Region in 1993 and 1998, and Gini Coefficient .................................... 194
Table 21. Poverty Characteristics by Region in Vietnam, 1992-93 ............................................... 194
Table 23. Population Density, by District, Thai Nguyen province, 1955-present ...................... 208
Table 24. Population and Ethnicity by District, Thai Nguyen province, 1989 ............................ 210
Table 25. Population of Ethnic Groups across Districts, Thai Nguyen province, 1989 ............ 211
Table 26. Land Tenure in Thai Nguyen province, by District, c. 1930 ........................................ 216
Table 27. Agricultural Collectives, by Number of Households, Bac Thai province, 1975-1980 ........................... 219
Table 28. Agricultural Collectives, by Land Area, Bac Thai province, 1975-1980 .................. 219
Table 29. Number of Collectivized Households (ho tap te), Thai Nguyen province, 1955-present ........................................ 220
Table 30. Area of Land and Allocated Land, by Land Type, Thai Nguyen Province, 1996 (hectares) ........................................ 225
Table 31. Number of Agricultural Households by Size of Agricultural Landholdings, by District, Thai Nguyen province, 1994 ........................................ 227
Table 32. Greater Freedom or Responsibility? Consequences of Economic and Property Rights Restructuring ........................................ 257
Table 33. Number of Communes per District, Thai Nguyen province, 1955-present .............. 275
Table 34. Area of Districts, Thai Nguyen province, 1955-present ........................................ 276
Table 35. Population of Females and Males in Urban and Rural Areas, Selected Years ........... 278
Table 36. Assets of Rural and Urban Households Compared, Thai Nguyen province, 1995.... 287
List of Maps

Map 1. Vietnam, Showing Thai Nguyen Province ................................................................. 42
Map 2. Map of Field Sites in Thai Nguyen Province............................................................... 44
Map 3. Map of Gross Domestic Product Per Capita by Province, 1993 ........................................... 193
Map 4. Administrative Map of Northern Vietnam, with Inset of Districts of Thai Nguyen Province ................................................................. 203
Map 5. Map of Bac Thai Province (1960s-1997) and the Later Split into Thai Nguyen and Bac Kan Provinces........................................................................... 204
Map 6. Topographical Map of the Area Surrounding Thai Nguyen Province................................. 207
Map 8. Distribution of Population by Ethnic Group, by district, Thai Nguyen province, 1989 (three classes equal interval) ................................................................................. 212
Map 9. Map of Forest Land as a Percent of Total District Land Area, by District, Thai Nguyen Province ................................................................. 223
Acknowledgements

Throughout the preparation of this dissertation, I have become increasingly appreciative of the many forms of support offered to me by my supervisor, Terry McGee, and my committee members, Trevor Barnes, Geoff Hainsworth, Pat Howard, and Maureen Reed. Catherine Griffiths did great work with her creative cartographic skills. Maureen Reed, Christine Veilleux, Van Nguyen-Marshall, Maija Heimo, and Dawn Currie offered hard-to-find feedback on various papers. I would also like to acknowledge Stan Barrett, a former mentor, whose fascinating qualitative methods course gave me a greater sense of the craft of ethnography.

Although my interviewees go unnamed in the dissertation, I thank them for their openness and willingness to make time for me in their busy schedules. For helpful commentaries as well as logistical assistance, I thank Ha Huy Thanh, Vu Tuan Anh, and Tran Thi Que at the Institute of Economics, and Pham Xuan Nam and Dang Anh Phuong of the National Centre for Social Sciences and Humanities. I acknowledge Ms. Dung (Director of the Department of Agriculture in Dong Hy district, Thai Nguyen province) and Nguyen Khanh Quac (former Rector of the Agro-Forestry College of Thai Nguyen University) for helping with the necessary authorizations to facilitate my fieldwork. Mark Hawkes of the Association for Research and Environmental Aid and Pascal Bergeret, Pierre Bal, and Marie Mellac of the Programme Fleuve Rouge / Groupe de Recherche et d’Echanges Technologiques provided invaluable insights into local dynamics in the Thai Nguyen region.

I extend thanks to my interpreters for their willingness to endure motorcycle rides and their patient efforts to explain and make sense of what might have seemed strange and complicated questions and responses during interviews. My good friends in Hanoi and the students I met in Thai Nguyen brought great pleasure and insights to my fieldwork experience. Thanks also to Helen Booth for the stocks of Orangina she brought up periodically from Hanoi and for the use of her kitchen at the Guesthouse in Thai Nguyen—a great respite.

Thanks to all my Vietnamese and Canadian colleagues in the ‘Localized Poverty Reduction in Vietnam’ program for the opportunity to attempt to put some of my ideas into practice after I completed my fieldwork. I want to particularly acknowledge Do Thi Binh, Tran Thi Van Anh, Dang Bich Thy, Nguyen Van Minh, Nguyen Hoang Trang, and Leonora Angeles for their stimulating discussions.
I would like to extend an apology to friends, family, and colleagues for my frequent silences, a consequence of my self-imposed pressure to move along in the long and sometimes lonely process of writing-up. Thanks to my e-family for their tolerance and for keeping me entertained and connected during the long stretches between visits. Thanks to Tod for providing statistical advice in a moment of crisis. Sobre todo, agrdezco a Francisco por su fe en mis capacidades y su buena energía.

The International Development Research Centre (Young Canadian Researchers’ Award), the Asia-Pacific Foundation of Canada (Travel Grant), the Ford Foundation’s Northwest Regional Consortium for Southeast Asian Studies (Graduate Students’ Field Research Grant), and the Centre for Southeast Asia Research at the University of British Columbia (Hampton Grant) generously provided funding for two research trips.

Despite the many people who contributed in various way to the construction of this dissertation, I alone take responsibility for the contents and any errors within it.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ADB</td>
<td>Asian Development Bank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FAO</td>
<td>Food and Agriculture Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDLA</td>
<td>General Department of Land Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HEPR</td>
<td>Hunger Eradication and Poverty Reduction program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPM</td>
<td>Integrated Pest Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MARD, DARD</td>
<td>Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (national), Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (provincial)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOLISA</td>
<td>Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-governmental organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIE</td>
<td>New Institutional Economics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRA</td>
<td>Participatory Rural Appraisal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SFE</td>
<td>State forest enterprise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNDP</td>
<td>United Nations Development Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VAC</td>
<td><em>Vuon</em> (vegetable garden), <em>Ao</em> (fishpond) and <em>Chuong</em> (pig sty): a model of integrated production and nutrient recycling</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Glossary and Units of Measurement

Collective and cooperative: In this dissertation, I reserve the term cooperative to refer to ‘new service cooperatives’ that have been newly created or formed from converted collectives after land for agricultural production became allocated to households in the late 1980s. I use the term collectives to refer to the organizational entities established through successive stages from the early 1960s to the late 1980s. This distinction is important since, for the International Labour Organization, a cooperative must have voluntary not compulsory membership and must be autonomous from state control. These are two characteristics of the new service cooperatives but not the former agricultural production collectives in Vietnam. Having made this distinction, I realize that in common usage in English and Vietnamese the terms collective and cooperative are considered largely synonymous.

Doi moi: Literally meaning ‘new change’ or ‘renovation,’ doi moi refers broadly to the open door policy and market economy orientation adopted in 1986 at the Sixth Congress of the Communist Party.

Kinh (or Viet): The majority ethnic group in Vietnam, comprising approximately 86 percent of the population.

Level of administration: There are four levels (cap) of administration in Vietnam: the central level (cap trung uong), the province (tinh), the district (huyen), and the rural commune or administrative village (xa). Other distinctions include the urban commune or ward (phuong) and the commune town (thi tran). The latter is usually the capital of a district. What are termed communes in Vietnam should be distinguished from people’s communes in China. The latter are more akin to what I call production collectives.

Patrilocal, matrilocal, uxorilocal, and neolocal residence: Patrilocal (or virilocal) residence refers to the pattern of residence after marriage in which a wife moves to live in her husbands’s (father’s) natal home or village. This is common among Kinh people (particularly for the first few years after marriage) and many other ethnic groups in Vietnam. In uxorilocal residence, a woman’s husband comes to live with her parents or in her native village upon marriage. I prefer the term uxorilocal over matrilocal (residence following the mother’s line) for my analysis since matrilocal is not a cultural trait of the Kinh people and is generally only associated with various matrilineal ethnic groups of the Tay Nguyen (Central Highlands) region. By contrast, in Vietnamese, cases of uxorilocal residence are referred to (from the husband’s perspective) simply as o re, meaning ‘at the in-laws.’ A final form of residence pattern is neolocal, in which the couple resides in a new area distinct from the hometown of either husband or wife. A further distinction in residence patterns relates to endogamous vs. exogenous marriage (i.e., marriage between people of the same or different villages. This is discussed on page 155.

Units of measurement: One sao in most parts of northern Vietnam is equal to 360 m². One mau is equivalent to ten sao or 3,600 m² (0.9 acres).

Currency conversion rate: In 1998 the conversion rate for US$ 1 was approximately 14,000 dong.
Chapter One.
Positioning the Author: Experience and Method

Some dissertations or books open with a series of vignettes for readers to gain a flavour of the social and geographical setting of the subsequent research study. I instead offer this chapter that situates me as author in the intellectual and fieldwork setting of the study. My rationale for including this chapter is to provide readers with a context to unearth who was behind the analysis and what was involved in carrying out ethnographic fieldwork in Vietnam and in pulling the analysis in the remainder of the dissertation together.

Conducting the field research for this dissertation posed numerous challenges, the discussion of which at times I felt could easily constitute a thesis in it own right. It is my contention that these processes and experiences are as valid and significant a research subject as the dissertation topic of decollectivization itself. Too frequently, the writing process smoothes over and eliminates the many ambiguities of field research and field notes. The task of the researcher, many would argue, is to present a ‘seamless,’ convincing and thoroughly researched study that engenders confidence in the results. Yet, fieldwork is by nature a rather chaotic process. There are many gaps between the clean and somewhat mechanical procedures laid out in methods textbooks and the ‘messiness’ of fieldwork practice. Very few publications examine fieldwork practice in Vietnam (but see Ambler 1998 and Christoplos 1995 for some exceptions). Given the fast pace of change in Vietnam, conditions and procedures for carrying out fieldwork are bound to experience similar shifts. Thus, the documenting of fieldwork processes portrayed here might serve as a basis for comparison of changing ‘fieldwork possibilities’ in the country, including issues of entry, access and commodification, as Kurti (1999) offers for Romania and Hungary (see also De Soto and Dudwick 2000).

Through an examination of various logistical and methodological challenges, the discussion in this chapter reflects on issues of positionality—of myself and others. I open this exposition of my fieldwork odyssey by situating myself as researcher on a longer intellectual journey of experiences and interests that led me to Vietnam in the first place. I then recount some of my fieldwork encounters as a foreign researcher negotiating Vietnamese language, geography, administration, and much more. I touch upon issues of data access, data quality,

---

1 Later in this chapter I describe some characteristics of institutional culture that posed challenges to the realization of my research objectives. However, in making these assertions I want to underline that Canadian bureaucracies could be equally, if not more, impenetrable—as colleagues working for Canadian organizations in Vietnam would
research strategies, the commodification of research, the challenges of moving beyond 'the
typical case' in discussions with officials, interpreter-researcher relations, and the complexities
of interpretation and analysis.

**Paths to Vietnam**

Many paths have led me to this research in Vietnam. In high school, I developed an
interest in global inequalities and development. At the age of 18, I spent a year in Thailand
studying language and culture, during which time I became drawn to understanding the roots of
uneven development, particularly in the Isan, Thailand’s rural northeast region. Upon entering
university, I followed programs in Chinese Studies, Latin American Studies, and Geography,
which most closely matched my interests in development studies. I took courses on
development theory and joined field schools to China and Nicaragua, which allowed me the
opportunities to explore recent experiences in land reform and socialist rural development
policies. I also pursued courses on Mexico’s rural restructuring during a time of landmark shifts
in land reform, as the communal *ejido* lands began to be privatized under the neoliberal reforms
of then-President Salinas.

During my master’s degree program, I spent six months in an indigenous area of
Mexico, turning my attention to the impacts of macro policies of structural adjustment on
localized poverty reduction efforts. In the face of cutbacks in state agricultural extension
services and parallel economic and property rights reforms, non-governmental organizations
(NGOs), such as the one I studied, were emerging to promote techniques for sustainable
agriculture and marketing of organic produce. I analyzed how, in a context of ethnic, cultural,
and class differences, the NGO project staff struggled to merge scientific and local knowledge
and sensitivity to gender issues. Through an analysis of project dynamics, I presented a critique
of participatory development discourses showing how, despite its apparently inclusive
participatory discourse, power relations and uneven flows of information were implicit within
the project’s structure. I further included a gender analysis of women’s differential access to
information and broader entitlements in the project.

Arriving at the University of British Columbia (UBC) for my PhD, I found a group of
faculty—including my advisor, Terry McGee—engaged in ongoing collaboration with
Vietnamese scholars at the National Centre for Social Sciences and Humanities (NCSSH) in
Hanoi. Turning my attention to land issues in a country in which close to 80 percent of the
occasionally remind me.
population is based in rural areas, I made an initial trip to Vietnam in 1997. Led by the inexhaustible Geoff Hainsworth, then-Director of the Centre for Southeast Asia Research, I joined a group of UBC grad students in a study tour on rural resource management and sustainable livelihoods. I was struck by the parallels between rural institutional restructuring underway in Vietnam and what I had observed in Mexico. Intrigued by the diversity and swift pace of change in the country, I returned the following year for 12 months. I set out to make sense of the multifaceted process of decollectivization—the shifting of property rights from collective production to individual production—and what it implied for new patterns of vulnerability and social differentiation, particularly in terms of ethnicity and gender.

My research was greatly facilitated by having mastered an intermediate level of communication skills in Vietnamese—I had studied the language in Vancouver since 1996 and I later took one month of intensive language training at the Institute of Linguistics in Hanoi. My language abilities continued to improve as I shared conversations, green tea, and motorcycle rides, and occasional northern Vietnamese delicacies such as eel soup and spicy snails, with Vietnamese friends.

Plate 1. Rounding Up the Wagons on an Excursion with Friends

The field research for this dissertation was carried out through institutional affiliations with the Centre for Southeast Asia Research (University of British Columbia), the Institute of Economics (part of the National Centre for Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi), and the Agro-Forestry College at the University of Thai Nguyen, 80 km north of Hanoi, where I stayed on my return visit in 1998. From there I made frequent trips to rural villages and government offices to interview male and female farmers and local officials about their perceptions of the
reforms which were reorganizing rural life. Unlike parts of the Red River Delta near Hanoi, the
highlands, in general, and Thai Nguyen province, in particular, might be considered as
‘neglected geographies,’ having been the subject of little detailed social research in Vietnamese,
French, or English.

Parallel to my analysis of local people’s strategies and use of networks to achieve their
objectives, the shaping of the research project can be traced to networks among researchers
themselves to gain access to certain people and information. In this way, the value of social
networks or institutional connections to facilitate this research project should not be overlooked.
In saying this, I turn back on myself some of the same conceptualizations of social capital that I
use on my research subjects. Despite the challenges detailed below, I was a researcher with
relatively privileged institutional affiliations that provided me with letters of introduction and
arranged for important interviews and access to other channels of information. Without such
social capital—defined simply as the norms and networks that enable people to act collectively
(Woolcock and Narayan 2000)—it would have been even more challenging to obtain
authorizations and accomplish what I did during my fieldwork.

Siestas, World Cups, and Other Contingencies

Before detailing some of the methodological challenges encountered in my fieldwork, I
will outline a number of the logistical constraints. First was the poor means of communication
in Vietnam, even within the capital city, Hanoi. I estimate that fully 70 percent or more of the
messages that were sent to my first email account in Vietnam never reached me. Similarly, more
than half of the posted mail sent to me never arrived. Phone messages in hotels were sometimes
not passed on, and faxes could be equally unreliable. Such circumstances forced me to accept a
degree of isolation and the impossibility of dependable international, not to mention domestic,
communication.

Poor transportation infrastructure was a further impediment to field research. There was
‘relatively’ good bus service to and from a few major tourist destinations around the country,
but to travel anywhere off the tourist route, even 90 km north of Hanoi to Thai Nguyen
province, the options were limited: a rambling four-hour train ride, once daily; a slow, crowded
bus ride renowned for pickpockets armed with razor blades; or a risky 2-hour ride on a rented
motorbike. Although rented motorbikes and motorbike-taxis are the most rapid and relatively
cheap form of travel in Vietnam, countless Vietnamese (and foreigners) have lost their lives
traveling this way—or have come perilously close to doing so. I usually opted for the train, but I
was later referred to a driver in Thai Nguyen whom I occasionally hired to make the trip by private car.

It sometimes seemed to take a miracle to coordinate all the logistics for a given field trip: the motorcycle taxi or hired car, the interpreter, the authorized appointment, and conducive weather. Beyond communication and transportation, a third logistical challenge was the element of contingency—the France 1998 World Cup soccer tournament being a classic example. This event seemed to have captivated the nation. Children knew by heart the official theme song, Ricky Martin’s “La Copa de la Vida/The Cup of Life” and would often chant its chorus line, “Olé, olé, olé...!” The month-long event usually entailed two games scheduled in the middle of each night. Throughout the month, it was hard to find people motivated to perform their job or attend to others’ requests. One of my interpreters as well as the driver I occasionally hired both suggested that I find alternatives as soccer would be their priority that month.

A related challenge for long-term work in Vietnam is the Tet (lunar new year) holiday. Officially lasting only for a few days, in practice it meant that offices and other facilities could be shut for two weeks or even a month. As for more everyday logistics, nearly all offices, banks, research centres, libraries, museums, and publishers closed for a two- to three-hour lunch break while workers took a siesta. This posed difficulties for coordinating visits to several offices during one morning or afternoon. And during day-long field visits in rural areas, it was sometimes hard for urbanite interpreters to remain awake after lunch.

A fourth constraint was the poor condition of documents—disintegrating, dusty, and insect-ridden—in many public institutions, including national libraries, universities, and policy institutes. Minimal maintenance and high humidity threaten these collections, including some materials of great historical significance. Investment and operating costs are lacking for improving the conservation of such research materials.

Beyond these factors, living in Vietnam, one learns to befriend insects and adapt to periodic losses of water or electricity, frequent floods, 39°C heat, and 100 percent humidity—the latter producing mildew in clothing, papers, and sometimes computers. But thanks to many geckos, mosquitoes were removed from my room without the aid of insecticides (too bad they would not do the same thing for the giant cockroaches). At moments when I tired of Vietnamese television channels for entertainment, there were sometimes more exciting spectacles to be found elsewhere, such as when a giant spider was strategically transported up my kitchen wall in Thai Nguyen by an ambitious team of ants. One requirement for adapting to life in Hanoi or
Ho Chi Minh City includes developing the skill to negotiate crowded streets and sidewalks. Although I have heard that improvements have since been made, during the period of my fieldwork traffic regulations seemed to be rarely enforced. To cross a street one sometimes does better closing one’s eyes and proceeding at a steady pace; the drivers of passing motorcycles are amazingly adept in calculating their movements to avoid pedestrians.

On an interpersonal level, in any public place I continually faced a succession of personal questions from curious passers-by. This included being repeatedly asked when I planned to have children. My partner and I were even directed to visit a temple that is frequented by couples who go to pray for fertility. In other settings, I came to expect the frequent invitations—even by strangers who approached me in a restaurant—to empty a cup of rice wine ("cham phan cham!" or "100 percent" was the local equivalent of "bottom’s up").

Other tests for fieldworkers included becoming accustomed to hair or flies in their food and ‘toilets’ that were nothing more than a floor from which liquid drained into a hole in the corner of a small room. But compensations for such hardships were also abundant, including indulgences in Vinamilk ice-cream and yogurt, fresh fruit and bread rolls, and tasty Vietnamese dishes, not to mention many memorable friendships.

Making Sense of Statistical Data

Concerns regarding data quality in Vietnamese official statistics are many. Indeed, any findings drawn from official data in Vietnam need to be questioned for their validity. Data were frequently inaccurate, inconsistent, unavailable, inadequate, or misleading. Possible explanations for discrepancies in the data are many. In addition to measurement and recording errors, the data may have been measured at different points during the year or before or after administrative boundary changes had been introduced. In most cases, statistical yearbooks for Thai Nguyen province only covered periods of one, three, or five years. This made longitudinal analyses awkward due to the need to consult so many books to trace changes in a single variable over time. Moreover, yearbooks were not available for the pre-1955, 1966-1972, and 1983-1985 periods. Some statistical yearbooks spanned five-year periods but the dates for individual tables of data were not specified. In using old yearbooks, one faces the further complication of illegible statistics: the paper turns brown and the ink is often too faded and patchy to be visible, particularly on a photocopy.

Regarding problems of data analysis, Beresford and McFarlane (1995: 53) observed that
The study of Vietnamese regional problems is rendered especially difficult by the paucity of data. In contrast to the situation in China, where provincial statistical yearbooks are regularly published, provincial level time series are available only in the case of some agricultural production statistics for Vietnam. The rest are fragments. At times the statistical data that one is able to piece together is so disjointed and incomparable across time periods or regions as to make them virtually useless. Analysis was further complicated by the continual shifts in administrative boundaries (as outlined in the Appendix), rendering consistent comparisons over time for the same province, district, or even commune, impossible. Two maps for adjacent areas were sometimes incompatible, with contours marked at different intervals or with different soil classification systems used. Discussion later in this chapter outlines problems of data projections being substituted for real data and of commune-level data being thrown out once they had been aggregated. In such circumstances, the data often raise more questions than they answer. I aim to make these problems of interpretation transparent to the reader, rather than simply omitting inconsistencies that appear to contradict overall trends. As mentioned in Chapter Six, in instances of discrepancies between sources, or within the same source, both or all were usually listed for readers to appreciate the complexities and shortcomings of the data and to draw their own conclusions.

Given the plethora of problems outlined above, I draw conclusions rather tentatively. I hope that even if the absolute figures are somewhat inaccurate, the figures can be used to deduce broad trends and compare relative orders of magnitude. When I speculated that the accuracy of statistical data and techniques for collection must be improving in recent years in Vietnam, one researcher from the National Centre for Social Sciences and Humanities suggested to me that the opposite could equally be true: state salaries were relatively higher in the past and local cadres who are responsible for record-keeping are now more motivated to seek supplementary employment, so they may be less conscientious in carrying out tasks within their state-sector positions. Moreover, with the increased autonomy of households in the boom of the household economy, and the decline in influence of collectives, it is much harder to keep tabs on the demographics, economic activities, and particularly income data of households. This points to the need to revise approaches to data collection that are oriented to a centrally planned rather than an emerging market economy.

---

2 As explained in the glossary, a commune is a level of administration comprising one or more villages.
3 See the glossary for a distinction between collectives and cooperatives.
4 The Vietnam Living Standards Survey, with technical assistance from the World Bank, fills some of these gaps.
Making Inroads and Unearthing Data

One day early in my fieldwork, I arranged (via the Agro-Forestry College) a 2 pm appointment to visit the Land Administration Office in one district of Thai Nguyen. I arrived in my hired car with an interpreter who worked in the College’s International Cooperation Office. The hour came and went and we later heard, after making some phone calls, that the officer had a sudden meeting and would be busy all afternoon and that there were no other representatives available in his office to meet us. Another staff member in the office suggested that we talk with a forestry extensionist who could perhaps answer some of our questions. Yet, after a few minutes of discussion, the extensionist explained that he was busy and had to leave and suggested we visit another office nearby, the Forest Protection Division. After two phone calls, he reported that no one was available there. I asked if it was possible to visit a Land Administration representative from one of the nearby communes or just make some household visits but I was told that, no, I needed to have authorization from the People’s Committee, and all the members were at a meeting out of the district for the afternoon. I asked if they had any data available on land statistics for the district. Alas, for that I should have specified what specific data I required in my letter of introduction from the College, and sent it with one week’s advance notice. And no, they did not have any maps.

Giving up hope for accomplishing any more in the district that day, I decided to make a trip to the provincial library in Thai Nguyen City. In the first room, I asked the receptionist where I could find materials on economic and historical issues about Thai Nguyen. She said she had nothing there, but I could ask upstairs. I asked if there were any maps available. She replied that they might have been misplaced after doing renovations. Upstairs (where the magazines were located), I was told they only had information (on agriculture and other issues) for the country as a whole but nothing for Thai Nguyen province. She suggested the nearby provincial museum might have some information. I found a few other cards in the catalogue for books from 1990 about collectives and economic development, but on the advice of the young librarian, I decided to check instead in the museum (behind the library), since she indicated that they had books and maps there. When I asked about maps, the librarian checked the card catalogue and found one card indicating a provincial map dated 1968 but warned that it perhaps no longer existed.

After explaining my objectives to two other women in the main library office, we made our way to the office of the vice-director of the museum. The vice-director said he could not help me because he did not have information about Thai Nguyen but only about Bac Thai (the
former name of the province)! Finally, we were taken to the exhibition rooms (which were unlocked especially for us), and two young guides undertook to tell us about the archaeology of the region. When I asked about the history of land tenure, they replied that research was currently being conducted on this but the results could not yet be released. In one of the last exhibition rooms, there was a cabinet displaying several books on the history of the region. I asked where I might locate copies to read, and the guides suggested going to the library. I asked if any copies were for sale: no. When asked about where to locate information on village-level land tenure in the pre-revolutionary period, they suggested the National Library, or the Social Science Library in Hanoi—although in Hanoi I had been directed to inquire in Thai Nguyen.

On another occasion, I asked my interpreter, a lecturer from the Agro-Forestry College, if there weren’t any economists at the College researching the economic history of the province, but she said she did not know. I had previously asked the Director of the Faculty of Forestry, a 20-year veteran of the Agro-Forestry College, if he knew of any studies on the economic history of Thai Nguyen province, but he did not. I had earlier visited the ‘Scientific Library’ of the Agro-Forestry College of Thai Nguyen University and inquired about maps of Thai Nguyen province. I was told they had none. Since it is not possible to browse in Vietnamese libraries, I requested any information they had on Thai Nguyen’s history, economy, or agricultural production and was told that they only had general information but not about Thai Nguyen province. I asked about magazine articles and was given the same response.

I returned to the provincial library two days later to check the Thai Nguyen province section of the periodical card catalogue for myself. I selected a few articles but was told that they were from old newspapers that were no longer available. I identified a card for a 1970 map but was told the map no longer existed—nor did they have any other maps. I requested one introductory book on Bac Thai province that I’d seen in the museum display case, which was located for me. It turned out to only contain photos glorifying the province’s industrial development, making only a single-sentence reference to ethnic groups. I asked the librarian if they had any other information on the population of ethnic minorities in Thai Nguyen. She disappeared and finally returned with a dusty and disintegrating 1976 book introducing ethnic groups for Vietnam as a whole but with no maps or statistics disaggregated by province. Nor did they have any other materials on agriculture, economy, history, or about a famous landlord in Thai Nguyen, Madame Nguyen Thi Nam.

The same week, I returned to Hanoi and went to the National Archives, arriving at 3:30 pm. The gatekeeper asked if I could come back the next day, as the offices would be closing at
four. I returned the next morning and after presenting my letter of introduction from the Institute of Economics, my backpack was sequestered and I was allowed into the main office. There I was told that the room and building that stored the information I was looking for was under renovation and would not be accessible until the following year. I asked if there wasn’t any other material that could be consulted this year, and the librarian said yes, but only general information, not relating to Thai Nguyen province. I said fine, so was then asked to fill in two copies of a ‘Request to Work in the Archives’ form, to be completed in French. During the previous conversation the librarian had been addressing me in French, while I responded in Vietnamese. When I proceeded to write the date as ‘98/04/28’ I was informed that I had to write it in reverse order, ‘28/04/98,’ and was given a fresh form. When I wrote the number one as a single stick-line, I was told that I had to write it the French style, with a hook and base. When I wrote ‘PhD’ as the degree I was pursuing, I was told I had to write ‘thèse du doctorat.’ After I at last completed the form in satisfactory fashion, I was told I could return in one week to receive the authorization to consult archival materials. On my third visit, however, I was told once again that I’d have to come back next year.

Maps seemed especially difficult to come by in Vietnam. Perhaps this is attributable to the political sensitivity around the use of maps, or perhaps to the absence of regional studies specializations and general shortage of resources for creating and disseminating maps. In response to my request for a commune map, in one instance, a commune-level Land Administration officer sent me to the district-level Land Administration office, where I was in turn directed to seek out the provincial maps office, which I was never able to track down. A doctoral student I met had used tracing paper to copy maps in the archives, but after this was detected most documents she was given had the maps removed from them. She was later permitted only to copy certain sections of maps corresponding to the one district in which her fieldwork was concentrated. In the district itself, she spent two afternoons sketching a map from the wall in the People’s Committee meeting room since, in most cases, these were the only accessible district-level maps. When I asked one of my interpreters about maps of Thai Nguyen, suggesting that one be posted in the College’s Office of International Cooperation, she claimed that “we don’t need a map because we have it in our heads.” She had previously lent me a copy of her master’s thesis—from a foreign university—that contained a map of a district adjacent to Thai Nguyen province where she had done her fieldwork. When I asked where she acquired the

---

5 In addition, no archival documents could be accessed from either the 1945-54 period or post-1975 (housed in
map, she replied that it was from a student of hers who had worked for a French NGO in the area. She added that the French were not very ‘open’ in sharing information. I resisted making any comparisons with the Vietnamese.

Paradoxically, it was easier to find good quality topographical and administrative maps of Thai Nguyen province in a make-shift bookstore in a Hanoi alleyway than anywhere in Thai Nguyen province, including the university. At this same ‘bookstore’ I was able to buy a book published by the Institute of Sociology that was not available for sale or reference at the Institute of Sociology or the Institute’s library itself. As another example, a particular issue of the well-known journal *Vietnamese Studies* sold at this shop was available neither at the journal’s publishing outlet nor at the National Centre for Social Sciences library.

From the various vignettes portrayed above, it should be clear that this it was not uncommon to be sent on wild goose chases for data. This was due in particular to the lack of centralization of information and coordination between institutions and research centres in Vietnam, making it difficult to find many materials on a given topic in a single location. Instead, it was usually necessary to pay visits to many different places, or subsequent visits to the same place—sometimes by chance talking to a different person in a given office—in the hopes of eventually finding some useful information. I ended up going in vain to many publishing houses (Statistics, Ethnology, Women’s, Social Science, Education, Transportation, and Politics) attempting to locate relevant materials. I visited the Land Administration Office in Thai Nguyen City, where I was able to acquire data on land types but was told that for data on land transfers I would have to go to another office. Moreover, the officer informed me that the provincial office only housed the aggregated data, so to locate data on transfers and land allocation by district I would have to visit each of the seven districts around the province. Then upon visiting the Statistics Office in one district, I was told that for some data I requested I would have to go to the district-level Land Administration or Department of Labour office since data for the district were not centralized in a single Statistics Office. Moreover, in this office, data on land use were ‘missing’ for some years, so I could only access statistics for half the communes in the district. When I asked about any available data from the pre-1985 period (the communes were reshuffled between districts at this point), I was told it had been thrown out. And no, the office had no maps of any sort.

separate Archives), as these were restricted for reasons of political sensitivity.
In gathering data from some government offices, I would explain my general research topic and then ask what related data they had. Officials sometimes had books of statistics and files thick with data sitting on their desks, but rather than volunteering anything they knew to be relevant to my topic, they would ask what specific data I wanted. If I mentioned something specific, they often replied that they did not have that data or would ask “from what year to what year?” I would ask what data are available (or ask for “all that is available”), pointing to their stacks of statistics, but—without specifically denying me access to the material—they would continue to ask vaguely what data I wanted. The whole thing began to feel like a strange kind of performance. When I did begin to formulate lists prior to visiting particular offices, getting access to the specific information on my list sometimes required gently asking the same person ten times.

On another occasion, I attempted to leapfrog the Agro-Forestry College’s bureaucracy by using my letter of introduction from the Institute of Economics in Hanoi. This came after making several requests of my interpreter (from the Office of International Cooperation at the College) to make an appointment for me to visit the provincial statistics office in Thai Nguyen—and after having been taken instead to the Thai Nguyen City statistics office. I first tried to call the director of the provincial Statistics Office, but there was no answer. I then called the ‘documentalist’ directly (another doctoral student had passed on his telephone number). He explained to me in Vietnamese that even with my letter of introduction, I needed to first contact the provincial People’s Committee to get authorization and a letter from them to then be able to visit the Statistics Office. Without my knowing, he then called my sponsor at the Institute of Economics to verify the authenticity of my claims. Despite these frustrations, respect and patience did at times pay off. It took me six months of persistent but polite requests through the Agro-Forestry College to eventually acquire some of the provincial statistical data I was looking for. In contrast, I have heard of more than a few researchers losing their patience, thus jeopardizing any chance of future research in a particular locale.

Although through my fieldwork I encountered some interesting surprises that led me in new directions, I was in some ways able to achieve much less than I originally hoped for. This can be attributed to the multiple constraints outlined above combined with my own perhaps unrealistic expectations about what data I would be able to gather. This left me with a series of unanswered questions and unrealized plans. I had intended to compare the distribution of land in a village context pre- and post-collectivization but was unable to collect old or new village-level maps—and having people sketch their own plots to try to fit together a map at the scale of a
village or hamlet did not seem viable. In other instances, I was unable to acquire statistics for multiple administrative levels (hamlet, commune, district, and province) on land transfers, or data differentiated by ethnicity or household headship. A representative of the Forest Protection Department told me that his office had no data on the historical changes in forest cover in Thai Nguyen. At the Office of Resettlement and New Economic Zones, I was told that this office had no data on population change or ethnic minority population, despite being responsible for sedentarization programs involving ethnic minorities. And a representative from the Thai Nguyen provincial Women’s Union told me that her organization had no provincial demographic data on numbers of female-headed households (neither disaggregated numbers of single mothers, divorcees, and widows, nor numbers of female-headed households as a whole). Nor did she have numbers of Women’s Union members, nor data on women’s labour and employment (for example, in agriculture, industry, and service sectors), nor on conditions of ethnic minority women, nor on women’s access to credit. All of these could have been valuable for poverty targeting and other types of analyses. When I finally asked what data they did have, she said none.

Formalities of Local Fieldwork

Thurston (1983) and Kurti (1999), among others, have written of the importance of official seals of approval for conducting fieldwork in socialist countries. The formalities and bureaucracy of authorization for field research might be indicated by noting that to arrange a visit to a district or commune, I was expected to carry a letter of authorization from the Agro-Forestry College specifically stating the dates and places to be visited, bearing a red stamp, and signed by the rector of the college. A copy was sent to the provincial police, the provincial People’s Committee, and the district-level People’s Committee. I technically should even have had a letter of authorization to visit a foreigner working for an NGO in one district. To facilitate these authorizations and contacts in the field, it was invaluable to have a university liaison. When a senior lecturer from the College recommended that I talk to the provincial Forest Protection Branch or Land Administration office, he cautioned that I should go with someone from the College “or they won’t tell you anything.” Moreover, I could not have brought an interpreter from Hanoi, as I did mid-way through my fieldwork, without already having had a university liaison introduce me to the local authorities in the commune where I was then conducting a survey.
Writing on Hungary, Kurti (1999: 174) noted that “Just like the socialist state bureaucracy itself, interviews had to progress hierarchically from the top down.” After first meeting with district officials, I was generally accompanied or directed to the commune that had been agreed upon for household interviews. Upon my first visit to any commune, I would generally meet with one or usually a group of officials and be quoted some general statistics on demographics and production levels. An often all-male entourage—from the commune People’s Committee, sometimes a district-level agricultural extensionist, and occasionally even my curious hired driver—would then accompany me for some initial household interviews. As the district and commune authorities became more familiar with my presence and my line of questioning, there was less need for these formalities, and I was permitted to proceed with only my (female) interpreter to carry out further interviews.

Authorization for a foreigner to actually reside in a village in Vietnam is rare. For Vietnamese researchers themselves, even those doing ethnographic research, it is unusual to spend more than a few weeks in one village. The restrictions on movement for foreigners are not limited to researchers. NGO project staff who did not regularly live in Thai Nguyen had to call ahead from Hanoi to arrange visits to project villages and be accompanied by a representative from the Department of Agriculture. Even long-term NGO project staff living and working in Thai Nguyen got hassled by the police occasionally. Some ‘sensitive areas’ of the region were off-limits to foreigners for military-strategic reasons, as were parts of the Central Highlands in southern Vietnam. And a volunteer English teacher in Thai Nguyen was unable to organize an English-speaking club without the authorization of the Communist Youth League.

Despite all these comments, I do not wish by any means to paint a ‘totalitarian’ portrait of Vietnam. Research on what are perceived to be sensitive issues can in any country be cause for official concern and subjected to restricted access. For all the obstacles recounted here, there were at least as many exceptions and many positive experiences. Mailing boxes of photocopied documents out of the country in my case posed little concern to authorities. At other times, I would be expecting to pay for photocopies that had been prepared at my request but they would be handed over at no charge. I was invited to countless meals, sometimes in people’s own homes, was offered rides on motorcycles or in chauffeured cars, and experienced much warm hospitality.

Each institutional culture has its own rationale and history. Three hypotheses might be forwarded to explain restrictions on access to information in Vietnam. These relate to
Confucianist authority structures, to the bureaucratic socialist system, and to the market economy, which converts information into a commodity to be hoarded and selectively exchanged. The first of these hypotheses links Confucianist structures to a paternalistic attitude toward ‘the masses,’ who are assumed to be not intelligent enough to think for themselves. Hickey (1964: xv) provided the following explanation of this trend:

It is a feature of the Vietnamese character that an official investigation brought to them [the Vietnamese] through regular channels will elicit from them readier and more explicit answers than will any unfamiliar private inquirer. This remains from their long experience of Chinese and Sino-Vietnamese officialdom and administrative techniques. Inquiring into the common weal and woe should be the strict prerogative of the sovereign, his delegates, and his advisers. Knowledge is power. All information concerning the realm should accordingly be kept ‘classified’ as we [Americans] might put it ourselves—made aware as we have been, thanks to the spirit and experience of the Cold War, of the possible use and misuse of a restrictive discipline.

In linking aspects of the bureaucratic system to “the Vietnamese character,” Hickey might be criticized for essentialism. Nevertheless, his comments serve as a valuable reminder of the persistence of historically embedded practices in current day Vietnam.

Instances of the second hypothesis, linked to socialist system bureaucracies, were alluded to above in the discussion of letters of authorization necessary to access individuals or information. Linked to both the first and second hypotheses, in some ways it seems as though the ‘system’ is designed so that no one has to take responsibility for anything and so that information is compartmentalized and dispersed as much as possible. This would prevent the accumulation of information in the hands of any one person who might be able to see things as a whole. Telephones are often locked to allow incoming but prevent outgoing calls—though this is common in other developing countries where charges are levied on a per-call basis.

In the context of institutional transformation in Bulgaria, Staddon (1999: 205) noted that, “One is particularly struck by the amazing perseverance of institutional arrangements associated with the collapse of the state socialist development model into the present time, including labour markets, circuits of capital circulation and information exchange” (emphasis added). The little statistical data and other research materials that are available in Vietnam tend to be carefully guarded and not readily made accessible. Even with the appropriate letter of introduction to enter a given library, much of the most useful and most recent materials may not actually be obtainable there but instead in private offices and locked cabinets. These may be only gradually offered to foreign researchers on an ad hoc basis, in accordance with how local

---

6 My thoughts on these issues have been enriched in part by discussions with Michael Leaf (pers. comm., 1998).
officials or scholars gauge the likelihood of foreigners to offer them or their institution some financial gain or other tangible benefit—be it through future collaborative research or development projects or by compensation for translation and logistical assistance. Acts of assistance may thus be calculated in terms of what each party can offer the other. This exemplifies the third hypothesis regarding commodification through the market economy, elaborated in the following section.

The Commodification of Research: Expectations and Incentives

One subjective aspect of fieldwork involves learning how and when to appropriately compensate certain individuals—for instance, local officials and poorly-paid state employees—for their time in arranging field visits, interviews, or other forms of assistance. Croll (1994) noted that in China conducting rural research is complicated by the fact that there is now much more competition for the time and attention of cadres and farmers: time is now money. Kurti (1999: 176) noted this reality for fieldworkers in Hungary and Romania: informants’ time, “which had formerly been regulated by the party, trade union or communist youth league was now under the constraints of the market and money.” Kurti also reflected that while he was formerly able to work through Communist Party-affiliated mass organizations to identify interviewees, getting to people in the new market context required a degree of ‘selling’ himself such that participants would judge it as a worthwhile use of their time. This was a harder task than he expected among young people. Some other areas, such as parts of Mexico, where I conducted research for my master’s thesis, became saturated with researchers, and ‘interview fatigue’ set in as local people tired of being approached and asked a multitude of questions. In such circumstances, it is not surprising that local people may begin to strategize and ask for compensation for granting yet another interview.

In Vietnam, now that people are more conscious of their relative poverty on a global scale, a foreign researcher is more inclined to be seen as a walking wallet. On one occasion, upon visiting a particularly poor farming family, my interpreter turned to me and asked, “aren’t you going to give her some money?” In other instances, I was asked for money—or more discretely, for an ‘envelope’—in exchange for various services or information, including for interviews with university professors or museum researchers in their workplace. Occasionally, I obliged. Perhaps under the impression that a researcher’s budget is infinite, some researchers had been asked by state authorities to pay US$ 200 for a single map. Some foreigners had even abandoned research projects in Thai Nguyen province for this reason. One foreigner told me he
had paid a lot of money for what was assumed to be current data based on government surveys, when in fact the data had been generated through projections of old figures. In another instance, upon returning to Vietnam, a Vietnamese researcher who had been studying abroad was asked to pay US$ 100 for climate data necessary for his dissertation. In such instances, the Vietnamese interpretation of a market economy has perhaps been taken too far.

These responses are often the outcome of experiences with foreign projects that offered remuneration for interpreters and other services far beyond local prices and salaries (a typical university researcher earns less than US$ 50 per month). This made it difficult for graduate students with smaller budgets to carry out research in areas touched by this monetarized 'project syndrome.' I was advised to avoid conducting field research in some areas that were becoming known as 'project districts.' This methodological constraint might be called the cargo cult—an anthropological term used in New Guinea and Melanesia to refer to the expectation that outsiders will bring rich cargoes of goods. This cargo mentality can constitute an obstacle to research as well as to development projects, to the extent that it creates expectations and thus the delivery of goods and services becomes disproportionately emphasized over local capacity building or less intrusive research. In this way, such research or development projects can harbour feelings of dependency on hand-outs. Christoplos (1995: 13) discusses the related issue in Vietnam of being perceived as a donor instead of a researcher, such that when foreigners engage in rural field visits, statements by local officials or farmers are constrained to relate only to the 'constructed needs' that they anticipate the foreigner or development project might offer them (e.g., credit, irrigation pumps, or schoolbooks). People often assumed that I was conducting ‘market research,’ and my university liaison at times had difficulty explaining to local officials that I was a researcher seeking to understand local conditions and issues rather than a businessperson about to invest in the region—much as they might have wanted me to be.

The 'Typical' Case: Resistance to Acknowledging Process and Difference

I encountered further difficulties in my fieldwork in researching about strategies, practices, ‘resistance,’ processes, differences, trade-offs, and certain sensitive topics. This posed particular problems in researching the two case studies presented in Chapters Five and Seven that focus precisely on marginal cases and practices and processes of policy implementation. I

---

7 The discussion in this chapter, in general, and this section, in particular, pertains largely to my experience conducting research in northern Vietnam. Southerners often speak more openly and more critically of state policy than do northerners. Thus, I would be somewhat reluctant to apply these observations to a southern Vietnamese context.
thus had to be rather indirect in accessing this information when it was not forthcoming or if felt it inappropriate to present as my primary research focus.

In meeting with Vietnamese officials or even researchers, I found it challenging to move from a discussion of policies, norms, or discourses, to actual practices. Even having people acknowledge the existence of this gap—the dissonance between the *de jure* and *de facto*—was difficult in some contexts. This division between rules, on the one hand, and practices, on the other, is perhaps more cemented in Vietnam, a legacy of unpopular socialist policies combined with Confucian and mandarin heritage. From my experience, people seemed conditioned to not talk about everyday practices that may run counter to given policies or social norms—at least not with anyone doing research, which until recently in Vietnam tended only to focus on the *(de jure)* ‘official line.’ Of course, everyone knew that disputes and ‘back stage’ practices existed, but to openly acknowledge these strategies of coping or resistance and their incongruity with official discourses or norms was generally not viewed as an appropriate—or at least not a commonplace—topic for social science research. Vietnamese ethnologists, by contrast, seemed to focus not on legitimating *(de jure)* state policy but on documenting socio-cultural norms (with an emphasis on folklore or rituals, particularly among ethnic minorities). Here, too, I perceived a resistance to examining *de facto* circumstances, no matter how far apart this reality may have been from the circumscribed norms. For instance, time and again, I read and heard references to the custom that women did not inherit land. Yet, in my fieldwork I came across a number of cases in which they did. From her experience in China, Croll (1994: 292) discussed this methodological challenge of breaking through “collectively constructed representations, to differentiate social norms from social practice,” in terms of

a clearly defined ideology representing social structures and social processes as they ‘ought to be,’ how certain socio-political and economic institutions ought to function, and how political, social, and economic relations ought to be constructed. It is thus more difficult to identify rapidly what actually is, as opposed to what ought to be. In terms of subject matter, it may therefore only be feasible to research the less intimate and politically sensitive areas for which data are relatively easily attainable and less subject to normative constraints. (Croll 1994: 292)

To many people, it seemed odd that I wanted to engage them in discussions about the process of land allocation. On a related note, a Vietnamese doctoral student in anthropology who was studying abroad and returned to Vietnam to conduct fieldwork told me of her difficulties in finding an adequate translation of the term ‘dynamics.’ These type of ‘how’

---

8 The Soviet-influenced higher education system in Vietnam included training in ethnology rather than
questions were always the ones I found hardest to elicit responses to. People would sum up a tremendously complex process of determining land allocations in a given village by saying simply that "two households agree on the border between their plots." My attempts to problematize categories and assumptions were often hard to get across. A further challenge was getting at the ambiguities and variations in collectivization by locale, by land type, and over time—i.e., the local specificities of how a national policy was received and implemented. This reflected a preference to discuss only 'the representative case,' however fictional this was. I was led by local officials to believe that the history of land tenure in district X was the same as that of North Vietnam as a whole. I was informed by university researchers that all mountainous areas had collectives in the past, that there was no deviancy or variation in experiences. To the extent that ethnic minorities were recognized by Vietnamese researchers, they were often collapsed into a category of 'the ethnics' as a homogeneous whole, without acknowledgement of any diversity in experiences, customs, or production practices between or within specific ethnic groups. Moreover, government statistics measuring population data by ethnic group were based on paternal ethnicity, never taking account of mixed ethnicity despite the relatively high rates of inter-marriage in some areas.

Related to the above challenges, I was often discouraged from interviewing unsuccessful farmers seen by university researchers as 'unrepresentative.' A district-level agricultural extensionist who accompanied me on one commune visit was emphatic that a poor Hmong (ethnic minority) household I visited was atypical, but when we came upon a particularly successful Kinh (ethnic Vietnamese) household nearby he said nothing about it being exceptional. Most Vietnamese researchers and officials seemed only interested in discussing cases that were deemed 'typical,' even if these were in fact exceptional 'model' farmers or communes. Instances of marginality and difference were dismissed as being unrepresentative—a tendency compounded by a lack of understanding or appreciation of qualitative methods. Until recently, research by Vietnamese scholars generally aimed to confirm policy decisions or document success stories, such as the mechanization of agriculture in a model commune in the Red River Delta. The dangers of over-generalization are captured in Christoplos' (1995: 11) characterization of Vietnamese research practice: "The quantitative data regained dominance in..."
presentations of research results. Diversity was shoved under the rug. Agency, and the creativity of the individual informants, was forgotten in the interest of constructing a generic 'poor farmer.'” Even reports based on so-called ‘participatory’ methods “almost inevitably construct an image of an ‘unembedded’ agriculture, carried out by ‘unembedded’ farmers” (Christoplos 1995: 14).

In my experience, there was a general reticence among officials and researchers alike to look beyond the model cases and acknowledge the trade-offs or problematic aspects of given policies. In response to a question about the impact of Vietnam’s socialist experience for women, one policy advisor on gender issues told me frankly that she did not care what the revolution did for women. It was often difficult to find people who would say much about the positive side of collectivization, on the one hand, or about problems of implementation of the land allocation in the 1980s and 90s, on the other. The tendency to view issues in black and white terms was exemplified when I inquired about any possible disadvantages of the current economic system in terms of social problems. Local officials often said there were none and attributed this to the high respect for community norms. In a formal interview setting, it was often hard to access people’s perceptions of ‘back-stage’ goings-on, beyond the rosy image of the well-integrated community and society that is so frequently projected to outsiders (and, I suppose, to insiders). As one Land Administration officer explained, “if someone moved to the area after land allocation, the commune can give them some spare land. The atmosphere is harmonious, with people helping each other.” Transitions and policy implementation were frequently portrayed as smooth and automatic. Conflict and negotiation was not seen as, or at least not portrayed to be, a part of everyday life. That said, it is worth realizing just how recently critiques of overlooking diversity and conflict have been levied on international planners and development analysts for their problematic depictions of farmers or communities (e.g., Scoones and Thompson 1994; Guijt and Shah 1998). Seen in this comparative light, perhaps my observations in Vietnam were not so exceptional.

The conduct of Vietnamese researchers and state officials outlined above could be linked in part to a fear of losing face and admitting mistakes. The perceived lack of critical thinking and/or expression of individual opinions can also be linked to the political sensitivities of speaking out against state policies. A commune official in an area where I was to conduct a household survey repeated twice that I could do the interviews provided that I would not ask any ‘political’ questions. In earlier discussions with a university representative about the selection of potential field sites, I was told that Christian villages had historically had poor
relations with the government—so if I worked in these villages I might have problems with the police but, on the other hand, the local people might speak to me more openly. In another context, in noting that family ties and official political positions play an important role in the distribution of products in a given district, Kiuru, Lehtonen et al. (1997: 60) wrote that “Due to the sensitivity of the issue, a full presentation of the distribution system may cause confusion and even disturbance.”

These examples all point to the challenge of researching topics that are politically sensitive. Other issues requiring special discretion and sensitivity ranged from land disputes and land transfers to taxes, social classes, and women’s rights. Socioeconomic differentiation was a delicate topic and people were sometimes reluctant to report their income or land size. One doctoral student told me of discrepancies in land size figures in which the figure recorded on a land-use right certificate was two to three times smaller than the area of land the student measured on the ground as actually belonging to the given farmer. Croll (1994: 295) noted that in China, in the past, “there was less cause for secrecy, given that taxes were paid by the collective and there were fewer differentials within villages, where ‘everybody knew everybody else’s affairs.’” In the current context, however, especially in richer regions, research on economic activities of individual households is a much more time-consuming exercise, given that peasant households are now much more complex, autonomous and diverse economic units, less inclined to reveal the details of their economic activities, incomes and savings.” (Croll 1994: 295)

Land conflicts and land inheritance posed further difficulties in interviews. Responding to a question about the implications of land inheritance for women, a Women’s Union representative insisted, “It’s not very important.” The topic of gender issues was hard to raise in many contexts in which men were present. It was simply not taken seriously and often seen as a laughing matter. Amongst a mixed group, men often disappeared when I asked questions of or about women, suggesting boredom or lack of respect for the issue and for the person responding. Reference to any form of intra-household differences, on the other hand, met with some hostility amongst both men and women, to the extent that it challenged the social norms of family harmony and unity. A university researcher once went as far as to suggest that my research on the gendered implications of land allocation could be illegal, but I assured her it had the endorsement of the National Centre for Social Sciences and Humanities. Her response is indicative of the common view among state officials that land allocation could not be a gender issue. Moreover, it reflects how such officials fail to recognize any gap between policy and
practice and how they see little value in studying the implementation of a policy, as distinct from the policy itself.

Given the plethora of methodological and logistical constraints detailed above, I developed certain strategies to negotiate my research objectives. To compensate for missing or hard-to-access data, I turned to alternative means and methods, located other types of informants, and drew on documentary sources. To avoid certain sensitivities, I ‘repackaged’ my research topic depending on the context. I often presented my project to officials by explaining that my focus was the development of the household economy in the \textit{doi moi} period in Vietnam, downplaying the historical and ethnic components. Rather than referring to ‘problems,’ ‘conflicts,’ or ‘disputes,’ I sometimes used indirect questioning or observation or chose less controversial language by asking about ‘difficulties’ in implementation of land policies (‘challenges’ was harder to translate). In place of wealth, income, differentiation, and land conflicts, I referred to resources, well-being, and land use.

Much information could be inferred about collectivization and decollectivization by using biographical methods of listening to people’s life histories and experiences under different policies and historical periods. These various anecdotes related important aspects of settlement history, old landlords, war experiences, administrative changes, and environmental changes. I was often able to draw useful insights as well from popular jokes, which appeared to be an avenue for indirectly venting critiques of the economic and political system. Urban residents joked, for example, about the double meaning of the standard acronym for socialism, XHCN (\textit{xa hoi chu nghia}), which in the past they alternately coined as meaning \textit{xep hang ca ngay}: ‘queue for goods all day long.’

\textbf{My Interpreter and I: Interpreter-Researcher Relations}

The literature on ethnographic fieldwork has become increasingly sensitive in recent years to issues of the researcher’s positionality. In my discussion earlier, I referred to some of the expectations that local people may have of a foreigner in Vietnam. Yet, most accounts of researchers working in cross-cultural contexts brush aside the positionality of the field assistant or interpreter—to the extent that one is necessary. This is a serious omission, since factors such as age, gender, regional and class background, and prejudices such as attitude towards women or ethnic minorities can play a tremendous part in shaping interactions between the researcher, interpreter, and research subjects and the nature of the data obtained. In my fieldwork in Thai Nguyen, I had a total of four interpreters—two who worked with me for only a couple of days,
and two for longer periods of time. The potential challenges of working with a male interpreter on one occasion became obvious when he invited his buddies from the Department of Agriculture to a lunch I was to pay for, ordered large quantities of beer, and later began drinking rice wine with a group of men at the next table in the restaurant—encouraging the driver to do the same, against his will. He was then (not surprisingly) reluctant to start work punctually after lunch and later cracked jokes about ‘the women’s movement’ while I was interviewing the leader of a local Women’s Association.

One of my longer-term interpreters was a female instructor at Thai Nguyen University. Having studied in Cuba in the 1970s, she was more fluent in Spanish than English, so we communicated with each other mainly in Spanish. She had the advantage of being well-known and respected by many officials in the district-level Departments of Agriculture, since in many cases she had been their instructor during their studies at the provincial College of Agriculture and Forestry. She was older and her children had nearly completed high school so she had few family responsibilities and thus more time available to work with me. My other interpreter was a young woman from Hanoi who was completing a degree in English. Although willing to work hard, she was rather inexperienced and became intimidated during some interviews with district officials. Despite the challenges, my relationship with both these interpreters was friendly and mutually supportive.

Many people in Vietnam considered it hard to convince female Vietnamese researchers or interpreters to join research teams going to rural areas of the country. They may have young children at home and be unable to spend extended periods away from family or their husbands may be reluctant to allow them to go. Moreover, working in dirty, ‘rough,’ and non-air-conditioned rural areas had a stigma in the eyes of many people, particularly for those who had attained the status of researcher or interpreter. I remember telling some Vietnamese friends in Hanoi about where I was carrying out my research only to be met with the response, “Why would you want to work there?”

The quality of interpretation and translation services in Vietnam is often not high, and my interpreters had no formal training as such. In these circumstances, my own understanding of Vietnamese was helpful to check the quality of interpretation. I was often able to make clarifications, identify omissions, and ask questions myself. There were times when I faced problems of interpreters answering my questions themselves rather than asking the person being interviewed. The interpreter sometimes could not understand my rationale for asking the same question to different people in subsequent interviews and would remind me that I had already
received an answer to that question. One interpreter discouraged me from asking questions about inheritance or polygamy and (jokingly) sighed and rolled her eyes at the detailed questions I asked during interviews.

Another limitation among interpreters or research assistants was their lack of social science training, in terms of both analytical and methodological skills. I mentioned above my interpreter’s lack of appreciation (or tolerance) of my line of questioning on some occasions. Another problem was one interpreter’s difficulty un-gluing her eyes from the survey questions during interviews, and her inability to act naturally and make conversation before initiating an interview. An additional factor that was noted by Croll (1994: 295) as complicating research in post-reform China was “a decline in the use of common definitions and greater variation in the meaning attributed to terms in common usage.” Although this was not an obvious problem for me, there were reams of new terminology associated with the Communist Party and government that are relatively unfamiliar to Vietnamese who left South Vietnam before 1975. This was an issue for one Vietnamese person who worked with me in Canada to translate some documents.

A final point to add to this discussion is the problem of representation and ‘othering,’ in relation to ethnic minority people in Vietnam. Attitudes of Kinh, Tay, and Nung people towards other ethnic minorities, particularly the Hmong, were frequently condescending, patronizing, and fraught with misunderstanding. In a rural market, when I initiated a conversation with a group of Hmong women, the surrounding crowd of Nung on-lookers began to jeer at the women in an insulting tone. When I expressed my interest in interviewing a Hmong person to one Nung commune official, he sent me off with his assistant to a nearby hamlet where the assistant proudly presented me to a man, exclaiming, “here’s a nguoi Meo (Meo person),” as if he were showing off a museum exhibit or some kind of merchandise (Meo is an old and somewhat derogatory name for Hmong people). In another instance, after visiting a Hmong household, my Kinh interpreter joked with a district-level extensionist about the poor condition of the house, the Hmong woman’s illiteracy, her inability to specify how much land she had, and her son’s incompetence in obtaining a good price for selling a bird that he had trapped. Arriving afterwards at a relatively new house of a clearly well-off family, the interpreter exclaimed, “This must the home of a Kinh or Tay. What a nice house this is.” The interpreter further criticized Hmong people for their constant dependence on state programs, always asking for project hand-outs. Another university instructor I interviewed complained that Hmong people rejected efforts of the state extension service to donate cows to them, implying that Hmong were stupid and closed-minded. In so doing, he overlooked the inappropriateness of cattle to the
Hmong production system, as the cattle could compete with and damage the Hmong’s traditional swidden crops.

Plate 2. Interview in a Multi-generational Household

Plate 3. Discussing Local Legends over a Cup of Tea

Synthesizing Complexity: Research Approaches and Data Analysis

I came to researching Vietnam out of an interest in agricultural policy and land reform in the context of socialist development models, but I soon realized that socialism represented a tiny
blip in the long historical experience of Vietnam's development. During my first months in
Vietnam, I interpreted the socialist experiences of this country to a large degree independently
of the context in which they were embedded. I frequently overlooked the multiple influences
and syncretism, the mixing of Marxism, Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, ancestor cults, and
2000 years of nationalist struggles for the defense of the nation. All of these are intricately
entwined in a complex and long-term perspective that has shaped the national identities of many
Vietnamese, compared to the historical vision of a single war, a scant three decades in the past,
that many North Americans have in mind when visiting the country. The longer I stayed, the
more I began to resist simplifications, and instead to appreciate and slowly untangle the many
layers of historical and cultural influences that have come to shape contemporary Vietnam and
its people. Without an ethnographic approach, much of this richness would likely have remained
invisible to me.

Apart from the challenges of carrying out my fieldwork—the primary subject of this
chapter—another series of struggles faced me in setting about the process of data analysis. This
entailed synthesizing the complex array of field notes and other bits of information collected
over 14 months of fieldwork. Analysis and writing is not an automatic, mechanical process
leading in a direct and linear fashion from data collection. Few textbooks provide a satisfactory
guide to reflect my experience of working with qualitative data. Data analysis and writing—for
qualitative and ethnographic research in particular—calls for much patience, imagination, and
careful synthesis. Much of the process of reworking interview text to conform to a presentable
and workable format felt as though I were struggling to contain a giant octopus.

The most challenging aspect of writing this dissertation was achieving to my satisfaction
an adequate meshing of reams of so-called 'raw data' from diverse sources with a relevant (but
certainly not ready-made) conceptual apparatus, in order to lend a broader significance to
otherwise un-integrated observations, comments, and images from interviews, conversations,
observations, statistics, reports, or newspapers. I use the term 'raw data' in quotes to emphasize
the extent to which ethnographic field notes are already to some degree conceptually informed.
As noted by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995: 167), “theory enters in at every point, shaping not
only analysis but how social events come to be perceived and written up as data in the first
place.”

Rather than being grounded in field research and paying attention to local specificity, the
ungrounded theory in too many dissertations ends up overburdening, de-centering, or
misrepresenting experiences of 'reality.' In some cases, it is written even before the fieldwork is
conducted, with minimum revisions made after completion of the fieldwork. To avoid this, it has taken a considerable amount of time and effort for me to explore different themes and ordering schemas and to identify overlaps between bodies of data and theory, without forcing the latter onto the former. The craft lies in ‘listening to the data’ to build a conceptual framework for the analysis and in achieving a constant interweaving of field data with theoretical ideas. In letting topics emerge from my recorded field notes, I had at different times some 50 indexing codes used to file my notes—photocopied and cut up by hand—into recipe boxes. Many more sub-categories were added later when I reached the stage of fine-tuning the classifications after they had been put onto the computer. Despite all I have said about avoiding a predetermined analytical framework, the role of the researcher in filtering and conducing the direction of the analysis at all stages of the project should be acknowledged from the outset. The same set of field notes could be written up in an infinite number of forms. Ethnography is a craft—and an underused method among human geographers (Herbert 2000). Its practice calls for a good degree of judgement and a fine line must be drawn as the research proceeds in allowing the scope of the analysis to evolve and adapting it to the context at hand.
Chapter Two.
Study Aims and Research Design

One of the major historical events occurring in the contemporary world since the 1980s was the collapse of socialist systems and their experiences of adjustment that involve the reintroduction or expansion of a market economy. In moving away from the security of the 'iron rice bowl' economy and facing greater exposure to market fluctuations, this adjustment process imposes many difficulties. This dissertation focuses on some aspects of this adjustment process in Vietnam, namely those concerned with property rights and decollectivization and their uneven consequences for livelihood vulnerability, with particular attention to the impact on gender and ethnic relations. The study demonstrates the diversity of experiences of decollectivization, especially when the analysis is brought down to the micro level. This underlines the need for attention to complexity in the analysis of social processes. The term 'interfaces' that appears in the title of this dissertation is borrowed from Norman Long's discussions of the interfaces of structure and agency in his actor-oriented perspective discussed later in this chapter.

Land reform and property rights issues have been long debated in Vietnam to determine effective rural development strategies to meet both efficiency and equity objectives. Land policy reforms implemented in Vietnam since the 1980s suggest a new orientation in land management and production organization and new roles for the state, markets, cooperatives, and agricultural households. Decollectivization marks the shift from primarily collectivized production to household management of agricultural land. The 1993 Land Law represented a definitive step in decollectivization, ensuring farming households the rights to produce and market their own produce through private channels and to transfer, exchange, inherit, mortgage, and lease long-term land-use rights. Allocation of land to households reinstated the household as the principal production unit.

Agricultural land—an important asset and often a key axis of differentiation—has been relatively evenly allocated through decollectivization. Although China has undergone a somewhat parallel process of decollectivization as in Vietnam, the pace of socio-economic differentiation there has been more accelerated (Luong and Unger 1999). Given the many parallels between recent economic restructuring in developing countries and former socialist countries, my analysis situates Vietnam not strictly within a lens of other emerging 'post-
socialist'\textsuperscript{10} trajectories but within a broader context of the neoliberal agenda shaping global economic processes. Both developing countries and former socialist countries have been subjected to a common ‘market panacea’ message (Spoor 1997). In relation to land issues, this agenda has translated into the end of state-led agrarian reform, reflecting a trend in countries as diverse at Mexico and Vietnam to move away from collective forms of land management (\textit{ejidos} in Mexico and agricultural production collectives in Vietnam) and towards the allocation of individual title or long-term land-use rights (e.g., DeWalt and Rees 1994; Szelenyi 1998). Land and its redistribution have long been considered as central elements of welfare provision and poverty reduction efforts in addition to being a ‘moral imperative’ to redress injustices of colonialism. The 1980s and 1990s witnessed increasing debate over the appropriate functions of states and markets in land management—in developing country and ‘transitional’ (or post-socialist) economies alike. Some policy analysts in Vietnam are doubtful whether any form of land redistribution or allocation will in fact alleviate poverty given that small-holder production lacks economies of scale or the scope to apply ‘modern’ technologies (pers. comm., Ha Huy Thanh). From this perspective, the policy of egalitarian land allocation will not be effective in stimulating economic development for the population at large. This move is seen as too generous to poor farmers and as preventing an accumulation of land in the hands of those who can better manage it. By extension, state-led land redistribution is no longer considered a useful mechanism to target the poorest sectors of the rural population and alleviate rural poverty.

Within the broader set of economic and institutional transformations underway in Vietnam, the property rights reforms in the agricultural sector represent some of the most significant changes. Of the total employed labour force, 67 percent is engaged primarily in agriculture and forestry activity (General Statistical Office Yearbooks 1996-98). Poverty is highly concentrated in rural areas, where 76 percent of the population officially resides. The 1997/98 Vietnam Living Standards Survey revealed that just nine percent of urban dwellers but 45 percent of rural dwellers lived in poverty. Vietnam had a population in 1999 of 76 million people. Yet, the land area to feed this population is relatively limited. Vietnam’s agricultural land area of 7.4 million hectares comprises only 22 percent of the country’s surface area, with rice cultivation occupying over half this area. The population density averages 214 persons per square kilometer and the average area of cultivated land per capita is just 0.11 hectares—comparable to that of Sri Lanka and Bangladesh and one-third the size of China or Thailand.

\textsuperscript{10} I use this term in quotation marks since in Vietnam the country is still considered to have a socialist orientation,
These figures suggest why it is critical to take account of agriculture, rural development, and land issues within Vietnam’s overall development strategy.

**Aims of the Study**

The overall aim of this dissertation is to analyze the institutional changes reflected in processes of decollectivization and land allocation and to emphasize the interplays of gender, household, kinship, ethnicity and agro-ecological differences in shaping new patterns of livelihood vulnerability. This general aim is divided into three objectives. The first is to analyze decollectivization in Vietnam (particularly the property rights reforms via land allocation and certification) in terms of the restructuring of formal and informal institutions. This includes production organization and management, scales of decision making, service provision and social safety nets, new cooperative forms, and the reworking of relations between state, market, and rural households. This analysis is used to trace new forms of rural governance and the changing path of development implicit in Vietnam’s decollectivization experience.

The second objective of this study is to identify gaps between the *de jure* national policies of decollectivization and *de facto* experiences of implementation at the village level. It thus highlights the interplay of national policy with local responses based on socio-cultural, ethnic and gender dynamics. The study emphasizes variations in collectivization and decollectivization temporally and spatially and the interfaces of changes at various scales, from the macro and national to the micro and regional/local scale, based on an analysis of dynamics of decollectivization in Thai Nguyen province.

The third objective is to demonstrate the relations between the institutional shifts associated with decollectivization and emerging patterns of livelihood vulnerability in Vietnam. The analysis is disaggregated by region, ethnic group, and gender, through two case studies in the ethnically diverse province of Thai Nguyen. To achieve the third objective, I seek to (a) identify institutional gaps in service provision associated with the loss of collectives as mechanisms for coordination and cooperation; and (b) identify changes in entitlements to land and other resources and the forms of social capital that mediate this, taking account of both social norms (such as inheritance), and kin and ethnic networks.

albeit with a market economy.
Organization of the Dissertation

The dissertation is organized as follows. The opening chapter offered readers a flavour of my experiences in carrying out ethnographic fieldwork in Vietnam, including aspects of data access, quality, and interpretation, and broader considerations in adapting my research strategies in the field. The remaining part of the current chapter on study aims and research design outlines some key elements of the research methods—the integration of multiple scales and methods of analysis, data sources, and site and case study selection—that guided my study.

Land—embedded with its qualities as a store of wealth, a source of collateral, and a marketable good—is a key asset and social safety net to reduce vulnerability for rural inhabitants (Ellis 2000). This is especially true in much of northern Vietnam, particularly in the northern highlands in areas where there is limited livelihood diversification beyond agriculture. While focussing in particular on the productive asset of land, this study examines the related but less tangible assets of social capital and household-kinship relations to understand how they mutually affect entitlements to land.

Rather than viewing poverty in static and purely economic terms, my analysis focuses on vulnerability to better reflect dynamic social processes that produce differential entitlements to land. Various types of formal and informal institutions are shown to mediate access to assets and activities for sustaining livelihoods. Agricultural restructuring, the market economy, and privatization all require certain institutions in order to reduce risk and thereby reduce vulnerabilities. Chapter Three lays the conceptual foundation for my subsequent empirical analysis, justifying the analytical focus on institutions, vulnerability, kinship, gender, and social capital. Recent studies suggest that macro-level social capital and collective action tend to be low in post-socialist societies due to the termination of many formal organizational structures (e.g., agricultural collectives). My analysis examines the extent to which this is true in the context of the decline in collectives as coordinating mechanisms for agricultural production. It further examines whether less formal social capital at the meso- and micro-levels have been reinforced in some settings (e.g., kinship-lineage or ethnic groups).

The study of institutional change in Vietnam, including both collectivization and decollectivization, should not be considered merely in terms of formal or legal institutions. Many practices—relating to sale of produce or implementation of land allocation policies, for example—occur despite, rather than because of, existing formal institutional structures. This point was underlined in the preface to Fforde’s (1989: xi) study of cooperator resistance in
Vietnam: "knowledge of formal or legally constituted social structures does not necessarily tell much about underlying reality." Fforde (1989: 4) emphasized the importance of understanding formal structures first but then seeing through them to grasp 'the real meaning.' This is the rationale for my continuing reference to both formal and informal institutions and their interrelations. Anthropologists often refer to a 'front stage' and 'back stage' in a given setting. They suggest that only after considerable time conducting fieldwork do the initial representations that are portrayed officially, and particularly to outsiders, give way to more a fine-tuned understanding of local dynamics and everyday practices. My study seeks to capture both of these aspects. Chapter Three closes with an overview of doi moi (or 'renovation')—the economic restructuring process implemented since 1986—and its reflection in discursive shifts heralding entrepreneurship and market competition.

Chapter Four lays out the institutional context for my analysis. A brief historical overview of land relations in Vietnam underlines the degree of symbiosis of collective and household sectors in agricultural production through the phase of collectivization. A subsequent section details the evolution of land policy and property rights reforms and their realization in practice. As property rights and production are reorganized, new forms of rural governance begin to emerge. The remainder of the chapter outlines how the new discursive shifts are reflected in a range of new institutional forms. New actors for rural development are brought on board as collectives are dissolved or reformed. Local groups coalesce to organize and demand services such as transporting and marketing produce and providing inputs or agricultural extension information. NGOs, often in collaboration with mass organizations, substitute or complement state-led services and welfare provisioning.

This latter part of Chapter Four further identifies how new patterns of vulnerability in Vietnam are emerging in the form of institutional gaps created by the decline in some services provided by agricultural collectives. One implication of the changing status of households vis-à-vis collectives and the state is that farmers now have the opportunity to make production choices themselves. But a new handicap shaping household differentiation is the technical knowledge to effectively exploit the land that farmers now control. Gaps in technical knowledge and entrepreneurial know-how are becoming increasingly important in shaping vulnerability in Vietnam's market economy. Social networks in turn often shape access to knowledge.

The recent attention by political ecologists to issues of uneven access to natural resources has some relevance for my study. However, because I have not concentrated my analysis on environmental changes, or environmental consequences of the institutional changes
in the Vietnamese countryside, I decided against adopting a political ecology approach. I am also sensitive to critiques of political ecology suggesting that many analyses impose preconceived theoretical agendas and over-privilege political factors at the expense of a sound analysis of the multiple natural and human-induced causes of biophysical changes (Vayda and Walters 1999). The latter point calls for an analysis which many social scientists, myself included, are unqualified to perform. Moreover, although political ecology models traverse micro- and macro-scales of analysis, Zimmerer (1991: 443) found them lacking in that they fail to “settle the contradiction between the primacy attributed to the individual in human and cultural ecology and the structuralist framework of political economy.”

Chapter Five takes up the intersections of gender, land, and rural livelihoods in Vietnam, highlighting the gender-differentiated impacts of changing property rights and land privatization. Through an analysis of kinship- and gender-based norms and networks, it is argued that a lack of social capital can disadvantage some types of female-headed households. Inheritance and household headship patterns are shown to shape livelihood vulnerability, particularly through a lack of entitlements to land. The reordering of the household and its renewed status as a unit of decision-making and allocation of labour—responsibilities formerly taken by agricultural collectives not households—have served to reshape intra-household relations of authority. Shifts in intensification of land use and diversification of production bring about concomitant patterns of differentiation between households and workloads within households, as people’s use of use of time, space, and resources is restructured. These shifts bring about new forms of vulnerability at the inter- and intra-household level. Inheritance of land—an important customary institution—is reemerging in the decollectivized countryside, bringing about new intra-family divisions along gender lines. Analyzed this way, inheritance is seen as a key factor in explaining differential entitlements to land. In the latter part of the chapter, a village-level case study of household headship, residence patterns, and inheritance is presented to illustrate these trends.

Chapter Six opens with an examination of regional and ethnic disparities, practices of high modernism, and the changing of the social geography of Vietnam. This occurred through the resettlement of two main groups during the collectivization period, one being Kinh from the Red River Delta, and the other, shifting cultivators from higher altitudes into valley areas of the midlands. The remainder of the chapter provides a characterization of the northern uplands region and of Thai Nguyen province. This begins with an examination of the population dynamics of its development as a frontier territory and site of in-migration. Next, drawing on
provincial statistics, I demonstrate the process of collectivization from the 1950s to 1970s and its gradual disintegration in the 1980s. Following from this, the household economy experienced significant expansion in the 1990s. A discussion of contemporary land use and the allocation of agricultural and forest land follows. This chapter further highlights the current features of rural land tenure and rural-urban disparities.

A key emphasis throughout my study is on the localized outcomes of policy processes, akin to Fforde’s (1989: 4) observation that “while central authorities determine the form of rural institutions, local practice may be free to determine their content.” Gaps between policy declarations and the practices of implementation at the local level have a long history in Vietnam. These gaps are highlighted in my analysis of the periods of collectivization and decollectivization. The problems of periodization, or clearly demarcating these different institutional regimes, is illustrated by the significant symbiosis or co-existence of the private/household economy within the former collective system and by the uneven and at times intermittent experiences of collectivization. Each locality had its own idiosyncrasies in not following the norms of national policy—however clear these norms may or may not have been to begin with.

Chapter Seven examines how local autonomy shaped the diverse processes and outcomes of collectivization and decollectivization. A case study demonstrates the role of ethnic identity as a basis for ancestral land claims and differential land access, in turn shaping patterns of livelihood vulnerability. This analysis can be seen as reflecting “the significance of the concept of locality for analyzing how global trends are translated into place-specific processes” (de Haan 1997: 176). From this case, I discuss how institutional changes are shaped by and in turn shape new cultural, ethnic, family, and territorial identities, and identities based on regional autonomy; identities. I argue that not only formal institutions, such as laws or established organizations—but also customary ones, based for instance on shared kinship or ethnic identity—shape new livelihood vulnerabilities in rural Vietnam. This chapter demonstrates how ethnic identity can serve as a basis for ancestral land claims and how the operation of social networks can exclude outsiders in an ethnic group. It further illustrates how Kinh are not always the most advantaged group. Through land allocation, Tay, Nung, and San Diu groups, among others, claimed land that would have otherwise been shared also with Kinh and Dao in-migrants. Other experiences of the new land policies include Hmong and Dao shifting cultivators facing increasing enclosure of lands and resources that they formerly depended upon through common property regimes. This is particularly critical with new classifications and
allocations of forest lands. Policy design to date has not been sufficiently flexible to develop culturally sensitive alternatives for such scenarios.

A principal contribution of the dissertation is to traces the multiple contours of policy trade-offs and new patterns of vulnerability in light of the institutional reshuffling in contemporary Vietnam. This reshuffling resulted in new opportunities but also in a decline and privatization of some collective goods and services formerly available to farmers. Compensating for and responding to new circumstances and opportunities, those with a favourable combination of material and social assets are able to take better advantage of the situation and get ahead. The concluding chapter of the dissertation draws together the diverse threads of this analysis, underlining the significance of the empirical trends documented through the study.

**An Overview of Methods**

Relatively few foreign or Vietnamese scholars have conducted long-term local-level fieldwork in Vietnam. Even fewer have focused on the northern midlands and highlands region of the country. In this context, I set out to make a modest contribution in a field that lay still relatively unexplored. I sought to make sense of the complexities of agricultural land relations in the local implementation of land allocation and decollectivization, as lands formerly managed by collectives came under control of individual households. The study makes both empirical and analytical contributions, based on original data collection and on a synthesis and reconceptualization of existing studies. Given the limited number of empirical studies available on some of the issues addressed in this dissertation, my approach was often inductive and exploratory. Determining the appropriate questions to be asked was frequently a large part of the challenge, even if time and logistics did not permit answering them as fully as I would have liked during the period of fieldwork. The dissertation might thus also serve to define an agenda for further research on processes of decollectivization as derived from these preliminary trends and observations.

Consistent with recent ethnographic approaches, my study of land policy interprets the actions and responses of local people as engaged subjects rather than as passive recipients of policy. This ‘actor oriented approach’ (cf. Long 1989b; Long 1997) centres on elucidating different perspectives and practices among actors and on the interplay of structures with agency. Such an approach is particularly crucial for studies in Vietnam where many of the institutional adaptations in land policy were established in response to changes already underway on the ground (Fforde and de Vylder 1996).
The Place of the Local: A Multi-level Analysis

Human impoverishment and social relations of vulnerability reflect relationships that are complex, multilevel and multidimensional. Understanding these relationships calls for interdisciplinary research combining institutional, economic, environmental, demographic, and socio-cultural processes. Interdisciplinary studies are often about diversity. The metaphor of ‘border crossings’ is common to such studies, suggestive of much of the disorientation that accompanies venturing into foreign territories and disciplinary domains. This may be accompanied by a sense of being overwhelmed with an infinite number of interrelated issues and perspectives to consider when one aims at a ‘holistic’ or integrative analysis. There is a temptation to try to account for every possible factor and to avoid criticisms of “but what about...?” Managing an integrated multi-level, multi-dimensional, multi-method analysis is fraught with challenges, at times provoking self-doubt on the part of the researcher. Are all these ‘multiples’ a product of the post-modern fetish for pluralism and diversity? Am I going overboard in an infinitely differentiated analysis? How does one adequately combine an analysis of macro trends with an ethnographic (hermeneutic) approach? I hope my study will serve to raise questions about just how do we cross borders. My research resists simplistic categorization. It crosses many boundaries, not merely international geographic ones, but disciplinary and institutional ones as well, moving between academic-theoretical and policy-orientations, in the process engaging diverse audiences.

Academic cultures can inhibit interdisciplinary research and individual disciplines often have traditions of research that are scale-specific. For example, many sociological studies have tended to be at a more macro-scale and classic anthropological studies at village-level. Moreover, empirical studies have been further conditioned by discipline-specific methods, with sociology employing large-scale surveys and aggregated census data and anthropology employing ethnographic methods such as participant observation, with a smaller number of cases. Geographers often employ hybrid methodologies to address issues of multiple scales. The tension between large-scale generalizations and the uniqueness of place lies at the heart of geographical analyses. Yet, frequently insufficient attention is given to the interplay between large- and small-scale processes and phenomena and the local becomes subservient:

The local context [is seen as] structured by general processes, which deprive the local of its singular character. ... The local is either used as a source for sampling data, or seen as a spatial expression of general tendencies, without a history and an identity of its own. (de Haan 1997: 153-154)
The decline of community and village studies is due to their perceived failure to acknowledge the social disintegration within communities, on the one hand, and the relation between communities and the broader social and economic context, on the other. While myopic studies overlook the broader context of events, macro studies decontextualize the specificity of locality, masking the richness of local-level detail. The latter often disregard the 'situatedness of practice' and reflect little of the lifeworld of individuals (de Haan 1997: 153-154).

One issue I mulled over throughout my fieldwork and the elaboration of my analysis is the interrelation between the multiple scales of vulnerability and outcomes of the economic reforms. I toyed with how to encapsulate the geographies and spatial ramifications of vulnerability. In particular I sought to move beyond the identification of vulnerability solely at the level of a spatial unit (e.g., a commune, or a remote region), as is common in Vietnamese measures of poverty. Selecting a single level of analysis—such as one community or ethnic group—would have given too partial a view of the multifaceted implications of decollectivization. My study analyzes households within their agro-ecological production system, embedded within broader economic and social systems and formal and informal institutional structures in which they engage in everyday life. Such an actor-oriented approach erases macro and micro distinctions, understanding how local processes are integrated into regional, national and global systems.

There is a growing interest among geographers in socio-spatial dynamics and the production of space and scale, linking the production of localities to the production of scales. Marston (1999: 3) suggests that scale matters to geography in order “to understand processes that shape and constitute social practices at different levels of analysis” and the relations or interaction between scales. The organization of chapters in this dissertation reflects the attention to scale in my analysis. Chapter Four presents an overview of institutional change at the national level, while Chapter Six presents the regional context. In addressing the emerging patterns of vulnerability at different scales, the two case studies presented in Chapters Five and Seven address the relevance of scale by illuminating how vulnerability plays out at the levels of family-household, region, and ethnic group.

**Studying Up, Down, and Around: Multiple Methods and Data Sources**

The title of this section makes reference to Laura Nader’s (1982) article (originally written in the 1970s) on perspectives gained from ‘studying up.’ Nader denounced anthropologists for their lack of research on the middle and upper classes, in comparison to the
relatively abundant literature on the poor and disadvantaged, and on ethnic minorities. She
challenged us to consider

What if, in reinventing anthropology, anthropologists were to study the colonizers
rather than the colonized, the culture of power rather than the culture of the powerless,
the culture of affluence rather than the culture of poverty? (Nader 1982: 457)

Studying up as well as down, Nader noted, forces us to turn many conventional research
approaches on their head, to ask questions in reverse, and to examine resistance to change
among the privileged instead of only among the poor. Doing this ultimately produces better
theoretical and empirical analysis. Although applied to a US context, studying ‘at home’ within
the discipline of anthropology, Nader’s ideas might apply equally to research internationally and
in other disciplines. In adopting an institutional analysis for my study, I attempt to incorporate
some of Nader’s perspectives on studying up. I do this by drawing on a pool of interviewees that
includes not only poor farmers, but state officials, researchers, and development project staff in
order to understand the making of new social relations and networks in contemporary Vietnam.

A further argument made by Nader is for an eclectic array of methods. No single
research method is comprehensive; all have trade-offs. In light of this, my study emphasizes
methodological complementarity. I employed a variety of methods that would allow me both the
scope to understand broad trends as well as the specificity to observe exceptions to the rule,
including macro- and micro-level divergences in policy implementation and experiences
differentiated by ethnic group and gender. Although complemented with participant observation
and documentary research, the study’s core method was unstructured and semi-structured
interviews. The rationale for this was to promote free-flowing discussion and allow for a more
diverse range of issues to emerge spontaneously without having to ask directed (or mis-directed)
questions. In so doing, I sought to avoid the problem of imposing categories or topics when
people would not otherwise construct their reality in the way I do—although undoubtedly I
remained guilty of this at times. This may be as subtle as asking if there are any disadvantages
of land allocation when local people did not generally think in such terms.

The 341 interviews that I conducted over two periods of fieldwork range from the
national to household level. The interviewee types are listed in Table 1 and can be further
grouped as follows:

1. 69 unstructured and semi-structured interviews with villagers of Kinh, Nung, Tay, San Diu,
Hmong, and Dao ethnic groups in 13 communes across six districts of Thai Nguyen and
neighbouring Bac Kan provinces. This included a household survey of 25 households in one
50-household village of primarily Nung ethnicity in Dong Hy district, Thai Nguyen
province. The survey used random sampling of one-third of the village households, supplemented with purposive sampling to encompass all cases of female headed and uxorilocal\textsuperscript{11} households. Given the structured set of questions on household characteristics, no separate interviews were conducted for husband and wife.


3. 106 unstructured and semi-structured interviews with hamlet, commune, district, provincial, and central-level authorities in various government ministries and departments, nearly half of which were in Thai Nguyen province. These ministries and departments included Agriculture and Rural Development; Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs, General Department of Land Administration, Forestry Protection units, the Institute for Agricultural Planning and Projections, Office of Resettlement and Fixed Cultivation, Agricultural Extension offices, Statistics offices; Cooperative Association, People’s Committee and People’s Council, and a variety of mass organizations (Vietnam Women’s Union, Farmers’ Association, Gardener’s Association, Veteran’s Association, Youth Association). Other local informants included health clinic attendants and teachers.

4. 113 unstructured and semi-structured interviews with Vietnamese and foreign researchers and staff of international development agencies and NGOs.

5. 15 unstructured and semi-structured interviews with other people, including shopkeepers and university students.

In addition to these interviews, the following sources were drawn upon:

1. Books, reports and historical documents collected from government sources, national research institutes, publishing houses, international agencies, and university and public libraries, to complement and corroborate findings from interviews (27 libraries and resource centres were consulted).

2. Quantitative economic and demographic data from national and provincial government ministries and agencies.

3. Maps (administrative, cadastral, topographical, and land-use type).

4. National and local newspaper articles in English, French, and Vietnamese.

5. Notes from five weeks of workshops on ‘Concepts and Methods for Localized Poverty Reduction in Vietnam,’ that I co-facilitated through a collaborative university project with the National Centre for Social Sciences and Humanities at universities in Thai Nguyen, Vinh, Hue, Dalat, and Ho Chi Minh City.

6. Informal conversations and observations: gossip, oral histories.

7. Content and discourse analysis of museum exhibits (from 16 museums across the country), photos, postcards, pamphlets, proverbs, popular expressions, literature, and music. These often unexpected data sources offered insights into social norms, representations of gender, experiences of societal change and popular perceptions of economic systems.

\textsuperscript{11} Refer to the glossary for a definition of these terms.
**Table 1. Number of Interviews Classified by Type of Interviewee**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type*</th>
<th>1997</th>
<th>1998</th>
<th>Total***</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rural households*** in Thai Nguyen and Bac Kan provinces, of which:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kinh households</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nung households</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tay households</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hmong households</td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dao households</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Diu households</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household survey (not included above)</td>
<td></td>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural households outside Thai Nguyen province</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State officials and community representatives in Thai Nguyen province</td>
<td></td>
<td>49</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commune or hamlet level</td>
<td></td>
<td>17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District level</td>
<td></td>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Province level</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State officials in other provinces</td>
<td></td>
<td>49</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commune or hamlet level</td>
<td></td>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District level</td>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Province level</td>
<td></td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central-level officials</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researchers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnamese (National Centre for Social Sciences and Humanities; universities and research institutes; museums)</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From Thai Nguyen University and provincial museums</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreigners (and overseas Vietnamese)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO or international development agency representatives</td>
<td></td>
<td>43</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreigners (and overseas Vietnamese)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others (e.g., shopkeepers, students)</td>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td></td>
<td>138</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Instances of joint positions (e.g. academic researchers and NGO staff) were classified as per the principal capacity in which the interviewees’ experience and ideas were being solicited.

** Instances of repeat interviews were counted no more than twice.

*** Households of mixed ethnicity were counted as per official Vietnamese reporting, according to the husband’s or father’s ethnic group.

Although useful to lend breadth to my analysis, not all data I collected were analyzed exhaustively for this dissertation, given the constraints of time and space. Interview data and documentary sources were analyzed by developing an evolving series of codes based on both research questions and categories emerging from the data. New categories were developed when...
recurring themes were identified. These various data types provide the backbone to the analyses in Chapters Four through Seven. The analysis of provincial statistical data is presented in Chapter Six and in the statistical narrative in the Appendix.

Data were collected during two principal periods of fieldwork in May-July 1997 and January-December 1998. In 1997 I participated in a study tour on rural resource management and sustainable livelihoods organized by Geoffrey Hainsworth through the Centre for Southeast Asia Research at the University of British Columbia. In 1998, I was hosted by the Institute of Economics and Thai Nguyen University’s Agro-Forestry College, the latter being my home base for field work in Thai Nguyen province.

I studied Vietnamese for one and a half years in Canada, and one month intensively in Hanoi, in addition to the practice I gained during my fieldwork. From these experiences, I attained an upper intermediate level of conversation, reading, and writing in Vietnamese. Although I was accompanied by an interpreter during most of my formal interviews, I was able to ask questions and understand about half of the communication.

Site and Case Study Selection

This study bridges macro, regional, village and household levels, using Thai Nguyen province—located some 85 km north of Hanoi, in the northern midlands of Vietnam—as the setting for the largest part of the fieldwork (see Map 1). In relation to the more numerous studies of the Red River Delta, fewer studies have examined the midlands and highlands regions of northern Vietnam, highlighting the diversity and unevenness in experiences in the implementation of both collectivization and decollectivization. The midlands region, and Thai Nguyen province in particular, seemed to be a prime setting to reflect this diversity, given its ethnic composition and agro-ecological variations.
Map 1. Vietnam, Showing Thai Nguyen Province

Map 2 shows the location of my research sites (indicating commune names) within Thai Nguyen province. Within the province of Thai Nguyen, the selection of research sites (and specifics of the research problem) were identified by their relevance to the issues I wished to examine. But as most ethnographers appreciate, this is also guided to an extent by the availability of, and access to, adequate data (as discussed in Chapter One). The criteria for selecting given districts and communes as research sites in Thai Nguyen province were complicated by the problem of finding 'representative' sites, not to emphasize a 'typical case,' but rather the diverse outcomes of the reforms. Particularly grounded in an analysis of ethnicity, the study documents various forms of contestation of national policy to explain locally divergent outcomes. Through my review of secondary sources and in combination with primary data collection, the study established a set of conditions to account for differential local outcomes of
land allocation. These include, *inter alia*, traditions of customary land tenure and mutual assistance, ethnic composition, historical experience of land concentration and collectivization, history of population migrations, population density, agro-ecological conditions (proportion of agricultural vs. forest lands, valley vs. upland production systems, paddy rice vs. slope-land crop and swidden production, extent and tradition of home gardens, etc.), degree of market integration and access (remoteness), land quality, and extent of land and labour markets. Such variation in local conditions contributed to different structures and outcomes of allocation of agricultural and forest lands, particularly in terms of being more or less egalitarian, encouraging more or less effective protection of forest resources, or reflecting to a greater or lesser degree of reclaiming of ancestral land. Given these considerations, plus my emphasis on ethnicity, I sought sites that would reflect a range of conditions in midland and highland provinces rather than delta conditions. For this reason, I de-emphasized the deltaic southern districts in Thai Nguyen. Through this approach, I was able to contrast various sites in the study and seek instances in which the implementation of land policy had been subjected to 'negotiation' between the national and local (province, district, commune and village) levels.
Map 2. Map of Field Sites in Thai Nguyen Province
Chapter Three.  
Conceptualizing Institutions, Property Relations, and Vulnerability

The pace of change has not been uniform, and the path of transformation has not been unidirectional. (Luong 1992: 186)

The bases for land access, and more broadly for livelihood vulnerability, are in flux in the new economic and institutional context of contemporary Vietnam. My analysis interprets decollectivization in terms of shifts in formal and informal social institutions that can produce or reduce vulnerability. This chapter outlines the elements of a framework for a social assessment of Vietnam's recent reforms in land policy and land relations and the associated creation of new vulnerabilities.

This chapter opens by addressing the question of why a framework of institutions is pertinent to this study. It distinguishes between formal and informal or customary institutions and discusses their relevance to economic development. From here, the second section link an institutional analysis to the notions of poverty and vulnerability and, later, social capital, including its ethnic and gender dimensions. The third section outlines the relationship between land rights, property, and gender. The fourth discusses institutional restructuring, land reform, and new rural governance, examining in particular experiences of property rights reform in post-socialist or transition countries. The final part of the chapter turns to an overview Vietnam's economic reform program broadly referred to as doi moi. The discussion examines the new market economy discourses and development orientations implied by doi moi.

Why Institutions?

The post-Fordist development of local governance has led to partnerships between different actors and administrative levels, such as various business coalitions of private, quasi-public, public, and voluntary actors. ...New ideological underpinnings are a consequence of the breakdown of the possibility (and willingness) of pursuing traditional planning and governance strategies. (Tykkylainen 1998: 326)

Deregulation and wider processes of restructuring of governance around the world are leading to new institutional constellations, as indicated in the above quotation. The 1990s witnessed a surge of interest among many international development agencies in building institutions for development, creating or strengthening "organizations and fiscal arrangements to ensure efficient delivery of health, education, and family planning services, clean water, roads
and other infrastructure… [for] building the human and social capital necessary for the rural population to participate in and benefit from the emerging market system” (Rondinelli and Litvack 1999: 9). Institutional coalitions, such as the type indicated by Tykkyläinen above, represent an extension of this. Figure 1 provides a conventional framework and the various components of “institutional development for economic transition.” Within this, the economic support institutions include property rights, financial markets, labour markets, marketing and distribution systems, and legal institutions for business. The property rights component of this will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

Douglas North, the foremost proponent of new institutional economics (NIE), defines institutions as ‘rules of the game’ in a society, referring to:

the humanly devised constraints that structure human interaction. They are made up of formal constraints (e.g., rules, laws, constitutions), informal constraints (e.g., norms of behaviour, conventions, self-imposed codes of conduct), and their enforcement characteristics. Together they define the incentive structure of societies and specific economies. (North 1990: 360)

A related influential approach based in the analysis of institutions is that of common property resources, exemplified by Elinor Orstrom: “Common property analysts such as Orstrom (1990), by contrast, tend to take their theoretical grounding from game theory, looking at collective action dilemmas and focussing on the ways in which institutions or rules can be purposively crafted to produce collective action” (Mehta et al. 2000: 14). Both of these approaches has “established firmly that institutions matter and that local people, as well as state governments, can successfully manage resources through property regimes varying in scale and space” (Mehta et al. 2000: 13).

Both these approaches, however, can be found lacking in their explanatory power. Leach, Mearnes, and Scoones (1999) are critical of the tendency of NIE to lump together norms, rules, and behaviour in a single understanding of institutions. This approach is further limited by its exclusive focus on formal institutions that alone are unable to account for the complexities of resource management practices characterized by overlapping rights. NIE thus fails to consider the interactions between formal and informal institutional arrangements at multiple scales. Linked to a more anthropological or sociological notion of regularized practices, Leach, Mearnes, and Scoones (1999) instead consider institutions as regularized patterns of behaviour that emerge from ‘rules in use’ between individuals and groups in society.
When analyzed in conjunction with uncertainty, institutions need to be seen not as mere rules of the game or rigid organizations but rather as sites of social interaction, negotiation and contestation comprising heterogeneous actors having diverse goals (not all of which are material or economic in nature). (Mehta et al. 2000: 35)

Institutions are not static, but in flux, responding and adapting to ongoing changes in circumstances. This is all the more true in periods of dramatic economic reform, such as Vietnam has experienced in the last two decades. Institutions are at the heart of shifts in property rights and ownership structures associated with the recent land reforms and decollectivization.

The analysis of institutions provides a central framework for this study in explaining patterns of differential entitlements to land between social groups. "Institutions play a critical role in livelihood sustainability, both in the sense of exclusion from access to institutions (such as credit markets), and exclusion by institutions (such as the tenure system preventing access to
land for certain social actors)” (IDS 2000). Institutions that mediate economic relations and resource management structures extend from macro to local levels. A macro-level focus on formal structures such as state policy, laws, collectives, mass organizations, banks and financial markets, should be matched by a parallel focus at a micro-level, particularly focusing on informal (or what is sometimes called customary) institutions. The latter may operate as schemes for mutual assistance (also known as moral economy or informal social safety nets) or for regulation of communal property resources. Adger (2000a: 353) describes the complex institutional arrangements of “local level property rights associated with coastal resources…. [These common property resources are] complex mixes of state, private, and regulated and unregulated commons, often nested within each other and all changing and evolving over time.” Customary institutions encompass village-level rotating credit schemes and funeral funds as well as more generic institutions such as households, families, marriage, and inheritance. Together with social norms, all of these social or customary institutions in different ways play key roles in mediating access to, and control over, productive resources.

References to informal or customary institutions inevitably bring us to a discussion of culture. Rather than constituting an independent sphere, culture and social relations are increasingly seen as intrinsic to politics and the economy and as subjects of interpretation and contestation (Hefner 1998). Culture and traditions are unevenly assimilated. Culturally- and socially-embedded institutions shape the structures of agricultural organization and are themselves affected by farmers’ patterns of resource use (Berry 1989). My analysis in subsequent chapters considers how economic relations, be they state-legal or market structures, are implicated by the strength and persistence of customary institutions. Such institutions shape the outcomes of state policy at the local level and, in turn, can often explain the uneven entitlements for different social groups. This explains my rationale for focusing on the interplay of formal with culturally embedded structures and institutions.

**Linking Institutions to Livelihood Vulnerability**

The analysis of vulnerability is part of the third objective of this study. The term vulnerability can be applied to a wide variety of contexts and begs the question, vulnerability to what? My analysis revolves around livelihood vulnerability, the opposite of livelihood security. As described by Ellis (1998), a focus on livelihoods incorporates multiple dimensions:

A livelihood encompasses income, both cash and in kind, as well as the other social institutions (kin, family, compound, village, and so on), gender relations, and property
rights required to support and to sustain a given standard of living. Social and kinship networks are important for facilitating and sustaining diverse income portfolios... social institutions are also critical for interpreting the constraints and options of individuals and families distinguished by gender, income, wealth, access, and assets. (Ellis 1998: 4)

My study thus adopts this operational definition of livelihood, incorporating elements of income, social institutions and social networks, gender relations, and property rights, all of which combine to form the constraints to and opportunities for ensuring against livelihood vulnerability (see Table 2).

Table 2. Components of a Rural Livelihood

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assets:</th>
<th>Institutions:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• natural capital (e.g. land)</td>
<td>• property rights (including common property), real markets, policies, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• physical capital (e.g. tools, housing)</td>
<td>• social relations (village, ethnicity, gender, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• human capital (e.g. labour, skills)</td>
<td>• organizations (government agencies, community associations, NGOs, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• social capital</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• financial capital</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Access mediated by:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activities:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• crop output, livestock, gathering, farm wage, non-farm wage, non-farm self-employment, remittances</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Ellis (2000: 16).

To situate the analysis, this section presents a conceptualization of vulnerability. In recent years the concept of poverty has to an extent been superceded by a series of alternative concepts: entitlements and capabilities, social exclusion, marginalization, and vulnerability. These concepts aim, in different ways, to do at least two things: (1) to better capture the multi-dimensionality of the experience of deprivation, by moving beyond simply measuring income and (2) to emphasize dynamic and qualitative processes rather than considering poverty as a static condition, quantitatively measured at a fixed point in time. In a similar vein, studies of poverty ‘as a lived experience’ have increasingly drawn attention to transient poverty, underlining how the resource or asset base of many people (graduate students included!) fluctuates over periods of time in the short or long term.

Important contributions to the reconceptualization of poverty have been made by Amartya Sen, 1998 Nobel laureate in economics. Sen’s work on poverty and famines focused attention on what he called people’s functionings and capabilities, as constrained by entitlements—the set of alternative bundles of commodities over which a person can establish command, or the range of resources at one’s disposal (Dreze and Sen 1989). The earlier
understanding of entitlements in a legal sense was subsequently expanded as Sen developed the notion of ‘extended entitlements’ to take greater account of social sanctions in access to resources. These sanctions may be based on social conventions or customary institutions which are not legally codified.

The connection between poverty and vulnerability was also emphasized by Moser and McIlwaine (1997a), who demonstrated how, having a smaller range of assets, the poor may be, on the one hand, more vulnerable, insecure, and exposed to risks than the non-poor and, on the other hand, less resilient in their capacity to cope or respond to such risks and stresses. Vulnerability can thus be seen as comprising two components: the sensitivity, or degree of exposure to a given risk or stress, and resilience, referring to the capacity to cope and respond to shocks (Chambers 1989; Davies 1996). Davies (1996) takes this further to distinguish between risks that are differential and household specific, such as illness or unemployment of household members, and those that are community- or regionally-based and livelihood-system specific, such as a drought. Others have identified a similar distinction between ‘idiosyncratic shocks’ affecting a single household, and ‘covariate shocks’ that affect whole communities (Van de Walle 1999). Vulnerability can be further distinguished as structural (e.g., in terms of dependency ratio, gender, or ethnicity) or proximate (such as short-term illness, pregnancy, or seasonal fluctuations in weather and production levels) (Davies 1996).

The concept of poverty is often used to portray poor people at passive victims, located at fixed points in time. This understanding of poverty gives less attention to the potential for people’s situation to improve or deteriorate in relations to a given reference point, somewhere below a determined ‘poverty line.’ The concept of vulnerability offers a more dynamic analysis. Attention to coping strategies and responses, through the notion of resilience, emphasizes an individual’s agency to a greater degree than conventional notions of poverty. Recent interest in coping strategies appears to have been born from the analytical shift from outcomes to processes (Davies 1996: 45). Yet, as Davies insisted, not all coping strategies imply resilience: such strategies are often erroneously associated with the capacity to bounce back. She distinguishes short-term coping from the longer-term process of adapting, which implies a more permanent change, once coping strategies no longer function.

Social safety nets contribute to the alleviation of both poverty—through redistribution—and vulnerability—by protecting individuals, households and communities from uninsured income and consumption risks and, thereby, from falling into poverty again. Formal social safety nets include food subsidies, public works, agricultural extension, credit provision, and
charity organizations. Informal safety nets tend to be based on family and community networks. In a context of cutbacks in many state services and formal safety nets, informal social safety nets and customary institutions are becoming increasingly important. As fall-back measures, these informal measures can fluctuate in effectiveness over the long or short term, being either strengthened or weakened in periods of stress.

The concept of vulnerability has been more commonly applied to contexts of natural disasters or famine and food insecurity. Adger (1999: 251) noted that vulnerability tends to be “used to describe the state of exposure [e.g., to stress from environmental change], usually associated with a geographical location rather than with individuals or social groups.” Adger’s analysis thus brings greater attention to both agency and power relations in shaping the social vulnerability of individuals and collective groups. I examine the issue of power in more detail in the discussion that follows.

Dittrich (1998) outlined how spatial vulnerability can be deduced from three elements. First are environmental conditions, as climate and natural resource endowments constitute natural constraints for food production. Second are infrastructural and institutional constraints. These include public institutions for regional and local development (e.g., to support production and marketing) and for social service provision. Some indicators of these constraints are the extent and quality of transportation, communication, market places, social and charitable institutions, agricultural extension services and development projects. Third, Dittrich identified processes related to economic dependence and political powerlessness, vis-à-vis political and economic centres. Indicators include the character of relationships between lowlands and mountain regions, systems of economic exploitation, and the degree of social articulation and political participation.

My conceptualization of vulnerability emphasizes the latter two dimensions. It moves beyond solely environmental constraints to address how institutional structures and power relations mediate property rights and alleviate or reinforce patterns of deprivation. This conceptualization parallels other multi-dimensional studies of vulnerability. For example, in the framework used by Watts and Bohle (1993) to analyze individuals and social groups experiencing multiple forms of deprivation, these authors emphasized the need for a multi-level analysis that takes account of both the micro-level shaping of entitlement sets and the broader political economy context. They conceptualize three elements defining spaces of vulnerability, thereby broadening the focus from entitlements to empowerment and political economy. In this analysis, vulnerable individuals can be seen not only as resource-poor but also disenfranchised
and exploited. As emphasized in the earlier discussion on gender and land rights, equal access to property rights constitutes an important aspect of empowerment. The domestic domain is an important political space where property rights relations are determined and in this sense it constitutes a space of vulnerability (Watts and Bohle 1993). Land is a key asset to reduce vulnerability for rural inhabitants, particularly where there are few options for livelihood diversification. Differential access to land is often a key factor shaping distinct livelihood strategies pursued by rural households of different income levels (Ellis 1998).

How is it determined who gets what benefits? Empowerment approaches to vulnerability, which raise questions such as these, highlight the centrality of politics and a theory of power. Watts and Bohle (1993), for instance, see vulnerability as a political space. Property rights ensure access to land and other assets, but political rights are also central to the process by which claims can be made regarding public resources to maintain and defend entitlements. The political space of vulnerability, for Watts and Bohle, is comprised of three aspects. First is the domestic, referring to patriarchal and generational politics. Vulnerability in the domestic domain is expressed through gender differences, access to, and control over, resources. As seen later, Moser and McIlwaine (1997a), by contrast, give more emphasis to household relations as an asset, de-emphasizing the political dimension. The second aspect of vulnerability for Watts and Bohle is work or production politics. Third is the public or civil space, or state politics. Formal political rights (enfranchisement) may be important in securing the promotion of entitlements and being granted social security through public action.

Attention to institutional structures, influencing both exposure to risk and capacity to cope, implies links to the policy environment. State policies can affect both sources of and calls on entitlements. While state intervention on the sources side is widely acknowledged, through provision of production and exchange entitlements, "state policies towards coping and adaptation may be less so. The state can reinforce or undermine strategies, by restricting migration, fining travelers without identification cards, impounding goods on the way to market, and pursuing policies to encourage sedentarization of rural producers more generally" (Davies 1996: 37).

From Vulnerability to Social Capital

To operationalize the concept of vulnerability, Moser and McIlwaine (1997a: 65) developed an asset vulnerability matrix (see Table 3). This matrix demonstrates how vulnerability can be aggravated or reduced through stocks of community, household and
individual/intra-household assets. People’s well-being depends on the amount and quality of these different resources. At the community level, one can identify elements that strengthen or weaken social capital. Moser and McIlwaine’s (1997a: 65) definition of social capital is derived from Putnam (1993): “features of social organization, such as networks, norms (of reciprocity), and trust facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit. Social capital enhances the benefits of investment in physical and human capital.” Such reciprocity exists within communities and between households based on social ties. At the household level, the matrix includes productive and material assets (such as housing, land, machinery, means of transport, and savings) and household relations (a mechanism for potential pooling of income and sharing of consumption). The central assets at the level of the individual are labour and human capital. Human capital determines one’s capacity to work and the returns on one’s labour, and can fluctuate depending on an individual’s health, skills and education. Moser and McIlwaine (1997a) extend the analysis of vulnerability and collective action to transitional socialist contexts. In their case study of Angyalfold, Hungary, they found that people had no experience of organizing together for collective action in the face of crumbled institutions led by a socialist state. They interpreted this context in terms of a lack of social capital stocks for community mobilization. At the same time, the authors did point out other forms of social capital, particularly inter-household exchanges of small loans and child care.

Table 3. Asset Vulnerability Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual assets (intra-household level):</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• labour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• human capital: health, skills and education (determining capacity to work and returns to labour)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Household assets:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• productive assets: land, livestock, housing, equipment, means of transportation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• household relations: as a mechanism for income-pooling and sharing consumption</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community assets:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• common property resources: community natural resource base (grazing area, wild plants, sources of fuelwood, fodder, water)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• social capital: reciprocity and trust within communities and between households based on social ties and drawing on social resources, reinforced through community organizations, NGOs, informal associations for savings and lending of credit, rice, labour</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Moser and McIlwaine (1997).

For Putnam, communities with a high degree of social capital are more efficient and equitable, with a greater ability to address common problems through shared trust, established
through 'horizontal associations.' Putnam's (1993) study contrasted these associations, common to northern Italy, to the more 'vertical' patron-client relations typical of southern Italy. Patron-client relations involve what Davies (1996: 37) identified as relations of subservience or dependence implying structural vulnerability for the dependents but a source of entitlement for the 'asset' holder. In Putnam’s view, the networks and organizations associated with enhanced social capital are considered to have, among other characteristics, voluntary membership, transparent decision-making, and the ability to cross class boundaries. Researchers and planners are increasingly recognizing the value of the community as “an important asset to decrease vulnerability or increase opportunity, depending on its ‘stock’ of social capital: ...the networks, norms and trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Moser and McIlwaine 1997: 65, drawing on Putnam 1993). Many so-called ‘traditional’ practices have long been considered to hinder effective development, but recent conceptualizations suggest that social capital, as a product of customary institutions, and conditioned by cultural institutions or values, can facilitate cooperation. “Across class and gender boundaries, communities rely on social capital in the form of age-old systems of resource exchange as a means of ensuring collective survival of the community” (Buenavista et al. 1994: 7). These assumptions about the mutually beneficial nature of social capital will be explored in more detail below.

In her classic study of social institutions in Africa, Berry (1989) argued that entitlements to productive resources such as land depend on social identity. Entitlements to resources frequently stem from one’s position, membership, or status in social groups—a community, lineage, marriage, collective, or patron-client relation. Berry’s (1989) research on social (or customary) institutions demonstrated the rationale for farmers’ preference for investment in social relations over direct productive investment, in order to strengthen their position in a social group. This allowed them to draw on these stores of group support in times of need. The centrality of these often kin-based social institutions as social safety nets is highlighted, Berry noted, by the definition of poverty given by local people in Ghana as being ‘without kin.’ Although Berry does not use the term, her analysis centres on social capital. This can take the form of networks for support, cooperation, forums and meetings, traditional events and ceremonies, and informal institutions including fictive kinship as a means of gaining access to resources. Social capital (through kinship, ethnic or community networks) may facilitate access to labour, information, loans, or other resources, thus constituting a form of non-tangible but productive asset that can contribute to reducing vulnerability.
But as pointed out by de Renzio and Kavanamur (1999) in their study of Papua New Guinea, studies drawing on Putnam and Coleman’s interpretations of social capital rarely emphasize the downside of this concept. Instead it is seen as having only positive consequences. By contrast, de Renzio and Kavanamur highlight the cultural constraints, obligations, nepotism, downward leveling, and other disincentives associated with the wontok system of relationships based on common language, kinship group, geographical area of origin and religious group. They also shed light on the lack of cohesion and cooperation between different social groups, contributing to a lack of capacity to reach common objectives. Their analysis points to a need for scaling up, to overcome locally confined solidarities; expanding horizontal linkages to ‘thicken’ existing relationships; rewarding initiative and volunteerism; and cross-sectoral linkages and greater dialogue to improve state-society relations. These authors identify a range of sources of social capital, from micro to macro levels. These can include the family, kinship, household, ethnicity, family business, cooperative, religious group, social movements, cross-sectoral linkages between NGOs, civil society associations, government agencies, and universities.

Renzio and Kavanamur’s analysis raises the important critique that the benefits of social capital may not be equally shared. Social capital can function as a community or an individual asset to the extent that it constitutes an element of differentiation and differential vulnerabilities. Social capital and customary institutions are mediated at the level of either the community, as in credit groups, or the family, as in inheritance. They are closely bound to the notion of moral economy. Davies (1996: 37) clarifies how moral economy elements have sometimes erroneously been considered as welfarist leveling mechanisms, or as “an informal insurance system which provides a community safety net in times of stress.” To respond to these potential confusions, Shields and Flora et al. (1996) distinguish two types of social capital: those that are built horizontally, referring to egalitarian forms of reciprocity, between people of similar socioeconomic backgrounds, and those built vertically, to which not everyone in a community or social group has equal access.

The distinctions above go some distance in providing a finer-tuned understanding of social capital—a term that has come to be applied uncritically in a wide variety of contexts. Yet, perhaps the most useful clarification to address the conceptual vagueness that generally surrounds the term is that of Woolcock and Narayan (2000). These authors distinguish between three strands of social capital: bonding, bridging and linking.
bonding social capital [refers to the] strong ties between immediate family members, neighbours, close friends, and business associates sharing similar demographic characteristics; bridging social capital [to the] weaker ties between people from different ethnic, geographical, and occupational backgrounds but with similar economic status and political influence; [and] linking social capital [to the] ties between poor people and those in positions of influence in formal organizations such as banks, agricultural extension offices, schools, housing authorities, or the police. (Woolcock 2000, emphasis added)

This interpretation of social capital helps to make sense of the different nature of social capital of poor and better-off people. Bonding social capital is often abundant among poor people. They tend to have some bridging social capital among more distant friends and acquaintances, but very little linking social capital, or ‘friends in high places’ to facilitate bureaucratic procedures for commercial, educational, legal or political purposes (Woolcock 2000). It is the lack of the latter form of social capital that enhances their vulnerability. The strategy that Woolcock advocates for NGOs, firms and government agencies is thus to “mobilize bonding social capital within communities; build more extensive bridging social capital to markets; [and] enhance linking social capital to public institutions.” These distinctions and strategies will be carried through in my analysis of decollectivization and patterns of livelihood vulnerability in Vietnam.

In addition to the distinction between types of material and non-material assets (including social capital), an important contribution of the schema of Moser and McIlwaine (1997a) outlined earlier is the authors’ attention to the multiple levels or scales of the social processes that shape vulnerability. Other analysts have conceptualized this slightly differently, establishing an ‘anatomy of poverty’ in terms of both inter-regional and inter-household poverty (e.g., Mason 1996). My analysis integrates these two approaches, examining vulnerability and differential entitlements from the intra- and inter-household levels to the levels of kinship group, ethnic group, community, region, and nation. Table 4, adapted from Dittrich (1998: 154), differentiates these levels in terms of vulnerable social groups and vulnerable spatial units. In practice, however, the two are often interrelated: vulnerability is more extreme among particular social groups within already vulnerable or disadvantaged localities.
Table 4. Spatial Dimensions and Levels of Mediation for Analysis of Vulnerability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spatial dimension:</th>
<th>Level of mediation:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Individual and intra-household</td>
<td>vulnerable social groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Inter-household, kinship and ethnic group</td>
<td>vulnerable localities and regions (spatial units)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Local community</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Regional</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• National</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Macro-regional</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Global</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Dittrich (1998).

Ethnicity, Social Capital, Land and Identity

Ethnicity, like kinship, is a binding force in social relations and an important ingredient of social capital. The Vietnamese have fought many wars to protect families and communities as much as, or more than, to protect the nation. Hettne (1996: 17) notes that the ethnicity “has a primordial or ascribed quality, but it is also true that ethnic identity is shaped by historical experiences. It is thus at the same time objective, given, and subjective, a creation.” Noting the lack of fixity of any given identity, Egwu (1998: 37) calls for a “more dynamic theory to codify various aspects of ethnicity,” that accounts for the maintenance, weakening, and renewal of ethnic boundaries. The belief in shared descent, based on ethnicity and kinship, frequently shapes patterns of exclusion and vulnerability through differential entitlements.

This ambiguous role of ethnicity has been noted in numerous studies. In his study of rural ethnicity in Nigeria, Egwu (1998: 17) observes that ethnicity and kinship “provide a more enduring basis for cushioning the impact of [structural adjustment]. The objective situation, therefore, tends to reinforce the emotional basis of ethnicity.” Yet, Egwu underlines the ambiguity in ethnic solidarity constituting both a liability as well as a basis for advancement for rural people. On the one hand, inter-ethnic conflicts can threaten development, but depending on the specific conjuncture can also be constructive for socioeconomic development, encouraging networking for mutually beneficial economic ventures such as mutual assistance for weddings, sharing of credit, and forming small cooperatives.

One dimension of my study addresses the links between land, territory and the ‘reinvention’ of ethnicity and identity. The analysis in Chapter Seven demonstrates how ethnic and kin networks are simultaneously uniting but exclusionary forces. The reformulation or renegotiation of the identity of a given social or ethnic group can serve as the basis for collective
action, sometimes lying at the base of conflicts in resource use. Ethnic differences can often explain regionally differentiated outcomes of reforms, in this case shaping who ends up with or without land. In the context of decollectivization in 'post-socialist' transformations, Kaneff (1998) notes the emergence of new ethnic-based solidarities, what she terms a 're-activation of ethnicity.' She interprets the emerging capitalist agenda of the Bulgarian state in terms of the renewed importance of land as private property, and the way in which bonds of ancestry to the land takes on real spatial boundaries through land ownership. Her analysis of rural Bulgaria shows how restitution has emphasized the relevance of kinship and ethnicity in defining who is 'native' and who does or does not have land rights. Thus, changing property rights in the Bulgarian context highlight genealogy and ancestral links and ground descent spatially and temporally. Kaneff demonstrated how, though the content of the relationship changed, kinship relations maintained an important position in both socialist and post-socialist political-economic systems. She concluded that kinship is being used in new ways, in that there is a strengthening of ties between kin and land, especially as a survival strategy (for food production) in hard economic times. In this way, the economic reforms can thus reinforce 'difference' and the strength of lineage and ethnic groups through networks of social capital. This phenomenon, with parallels to the Vietnamese situation, raises the issue of whether globalization erases or enhances differences—whether it closes or opens up new spaces for expressions of identity along ethnic and other lines.

The trend for elements of local institutional structures to shape current processes of restructuring is beginning to be recognized. “Developments in rural areas are increasingly determined by transnational processes and structures, but we also need to consider how the general/abstract are transformed into concrete local practices by the distinctiveness of local social structure and culture” (de Haan 1997: 154; emphasis in original). Many explanations of restructuring have downplayed geographical differences and “the inherited structures of society and local and sectoral characteristics” (Neil and Tykkylainen 1998a: 19). What Neil and Tykkylainen refer to as ‘the inherited structures of society’ others call path dependency. Staddon (1999: 200) observes that to draw out locally-specific outcomes, research on ‘transitional’ countries needs to consider several factors: “the importance of path dependence in actually existing transitions, the significance of local institutional negotiations, and also local adaptations to fluid political-economic contexts.” Observing the degree of path dependence in conditioning local transition in Bulgaria, Staddon (1999: 205) noted that, “One is particularly struck by the amazing perseverence of institutional arrangements associated with the collapse
of the state socialist development model into the present time, including labour markets, circuits of capital circulation and information exchange” (emphasis added).

Gendering Social Capital and Collective Action

Institutional economics, while offering some important analytical tools to study social dynamics, remains limited in not sufficiently accounting for extra-economic variables and power relations, particularly within family and gender systems (Evans 1993). The discussion below seeks to address this lacunae through linking institutions for social capital with a gender analysis. Social capital is said to enhance people’s capacity for collective action to address common problems. Analysts have been arguing for “more careful consideration of the distribution of social capital and of the kinds of social capital available to different groups in society,” including class and generational effects. In this context, Lowndes (2000: 536) makes a strong argument for paying closer heed to gender differences across and within other social categories.

A growing number of feminist analysts raise the issue of there being different, gender-specific ‘circuits’ of social capital. In this debate, “a consideration of gender dynamics throws light upon two important issues: the distribution of different types (and levels) of social capital within communities, and the nature of the link between networks of sociability and patterns of political engagement” (Lowndes 2000). Chiding that studies to date have paid disproportionate attention to male-dominated activities, Lowndes (2000: 534) noted that in Britain, more than twice as many men as women undertook voluntary work related to sports and recreation… Women, by contrast, were more active in voluntary work in the fields of health, education and social services… [M]en were more likely to occupy committee posts, while women dominated in visiting and befriending activities.

In the Philippines, Shields and Flora et al. (1996) noted that men tended to have greater roles in community politics and the cash economy. Women, on the other hand, had the main responsibility for community management, including the allocation, provisioning, and management of items of collective consumption—water, healthcare, education, garbage collection, community gardens, playground construction, and involvement in community fairs, festivals or markets.

What are the constraints to women’s involvement in formal institutions and participation in collective action? Discussing the context of institutions for environmental management in India, Agarwal (2000) identified first, women’s lack of awareness about the institutions and, second, entry rules, since membership is open to only one person per household—usually the
male head. Moreover, social norms tend to define the tasks that men and women can carry out. These expectations of gender relations and public interaction act as a form of territorial gendering of space. The collective action literature often views social norms positively, yet overlooks the role of gender ideology. Agarwal (2000: 302) writes that a gendered reading of social norms reflects the “dark side of social capital.” Norms of acceptable female behaviour—such as soft speech and deference to men—and perceptions held by males of female abilities together constrain women’s behaviour and participation within male social networks and formal meetings and lead to women’s suggestions not being heeded within groups in which men predominate. Instances of men’s reluctance to yield their ‘territorial claims’ to women might be found in the Farmer’s Association of Vietnam. Agarwal found that informal group arrangements better responded to women’s time constraints and, by offering a child-friendly atmosphere at meetings, facilitated women’s need to respond jointly to domestic and community responsibilities.

In India, since their physical mobility is more restricted than is men’s, women have a greater need to build social capital through localized networks and everyday forms of cooperation. Agarwal noted that women’s forest protection groups emerged as an extension of everyday social networking and tended to lack authority and to be sporadic and situation specific. This informal nature of women’s groups contrasted with men’s formal forest protection groups that had an authority structure linked to the state or village. Comparing the nature of collaboration in agricultural tasks, Agarwal again found striking distinctions. Women’s agricultural tasks were frequently performed cooperatively through labour exchange systems, while men’s tasks—ploughing, threshing, irrigation—were more prone to be done alone or with few other people. House construction was one male task that involved labour exchange, but it took place less frequently than the collective tasks that women carried out. These observations and circumstances might be constructively compared to those in Vietnam where women face fewer sanctions on their mobility in the public sphere, in markets, and in the cash economy. In addition to women’s informal networks created through these and other channels, women’s formal networks—or associational capacity—can be further reinforced through the Vietnam Women’s Union as a potential vehicle for collective action, albeit circumscribed within a certain mandate and political allegiance. In distinguishing gendered formal and informal networks in the quasi-domestic and public spheres, Lowndes (2000: 534) reminds us that: “Feminist political theory has long focused on what should become a central issue for the social capital debate –
that is, the relationship between the ‘small democracies’ of everyday life and the ‘big
democracy’ of political parties and organized government.”

Having reviewed debates on social capital and gendered social capital, I am concerned
about the vague use of the term social capital. Referencing Putnam, Lowndes (2000: 533) notes
that “High levels of social capital are associated with high-performing democratic institutions,
and economic success.” Yet, Agarwal and others document the existence of social capital
among the poor, arguing that women, poor households, and other such disadvantaged groups
depend on networks. What is not addressed is why, if social capital leads to
economic success, do these groups remain poor and disadvantaged? It is here where the
distinctions introduced by Woolcock—between bonding, bridging, and linking social capital—
become most relevant. What needs to be underlined is that the networks among women and the
poor (e.g., for child care or labour exchange) reflect mostly bonding social capital. This can be
contrasted with the networks of some better situated individuals, which reflect ‘higher levels’ of
(bridging and linking) social capital to facilitate their economic advancement (e.g., by granting
them information on economic opportunities).

My second concern relates to Agarwal’s discussion of gender differences in values and
motivations around social networking or social capital. Agarwal noted that factors that facilitate
collective action include trust, reciprocity, ‘density of social ties,’ and prior history of
cooperation. She further observed that “moral norms, social values of empathy, and trust play an
enabling role in enhancing cooperation and undercut the tendency to free ride” (Agarwal 2000:
295-6). Agarwal then turns to the identification of gender-specific aspects of cooperation,
complementarity, coexistence, competition and conflict. In her analysis of forms of women’s
involvement in environmental action, she observed greater cooperation among women. Such
cooperation, for Agarwal, can be linked to the dependence of Indian women on social
relationships with other women; their informal social networks are crucial.

Agarwal takes her observation on the distinct character of men’s and women’s support
networks a step further. Noting that in India women’s networking more often crosses class
divisions than do men’s, Agarwal (2000: 295) draws the controversial conclusion that the lower
degree of divisiveness among women’s groups and “the greater permeability of women’s
networks across class lines, make… for better prospects for group action among women.”
Women are thus portrayed as better at conflict resolution and group functioning due to their
everyday strategies and group interaction with other women and their fear of sanctions and
isolation if excluded from the group. Having fewer 'exit options' makes women less prone to free-riding and more inclined to cooperation.

Rather than idealizing cooperation among women as part of women's essential 'nature,' Agarwal's analysis situates the character of women's networks for collective action within a context of women's conditions and positions in the social and economic hierarchy. Yet, what seems to be insufficiently addressed in this analysis is the extent of vertical social capital within women's networks. Are women in India really less connected than men to local power structures, as Agarwal suggests? Does this lack of connection increase cooperation among women? These are questions that call for further empirical and comparative study.

Despite the challenges posed by gender ideology, Agarwal remains optimistic: "these constraints are not immutable and much depends on building up women's bargaining power vis-à-vis the State, the community and the family" (Agarwal 2000: 304). She asserts that to change rules, norms and perceptions, to enhance group strength and have women's interests be expressed and heard, a critical mass must be achieved. Agarwal wonders whether women's informal (forest protection) groups could be formalized and empowered with the authority that men's groups have. She warns that neglecting gender can negatively affect analysis and policy on collective action. Losing opportunities to promote collective action among women and keeping women out of decision-making bodies, such as community resource management institutions, can lead to inefficiencies of many kinds: "rule enforcement problems, information flow imperfections, inaccurate assessments of resource depletion, problems in catching transgressors, unsatisfactory conflict resolution, non-incorporation of women's specific knowledge of species, and non-recognition of gender differences in tree-species preferences" (Agarwal 2000: 305). These factors can affect short- and long-term institutional and environmental sustainability.

A further issue that has received little attention thus far in debates over social capital is the methodological implications. Lowndes (2000: 536) offers the suggestion that "Despite its association to date with game theory and abstract modeling, the social capital debate could make more use of qualitative case studies and individual 'life histories.'" I hope my analysis will go some distance in this direction.

**Gender, Property, and Land Rights**

"Economic analysis and policies concerning women have long been preoccupied with employment, to the neglect of a crucial determinant of women's situation, namely, the gender
In part as a contribution to emerging feminist geographies, a key objective of this dissertation is to demonstrate the gendering of institutions and to understand how shifts in institutional structures shape new patterns of access to, and exchange of, land. Land is a special form of property, linking economic, cultural, political, and legal dimensions of social life. Property relations often provide the foundations of identity formation (Hann 1998). What is often overlooked is the gendered nature of such property relations and the different relationship women have to property—fundamentally shaped by kinship systems. Compared to men, women’s entitlements are embedded to a far greater degree in family and kinship structures. Patrilocal residence patterns after marriage greatly determine the possibility for women’s asset accumulation in the form of land (Kabeer 1989: 9, cited in Jackson 1996). Commenting on the complexities of measuring gendered poverty, Jackson (1996: 496) observed that poverty is defined commonly in terms of household assets and resource access, land and livestock, for example, but since patriliney is extremely common, women have widely different property relations to men. Thus land ownership is seldom as defining of women’s socioeconomic position as it may be of men’s.

Feminists have pointed out the considerable problems raised by defining a woman’s class position in terms of that of her husband or her father (Agarwal 1994b: 7). Her class position is more open to change than that of her husband, and this can vary dramatically upon marriage, divorce, or becoming widowed. Secondly, women often do not own property themselves. Finally, issues such as risk of domestic violence and responsibilities for domestic tasks and childcare cut across class boundaries. These observations call into question land reforms and related approaches to poverty that emphasize the transfer of assets to the poor but overlook gender differences. They “raise the question of whether the same policies to strengthen the position of poor men can have the same impact on poor women” (Razavi 1998: ii). Razavi thus clarified that “the gender analysis of poverty is not so much about whether women suffer more from poverty than men, but rather about how gender differentiates the social processes leading to poverty, and the escape routes out of destitution” (1998: ii).

Commenting on the historical process of land enclosure in Britain and its implications for household formation, Li argued that the enclosure of fields in practice enclosed individuals within the household, provoking a reworking of gender and generational relations:

According to Humphries (1990), prior to land enclosure women made substantial contributions to the conjugal economy through grazing and gathering activities on the village commons. Land privatization increased women’s dependence upon a
husband’s wages, and therefore disciplined women and subjected them to male authority. (Li 1996: 262)

Policies in socialist and capitalist countries alike have been equally implicated in neglecting the importance of women’s rights to land. For communist parties, addressing the issue of access to land from a gender perspective was considered potentially divisive within the overall objective of uniting proletarian interests against large landowners.

In societies which underwent socialist revolutions, while private property ownership was legally abolished, control over wealth generating property remained mainly with men; any positive effects on gender relations that could have stemmed from the change in ownership, if accompanied by gender-egalitarian mechanisms of control, thus went unrealized. (Agarwal 1994b: 7)

Communist parties reproduced the notion of ‘peasant’ as a male category, again erecting blinders to an examination of how women’s access to land was generally mediated by men (Agarwal 1994a), be it their husband or leaders of work brigades, communes, and other levels of administration. Moreover, in the absence of well-defined policy, women’s labour intensified under socialist policies in many countries, thereby subsidizing economic development (Croll 1981).

Factors perpetuating gender inequities in command over property can be social, administrative, and ideological (Agarwal 1994b), reflecting the need for change on each of these levels. Assumptions relating to women’s capabilities, needs, and roles can prevent the implementation of progressive laws. Ideologies can be shaped and controlled by multiple forms of media, education, and religious establishments (Agarwal 1994b: 7). Despite progressive gender-sensitive laws for land reform in South Africa, for instance, implementation faltered. This was due to the lack of guidelines on how to ensure that women are not marginalized in the land reform processes... Lack of policy direction and training – as well as trainers – is aggravated by low levels of sensitivity to gender dynamics among officials, all of which weakens capacity to fulfil the gender goals of the land reform programme. ...Moreover, the climate on the ground may be hostile to well-intentioned interventions. (Walker 1998: ii)

Gender ideology and power relations constrain opportunities for men and women and shape differential entitlements to property. The value of an entitlements approach for an analysis of gender and poverty is captured well by Kabeer:

By encompassing both the outcomes of deprivation as well as their underlying causes, such an approach draws attention to issues of equity and justice as well as to basic needs and welfare. It takes us beyond an economistic focus on ownership and exchange to socially constructed definitions of who is entitled to what and on what
basis... it also shifts attention away from a static view of poverty – poverty as an end-state – to a more dynamic concern with the processes of exclusion, inclusion and marginalisation which are set in motion by shifts in the configuration of entitlement relationships within which people define goals and devise strategies and which place some groups of people at an entitlement disadvantage in relation to others. (Kabeer 1997: 4)

My analysis interprets new land relations and property rights regimes emerging in the context of decollectivization in terms of the interplay of diverse forms of formal and informal institutions: state policy, market dynamics, and gender, household, and kinship relations. Elements of ethnicity, community, and migration and settlement history further play a role in explaining new vulnerabilities. In this analysis, gender is seen as culturally, historically, and geographically embedded at various scales of analysis. Gender inequalities can manifest both within the family-household, ethnic group, and community, in market relations, and in the application of state policy. As demonstrated in Chapter Five, men can also be disadvantaged by particular constitutions of kinship relations (such as being sons of second wives), highlighting the relevance of studies of masculinities within gender analyses. Gender and development analyses often consider women’s roles within the household, but they less frequently take into account broader kinship relations as an important context in which gender relations are situated:

By and large, while looking at the situation of women either at the macro level or at the micro level, feminists have not shown a clear realization of the significance of varying patterns of kinship for understanding gender relations and explaining disparities, inabilities, and exploitation. Even in the discussion of the family as the seat of oppression, the wider context of kinship has not been considered. The term patriarchy, which has been used rather indiscriminately, does not generally indicate any relationship to specific kinds of kinship organization. (Dube 1997: 159, n.1)

Too few feminist analyses challenge the assumption of “universal, cross-cultural and ahistorical female disadvantage... [and] thereby both ignore specific areas of male disadvantage and miss the insights that follow from examining the spaces in which women are not disadvantaged” (Jackson and Palmer-Jones 1998: 27). Addressing the complex gender and poverty interlinkages without resorting to over-simplifications calls for a careful and differentiated analysis of vulnerability among particular social groups, and particular kinship systems. Rather than talking of patriarchy in an overly generalized sense, Dube (1997) points to how the structural and cultural components of specific kinship systems are comprised of complex institutions. She identifies three main types of kinship systems: patrilineal, matrilineal, and bilateral—in which both parents are relevant for determining kinship and claiming rights to resources.
Dube (1997) suggests that the neglect of kinship in gender analyses may be due to the assumption that kinship is deemed irrelevant or immutable. Yet, kinship exerts strong forces in determining the allocation of resources, production relations or gender ideologies. Gendered subjects are actors in maintaining and reproducing social systems. Kinship systems are not rooted in nature but constructed. They shape notions of men’s and women’s capabilities and entitlements and also shape how gender roles are conceived and practiced. Kinship is further linked to religious beliefs, social norms, economic systems of production, and the political sphere. This conceptualization of kinship and gender thus considers both material and ideological aspects as interlinked.

Compared to patrilineal patterns, bilateral inheritance patterns in Southeast Asia and parts of India are associated with greater autonomy, freedom of movement and public interaction of women, plus increased social independence and relative equality in marital relations. They are known for their active roles in income-generating activities, particularly in small trading of agricultural produce, food items, and other goods, in both urban and rural areas. Southeast Asian women are said to have good business acumen, frequently owning and managing micro-enterprises. Their dominant presence in the economy is also related to their significant role in decision-making and control over the budget within the household. Dube (1997: 47) associates Southeast Asian women’s active engagement in income-earning activities with “their freedom of association, their ability to migrate (often leaving children behind), the support of their kin, their hold over resources, and their rights over space.” However, such patterns retain a number of characteristics of gender inequality (Agarwal 1994b):

- they do not imply a more equal gender division of labour, particularly with respect to domestic work and child care so often considered the domain of women
- they are not associated with women having sexual mores equivalent to men’s
- customary institutions with juridical power were controlled by men, and
- the managerial authority over land in societies of matrilineal and bilateral kinship tend to remain in the hands of men, in their positions as husbands, fathers, and brothers of women

Agarwal found that in systems of matrilineal inheritance, there was a greater divergence by gender between property ownership and its control to the extent that women owned property, but men effectively controlled it. By contrast, in patrilineal systems there was greater convergence, with men owning and controlling property. In other words, land ownership rights confer significant benefits on women, but women frequently continue to be excluded from the
management or control of the land they own, and from the institutions of public authority to defend these rights. Thus,

the arenas of contestation over effective land-rights for women will therefore need to extend much beyond the courtyards of the household to encompass complex institutions of community and state—the arenas where legal, social and political rules are made and unmade. (Agarwal 1994b: 28; emphasis in original)

In interpreting kinship and gender relations, residence after marriage is a key consideration. Residence can be differentiated in terms of patri-virilocal, matrilocal, uxorilocal and neolocal patterns, and endogamous vs. exogamous marriage (marriage between two people within the same or different villages). Residence patterns can have significant implications for women’s accumulation of land assets and intra-household bargaining power and autonomy. “Residence is a material as well as an ideological expression of principles of kinship... Although the nature of the control that is exercised over women varied with household composition, the ideology of patrilineal, patri-virilocal residence governs a woman’s life” (Dube 1997: 93), thereby subjecting women more than men to particular gendered vulnerabilities. In cases of patri-virilocal and exogamous residence (in which a woman moves into a new village upon marriage), women are unable to inherit land and can only inherit mobile assets or must sell or cede land to male relatives upon moving out of the village. In addition, married women in patri-virilocal residence in a new village generally have less intra-household bargaining power than do women living in their natal communities. In contrast, in bilateral systems and instances of village endogamy, women retain and utilize social networks with their relatives and residence is more flexible.

Linking kinship and residence patterns with women’s bargaining power, Ireson (1996: 231) observed that “Lao women exercising more intra-household power are often those living in their natal communities, and old women in established and prosperous families.” In contrast, Khmu women in a patri-virilocal system are “hampered by their weak position as in-marrying spouses.” Links can further be established between matrilocality and the education of girls:

Ethnic Lao girls [in matrilocal residence] have been more likely than girls of other ethnic groups to take advantage of available schooling, while few Hmong girls do so [in patrilocal residence]. The schooling of Khmu and Hmong girls is of low priority for families because (1) unmarried girls are valuable labourers and (2) any investment in a girl’s education is lost to her natal household since her labor and education benefit her husband’s family, not her natal family. Educational investment in girls would only pay off if educational costs could be recouped in an increased bride price. So far, education does not seem to enter bride price negotiations, and bride prices have

---

12 See glossary for definitions of these terms.
reportedly been declining under pressure from local government, particularly during the socialist period. (Ireson 1996: 228)

Land rights for women—a critical aspect for addressing poverty as well as unequal gender relations—often tend to go unacknowledged. Shortall (1999) argues that in processes of formalizing land rights in many countries, the state tends to uphold men’s customary access to land. Moreover, neoclassical economic models have tended to offer little analysis of gender-differentiated rights to property and “virtually no attempt to examine the way in which gender relations shape and are shaped by the institutional environment” (Evans 1993: 25). Evans explains the rationale for this within neoclassical economics as follows:

The fact that it is women with fewer claims to resources or rights to excludable property is... immaterial. What matters is the way in which an individual with a given set of endowments behaves within the sphere of exchange. (Evans 1993: 25, emphasis in original)

Thus no questions are raised about why some individuals from the outset have a different given set of endowments. Addressing this calls for an analysis of systematic gender-differentiated asymmetries in bargaining power, linked to an understanding of the institutional environment, part of which is shaped by ideology.

The acknowledgement of land rights for women could spur shifts in multiple domains—in the household, community, market, and at various levels of government—as Agarwal’s (1994) work in South Asia has forcefully demonstrated. Agarwal (1994a) identified three primary arguments for women to have land rights that are distinct from the rights of their husband or household. First, the welfare argument underlines how land serves as security against poverty. Direct access to land and other productive assets—not merely access mediated through a husband or other male family members—can significantly decrease a woman’s risk of poverty and influence the well-being of her children. As emphasized above in reference to residence patterns, land can further be used as a bargaining tool in both family and outside institutions. This last point highlights the relevance of collective actions and social networks among women. Second, the efficiency argument argues that land rights can make women more economically productive by facilitating their access to credit, technology, and information. Ignoring women in agricultural research and technology development, Jiggins (1986) suggests, can restrict agricultural output and welfare to below its potential. Beneficial environmental consequences can further result from women obtaining land rights and gaining greater determination over land use. Agarwal (1994a: 37) posits that, depending on the local division of labour for tasks of fuelwood and fodder collection, women may choose to favour planting trees
for these purposes rather than other crops that could be more damaging to the soil. Third, the equity and empowerment argument shows how acquiring land is central not only for improving a woman's economic circumstances in absolute terms but also for negotiating more equitable relations with men. For example, a woman is less likely to be thrown out of her house if she owns the land that her household depends upon. In this way, empowerment within the household is linked to economic equality. Having her own recognized rights to land could stand a woman in better stead for bargaining with employers, given that she has a stronger fall-back position, with land serving as a social safety net.

Development policies or programs often draw upon justifications of efficiency on the implicit premise that women constitute an underutilized human resource. Policies deriving from such an approach have thus tended to add to demands on women in order to increase the efficiency or effectiveness of a program. An instrumentalist argument—that agricultural production will be improved by increasing women's participation—bypasses addressing gender inequalities. But while the efficiency argument contains implicit ideological dilemmas for those whose primary concerns are equity and empowerment, the strategic merits of exploiting this motivation should not be overlooked. Critics of the efficiency argument may not recognize the potential of meeting dual objectives through policies emerging from this line of 'efficiency' thinking. These contradictions can be used to strategically push forward a feminist development agenda.

Entitlements to land can be mediated by various institutions. These may be market-based, institutions based on the formal legal system (or state allocations), or institutions beyond the market and legal system, such as kinship networks, customary law, social conventions, and norms (Leach et al. 1999). An example of the latter could be land rights derived from common property owned by a clan or village. Institutions beyond the market and legal system were not originally part of Amartya Sen's formulation of entitlements theory. Their inclusion has been an important amendment of feminist analyses (Jackson 1998: 73). The case study in Chapter Five concentrates on inheritance and kinship-mediated arrangements that influence gendered entitlements to land.

Distinctions between concepts of land access, land rights, and control over land are often unclear. Having access to land, either through use-rights or informal concessions granted by acquaintances, is not equivalent to holding land rights. Access to land refers to the ability to make use of it without necessarily owning it. Rights to land—legally and socially recognized and enforceable by an external legitimated authority—can be based on formal or customary
Agarwal highlights not only who owns land but also who controls it, since ownership does not guarantee control. Control of resources refers to command or decision-making over the resource and the benefits that derive from it. Agarwal further points out the tendency to equate property rights merely with legal rights, and the need to recognize the divergence between a woman's legal right and the social recognition of it. She underlines the persistent gap between women's legal rights (through state laws on inheritance or divorce) and their actual ownership of land—the gap between *de jure* and *de facto* rights. These issues will be revisited in the analysis in Chapter Five.

**Post-socialist Agricultural and Property Rights Restructuring**

Although little recognized, all socialist economies entailed some degree of market activity, reflecting a symbiosis of public and private systems (Ray 1996: 9). Despite attempts to limit or abolish them, private plots remained on state farms and collectives in the USSR, China, Vietnam, and elsewhere. In Poland, where 89 percent of agriculture remained privately owned, the average landholding was five hectares, compared to 5,000 in the Soviet Union. Since the New Economic Policy in the 1920s in the USSR, increasing the scope for market allocation was a convenient channel available to compensate for problems in the command economy. Yugoslavia experimented with a model of self-management and state co-ordination but with extensive markets and competition between worker cooperatives. In the Hungarian New Economic Mechanism that was introduced briefly in 1968, the state retained control of capital goods, distribution, infrastructure and agriculture, but allowed the parallel development of a market economy (Ray 1996: 121-123). To visually capture these symbioses in past and current periods, Varis (1998) diagrammed the articulation of three modes of production over time: the 'logic of socialism' (collective production), everyday self-sufficiency (household economy), and the new market economy (see Figure 2).
A more detailed matrix of the trade-offs of alternative policy stances vis-à-vis the roles of state and peasantry, as elaborated by Post and Wright (1989), is presented in Table 5. In describing the changing relation between peasants and the socialist state in Poland, Kocik (1996) talks of a shift from ‘repressive tolerance’ to ‘oppressive freedom.’ *Repressive tolerance* refers to elements of political and administrative repression of peasant agriculture and attempts to subordinate this sector to the state-directed economy. Yet, especially in situations of food shortage, peasant agriculture was tolerated because it constituted a primary source of agricultural produce. *Oppressive freedom*, by contrast, reflects the situation in which new economic pressures and competition arise despite political and administrative pressures having been removed. Parallels can be drawn between Vietnam and Poland in Kocik’s (1996) observation that the prospects for private farming improved as the food situation deteriorated. Given the ideology of egalitarianism, however, tolerance was limited, and private farming and landholdings were restricted. Systems of distribution were state-controlled and prices fixed. Noting that “Individual farmers were the only major group maintaining a relatively independent economic base in the communist system” (Kocik 1996: 118), Kocik points out the paradox that peasants were the greatest opposition to the state in the collective period, but in the transition to the market, they suffered the most, as they had no state safety net (as workers did) to protect them... [Therefore] the most important and largest group of private owners in the communist economy, in which family farming was treated as a residue of a market economy, has become one of the most important forces calling for state intervention within the market economy game. (Kocik 1996: 126)
Table 5. A Trade-off Matrix of Alternative Policy Stances for Addressing Underdevelopment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Performance Criteria</th>
<th>Producer power</th>
<th>Consumer power</th>
<th>Quantity of products</th>
<th>Availability of products</th>
<th>Quality of products</th>
<th>Full employment</th>
<th>Income inequality</th>
<th>Regional inequality</th>
<th>Autonomous civil society</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Policy Stance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative allocation</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Market allocation</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rapid industrialization</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collectivized agriculture</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peasant agriculture</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closed economy</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open economy</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanguard party</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Eastern Europe and Russia have tended to experience more dire social and economic consequences of their restructuring programs. Kornai’s recipe for democratization, privatization, decentralization, and price liberalization—in the form of ‘shock therapy’—took insufficient account of the social dimensions of privatization. Following decollectivization in Russia, Hungary, and Bulgaria, for example, the agricultural sector became dichotomized between a decapitalized subsistence agriculture and a nominally privatized but relatively unchanged large-scale sector of farms, often owned by their former managers (Szelenyi 1998). On the other hand, in its process of re-peasantization, Vietnam seems to have been too poor to permit such a dualism of organizational forms to emerge. It thus enjoyed the ‘advantages of backwardness’ and retrospect policy-making.

In ‘transitional’ economies, changes have often taken place more rapidly in agriculture than in other sectors (Neil and Tykkylainen 1998b). Even so, the inter-country variations in outcomes of decollectivization and post-socialist land restructuring have been significant (see Table 6). Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Slovak Republic, Romania, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania adopted policies of direct land restitution to former owners. In Bulgaria’s land restitution, to determine land allocation and land rights, less emphasis was given to who works the land than to ancestral claims, to the exclusion of ‘new’ (post-1944) immigrants (Kaneff 1998). Some other
countries followed an indirect restitution, with compensation paid for lost land. In Hungary, vouchers for auctions were issued, enabling one to purchase land. Other countries undertook more egalitarian allocations of land formerly under state farm or collective management.

Three elements appear to distinguish the agrarian sectors from one another in different contexts: scale of operational unit, pace of reforms, and form of property rights. Each country sought to balance these factors with social equity and degree of protectionism and intervention, versus the reign of the free market. As shown in Table 6, in some states (e.g., Latvia and Slovenia), nearly all land is now privately managed in small-holdings, while in others (e.g., Slovak Republic, Belarus, Russia, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) a large percent of land remains under the administration of large-scale state farms and collectives. Table 7 demonstrates the shifts through the 1990s in average size for various farm types—collective/cooperative, state, new corporate, and individual—in a number of Central and Eastern European and former Soviet republics (OECD 1999). As can be seen, the reforms in organizational structure of agricultural production have been much more dramatic in some countries than in others.
Table 6. Characteristics of Agricultural Decollectivization and Distribution of Farm Land in Central and Eastern Europe and Former Soviet Republics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Restitution?</th>
<th>Land ownership type</th>
<th>Transferability of use rights?</th>
<th>Collective/ cooperative farms (%)</th>
<th>State farms (%)</th>
<th>New corporate farms (%)</th>
<th>Individual farms (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>CEECS:</strong>*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Albania</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>priv. yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>74 -</td>
<td>22 20</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4 80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>priv. yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>58 42</td>
<td>29 6</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>13 52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>priv. yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>61 43</td>
<td>38 2</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>0 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovak Republic</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>priv. yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>69 60</td>
<td>26 15</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>5 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>no&lt;sup&gt;2&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>priv. yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>80 28</td>
<td>14 4</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6 54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>no&lt;sup&gt;1&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>priv. yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>4 3</td>
<td>19 7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>77 82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>priv. yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>59 12</td>
<td>29 21</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>12 67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estonia</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>priv. yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>57 -</td>
<td>37 -</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>6 63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latvia</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>priv. yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>54 -</td>
<td>41 1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5 95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithuania</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>priv. yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>61 -</td>
<td>30 -</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>9 67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovenia</td>
<td>no&lt;sup&gt;1&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>priv. yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>8 4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>92 96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Croatia</td>
<td>no&lt;sup&gt;1&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>priv. yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>22 18</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>78 82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ave. CEEES</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>26 65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NIS:</strong>**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armenia</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>priv. yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>priv. yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ukraine</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>priv. yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moldova</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>priv. yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belarus</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>priv. yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>priv. yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyrgyzstan</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>publ. yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kazakhstan</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>priv. yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Azerbajian</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>priv. yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tajikistan</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>publ. no</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uzbekistan</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>publ. no</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkmenistan</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>priv. no</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ave. NIS</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Central and Eastern European Countries
**Newly Independent States

1 Poland and Yugoslavia had predominantly private ownership prior to 1990.
2 In Hungary vouchers were issued in place of restitution of historic boundaries.
3 Private ownership is limited to household plots only, with land for commercial farming state-owned.

Decollectivization in different countries brought about curious paradoxes in the reconstitution of relations between state and private sector. It was politically popular in Vietnam, China, Bulgaria,13 and some other countries. By contrast, in Russia, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, peasants were not enthusiastic about privatization of farm land, and collective forms of ownership were maintained. In Estonia, when a new Farm Law posed threats to holders of private plots (allocated in the period of collective production) in the face of former owners' attempts to reclaim their lands, plot holders allied with state and collective farm leaders to resist the process (Abrahams 1996). These examples reflect contrasts in experiences of post-socialist reforms and attitudes among farmers toward private farming or land allocation. People are often more willing to cooperate if they are not forced to do so. This discussion points

---

13 In Bulgaria, in contrast to the popularity of privatization of land, the privatization of industrial enterprises was
to the relevance of considering local specificity in theories of the multiple paths in emerging trajectories in market socialist ‘transformations.’ In line with this perspective, Burawoy and Verdery (1999) argue against the concept of ‘transition,’ which is teleological, and instead prefer ‘transformation,’ which implies less linear a shift. Although I occasionally fall back on using the notion of ‘transitional’ economies or countries, I acknowledge the problematic nature of this term.

Neil and Tykkylainen (1998b: 313) identify a number of key factors influencing development in resource communities within societies experiencing major socio-economic transformation in the 1990s. Among them are restructuring of the private sector, in accordance with market ideology and economic deregulation; promotion of innovation and technical improvements; changing local economic policies towards new patterns of competition between localities; and sectoral shifts in the economy. One key process is privatization, particularly in ‘transitional’ countries. These processes of privatization and titling of land reflect a worldwide trend linked to market liberalization for promoting economic growth. These global processes of structural adjustment and neoliberal reforms have common patterns. Parallels can be drawn not only amongst ‘transitional’ socialist economies, but also with trends in Mexico, for example, through its 1992 constitutional amendments that permitted the sale of communal ejido lands—a legacy of Mexican Revolution and subsequent governments of the early 20th century. Although they have rarely been compared, the watershed reforms in Mexico and Vietnam reflect a common rationale that (quasi-)private land rights were a prerequisite for long-term investment and development of land markets. These processes of quasi-privatization and ‘titling’ (although full land title was not granted in Vietnam) created a similar release from agriculture of a growing number of un- or under-employed people to seek work in other sectors.

The withdrawal of state-owned enterprises and government supports from the countryside—a characteristic of neoliberal reforms—forced rural producers in Mexico to privately seek out credit and restructure their production activities (Snyder 1998). Processes of economic liberalization and the dismantling of state supports (e.g., agricultural extension services and subsidized credit) went further in Mexico, whereas in Vietnam some of these supports are just now being constructed. Reforms in both countries created pressures on peasants to make production choices individually. Vietnam’s integration into the Association of

14 My use of the term neoliberal is in the sense of an economic ideology (linked to the rationale for a ‘free market’), not in the sense of an economic model deemed to be free from social embeddedness.
Southeast Asian Nations and potential integration into the World Trade Organization—like Mexico’s joining the North American Free Trade Agreement and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade—have both propelled those farmers remaining in the agricultural sector to develop new strategies to compete in international market settings. But whereas ejidos in Mexico were created for social and political goals, it is as yet unclear whether this form of institution can be converted to meet the objectives of economic efficiency (Snyder 1998).

The evolutionary theory of land rights is the dominant framework used by economists to explain land tenure and property rights transformation in developing countries and to guide policy interventions. This theory posits that increasing population pressure on the land base, together with marketization of the economy, will combine to create pressure for privatization of property rights, to which states may respond. Figure 3 presents a summary of the evolutionary theory of land rights, which underpins the neoliberal approach to providing secure property rights through issuing individual land titles. The issuing of land titles is assumed to lead to four key outcomes (seen on the right side of the diagram): social peace and stability, positive effects on government budgets, rapid capital accumulation in agriculture, and efficient resource allocation (Platteau 1996). Without adequate property rights, so the theory goes, ‘common pool’ problems result, with resources being depleted for lack of constraints on their use. Property rights thus represent the institutional dimension of environmental sustainability: people interact with their environment through property rights regimes—embedded in socio-cultural, economic, and political contexts—that offer incentives and disincentives for resource use.
Figure 3. Evolutionary Theory of Land Rights

- **Rapid population growth and increased commercialization of agriculture**
- **Increasing land scarcity and growing land values**
- **Increasing uncertainty about land rights: (costly) strategic moves to claim new lands or to protect customary access**
- **Multiplication of land disputes and rising search or litigation costs**
- **Growing demand for (more specific and more secure) property rights in land**

**Supply of land titling or registration by the state**

- **Enhanced land security**
- **Reduced public expenditure on court litigation**
- **Provision of a land tax revenue base**
- **Social peace and stability**

- **Lower transaction costs in land transfers due to reduced ambiguity in property rights**
- **Efficient cropping choices**
  - Increasing willingness to invest in agriculture
- **Reallocation of land from less to more dynamic agents**
  - Consolidation of holdings
- **Development of a rural credit market**
- **Improved ability to invest in agriculture**
- **Efficient resource allocation**
  - Rapid capital accumulation in agriculture

**Accelerated development of a land market**

**Source: Platteau (1996: 35).**
Privatization of property rights to land implies doing away with customary institutions for land management and regulation. However, evidence from Africa in particular suggests that the establishment of private property rights in many parts of the continent may have been misguided. Whereas most ‘Western’ societies considered the introduction of private land rights through state legislation to be a natural progression for development, in many non-Western locales saw it as a process of alienation (de Bruijn 1997: 69). This position echoes that of Bromley (1991: 10): “The real and lasting ‘tragedy of the commons’ is the gradual breakdown of institutional arrangements in the newly independent nation states of the tropics.” A growing number of analysts suggest that informal, community-level mechanisms that strengthen local capacities for management offer more appropriate solutions than individual titling. In this regard, Platteau (1996: 75) notes a qualification: “Emphasizing a crucial role for village communities is not to fall into the snare of romanticism, but is rather a pragmatic attitude grounded in a realistic assessment of Sub-Saharan Africa’s present predicament.” Platteau concludes that formal registration procedures should be considered only when informal institutions for land rights management can no longer adequately perform their task.

International agencies such as the World Bank have begun to pay heed, at least in their discourse, to such calls for flexibility and adaptation of land policy interventions to local conditions:

> It is now recognized that formal title, under conditions of low population density, is not necessarily the most cost-effective and desirable way to ensure secure tenure and facilitate land transfers. One alternative is to award property rights to communities, which then decide on the most suitable tenure arrangements. This system not only should reduce transaction costs but also should allow a more flexible evolution of the structure of property rights while at the same time restoring some of the traditional social functions of land through secondary common property uses. (Deininger and Binswanger 1999: 269)

Building on this discussion, the adequacy of assigning quasi-private property rights to agricultural and forest land in Vietnam, particularly for some ethnic minority groups, will be considered in Chapters Six and Seven.

**The Doi Moi Reforms in Vietnam**

Decollectivization in Vietnam is bringing about new, and sometimes rekindled, forms of organization and property rights. The transformations reflect new institutional forms, new constellations of rural governance, and new state formations. It is now recognized that so-called

---

15 See Platteau (1996) for a summary.
planned economy systems suffered from limited incentives for developing management skills, maintaining quality control, facilitating product development and finance (Rondinelli and Litvack 1999). Given the 'soft budget' accounting, costs of production were not kept within reasonable limits, and the labour force was not always employed effectively and productively. All of these factors represented obstacles to economic growth.

As explained above, a key focus of the efforts of many development agencies in recent years has been 'institution building for development' to help ensure that the benefits of economic growth are shared among a population. Attention is thus being increasingly focused on the identification and strengthening of institutions to facilitate poverty reduction, social protection, human resource development, social service delivery, employment creation, and an environment for private sector development (Rondinelli and Litvack 1999). In transition economies, however, institutional strengthening is particularly challenged by the lack of institutions to support market transactions and protect ownership rights under a central planning framework (Rondinelli and Litvack 1999: 2). Efforts at institution building have emphasized the complementarity of roles of the private and public sectors, the strengthening of government capacity and a decentralizing of decision-making, along with reworking the incentive structures for investment and production. While these factors are important across Vietnam's economy as a whole, they are especially central in rural areas and particularly in the agricultural sector, in which the majority of the country's population is employed. The restructuring of institutions for agricultural production is the focus of the next chapter.

Institution building priorities reflect the 'post-Washington consensus,' a position associated with Joseph Stiglitz's role in the World Bank in the mid- to late-1990s. This position emphasizes the complementarity rather than antagonism between the roles of state and market. For many years, conventional economic thought held that economic growth would be dampened by policies that reduced income inequality. However, evidence from the East Asian 'miracle' economies provoked a re-examination of this thesis. This led to an increasing acknowledgement by the Inter-American Development Bank (e.g., Carter and Coles 1998), among other agencies, of the need for and possibility of 'inequality-reducing growth strategies,' particularly in agriculture.

Since the 1980s, Vietnam's agricultural sector has faced a number of internal and external challenges, from stagnation in productivity, to a de facto land allocation and breakdown of collective management structures, to declining foreign aid from the Soviet Union. Collectively, these circumstances propelled policy-makers to address the question of how to
develop a property rights regime and an adequate institutional structure to support the transition to, and development of, a market economy. The resulting property rights regime and quasi-privatization of land are central elements of the Vietnamese rural reforms. They provoked a host of other changes in rural social life as well, as detailed in the following chapters.

The scale and pace of the economic reorientation and structural adjustment through *doi moi* have been impressive, as have growth rates. The GDP grew at an average of 7.5 percent between 1995 and 1999 (MOLISA 1999). A sketch of the emerging trajectories of development reflected in *doi moi* economic restructuring is presented in Table 8. While generally considered to follow a path of gradualism, the period of reforms around 1989 have been labeled as shock therapy (Jansen 1997: 7). Yet, Vietnamese policy-making has also been described as “cautious and pragmatic” (Fforde and Luong 1996). Complementing Table 8, a summary of the key elements of economic restructuring is provided below, drawing on a number of sources (Wiens 1998: 61-62; Jansen 1997; Than and Tan 1993; Vu Tuan Anh 2000). Part of the *doi moi* reforms included the liberalization of a series of internal trade barriers and decentralization of state economic management. As a consequence, private trade and production boomed. Administrative measures and controls were replaced with economic ones, especially the use of market-oriented monetary policies to control inflation. State-administered price controls were abandoned, subsidies to food supplies phased out, and the exchange rate floated, exposing the agricultural sector to fluctuations in prices on the world market. As detailed later, the adoption of new agricultural policies allowed for long-term usufruct rights and greater independence in marketing products. Outward-oriented foreign economic relations were adopted, as was a legal framework to encourage foreign investment and private sector development. The private sector came to be seen as a key engine of economic growth (although in practice it has faced many obstacles). The state bank was partitioned into sectoral banks, with the Bank of Agriculture offering credit to not only state enterprises and collectives but also to farm households.
Table 8. New Trajectories of Development through *doi moi*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1960s – early 1980s</th>
<th>Late 1980s – present</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Collectivization and central planning</strong></td>
<td><strong>Doi moi and increased marketization of economy</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Command economy</td>
<td>Increasing neoliberal agenda: ‘Market economy with socialist orientation’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Emphasis on local people’s participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social goals: egalitarianism, progressive redistribution and social justice; historical socialist ideology</td>
<td>Social goals: privatized consumption; entrepreneurial discourse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Only marginalized groups targeted for poverty reduction programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral and ideological incentives</td>
<td>Entrepreneurial, private profit incentives; lifting of stigma on individual enrichment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centralized, top-down planning; little feedback on forms of management</td>
<td>Decentralization, greater local management autonomy (now <em>de jure</em> but <em>de facto</em> since long before)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increasingly larger-scale production</td>
<td>Downsizing; a plurality of organizational and management forms; household-scale farm and non-farm enterprises encouraged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State intervention; soft-budget; subsidies</td>
<td>Performance-driven; greater accountability in economic management, move away from soft-budgets and subsidies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic modernization based on public investment; centralized service delivery authorities</td>
<td>Wide variety of service providers: state, international agencies and NGOs, mass organizations, state extension service, new cooperatives, informal producer groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotion of full employment</td>
<td>Emergence of unemployment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State and collectives as main employers</td>
<td>Wage labour market and private production</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autarky and self-reliance</td>
<td>Promotion of trade and investment links with international economy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Compiled by author.

Public sector employment, including the army, was reduced significantly. The state sector (both government agencies and state-owned enterprises) laid off 1.1 million workers between 1986 and 1994. Military downsizing forced another half a million workers to seek alternative employment. Direct subsidies to state-owned enterprises, including state farms (*nong truong*), were virtually eliminated. Granting autonomy to state-owned enterprises in production, distribution and financing provoked the closure of 6,000 of the total 12,000 state-owned enterprises. The public sector and state-owned enterprise reforms provoked a surge in unemployment and the return of laid-off labourers to farming. The private sector, including the services sector and tourism, received formal recognition and encouragement, and absorbed a
number of the unemployed workers. Yet, open unemployment has been clearly increasing, only some of which has been cushioned by the agricultural sector. Moreover, with the effects of the baby boom that followed the end of the ‘American war’ in 1975, the labour force has been growing rapidly. Moonlighting to supplement incomes, particularly among state sector workers, is also on the rise. It is not uncommon for urban workers to hold down several jobs on the side.

Many analysts agree that it is largely due to Vietnam’s tradition of small-scale enterprises, petty trading, and household farming that the costs of adjustment and marketization of the economy through *doi moi* were much lower in Vietnam than in many former Soviet republics and Eastern European countries (van Arkadie 1993). Whereas in Russia 77 percent of the population were industrial workers at the time of the early phases of economic reforms, the equivalent figure for Vietnam was only ten percent. This reflects the large number of people employed in farming and the informal sector (Rondinelli and Litvack 1999: 6). A large majority of this non-state entrepreneurial activity is performed by women. In other words, although rarely acknowledged, women are responsible for performing many of the activities that have been attributed to helping ease the transition to a market economy (Fahey 1998).¹⁶

**Plate 4. Women with Shoulder-poles Carrying Goods for Sale**

---

**New Discourses of the Market Economy and Development**

Discourses shape identities. Paralleling the new regime of property rights are new conceptions of private over collective property. The 1986 Sixth Party Congress in Vietnam that

---

¹⁶ By contrast, in Eastern Europe fewer women were involved in such activities. Those who did run their own farms, or had husbands who did so, fared much better in comparison to widows on deteriorating pensions and younger rural women who lost jobs in the state or collective sector. Of all social groups, widowed and unemployed women in Eastern Europe faced the most meager prospects through decollectivization (Abrahams 1996).
set *doi moi* in place also unleashed a new set of discourses concerning the market economy, economic efficiency, and individual enrichment and equity. Vietnam experienced a rapid disintegration of state-led discourses of collectivism and a reformulation of socialist models and principles—what some consider a dismantling of the revolution (e.g., Kolko 1997). Critics have pointed out that ‘market socialism’ is an oxymoron, and that in market-oriented transitional economies, the label is more a euphemism to allow capitalism to continue without inciting opposition. Others defend the changes brought about by *doi moi*, suggesting that they remain compatible with a strategy for realizing socialist ideals and that *doi moi* is an extension rather than a rejection of the revolution (Boothroyd 2000). Either way, the ideological reorientation implicit in *doi moi* reflects changing incentive structures and a new pragmatism among policymakers, moving away from egalitarianism, collectivism, and ‘the plan’ to acknowledge and embrace the attributes of entrepreneurship and market competition. Decentralization and specialization have been heralded as the way forward. The leadership has moved away from central planning and regional targets for self-sufficiency in rice. A rethinking of incentives and private entrepreneurship is underway. Reflecting the ‘post-Washington Consensus’ in Hanoi, new discourses and practices suggest that the state is becoming an agent to encourage market development. The stigma has been lifted on individual enrichment and private sector marketing and financing—elements that were, until recently, considered capitalistic and exploitative.

There is a growing consensus among policymakers, both in Vietnam and internationally, that building a developmental state may require tolerating greater degrees of social differentiation and mediating trade-offs between efficiency and equity in order to ensure production incentives. On the rationale for reduced state intervention, the new discourses are clear:

Government is often tempted to intervene in price setting to support farm incomes. This may help poor families in the short term but often leads to distortion in production and slower diversification or other routes to higher farm income. (MARD and UNDP 1998: 39)

As the state steps back somewhat from its role in delivering welfare provisions, the significance of informal social safety nets and mutual assistance within villages is increasingly recognized and encouraged: “More affluent families sometimes also accept responsibility for the welfare of poorer community members through charitable support or employment or informal lending” (MARD and UNDP 1998: 40).

The peasantry and rural household have been re-inscribed as productive and progressive entities for economic development, reflecting a move away from the conventional socialist view
of peasants as backward and household enterprise as an obstacle to the construction of socialism. The principle of farmers' choices in the market economy is underlined: "rural incomes will grow more rapidly where households have freedom to respond to changed market or other circumstances and can choose input or marketing services from a range of competitive suppliers" (MARD and UNDP 1998: 39, emphasis added). Within the overall set of reforms, decollectivization and the provision of secure land rights occupy a central place. As outlined in an Asian Development Bank (ADB) study, there are multiple rationales for 'modernizing' Vietnam's land administration system: improved security of tenure for the landholder, increased domestic and foreign investment in land, reduction in land disputes, better infrastructure planning and coordination, and the establishment of a fair, equitable, and efficient taxation system, among other benefits (ADB 1997: v-vi).

Indicative of the changing concepts of local development and restructuring, Tykkylainen's (1998) characterization of community development in 'transitional' economies highlights the abandonment of top-down socialist policies, the reorganization of production management, and the concomitant need for capacity to be established for local authorities, agencies and coalitions to promote economic and infrastructural development within a market-oriented system. Along with new discourses of economic efficiency and entrepreneurship comes a different set of discourses on development.

The new discourses of various state and non-state actors ostensibly promote approaches that are

- participatory, community-based, and bottom-up (e.g., farmer-to-farmer agricultural extension programs)
- environmentally friendly (e.g., integrated pest management (IPM), slope-agriculture land techniques, and the promotion of the system of integrated nutrient recycling between garden, fish pond and pig-sty, known as vuon-ao-chuong or VAC)
- localized (i.e., better oriented to local knowledge and cultural or ecological particularities) and
- sensitive to gender and ethnic differences

Many instructors at the Agro-Forestry College of Thai Nguyen—who also worked as consultants for international agencies—were fluent in the latest development lingo, including human capacity building, IPM, and participatory rural appraisal (PRA), for example, and had even come up with a few of their own acronyms.
Shifts in agricultural extension services have been one manifestation of these new orientations. Whereas in the past agricultural extensionists (agronomist technicians) worked only with leaders of collectives, they now work directly with households. In some cases, ‘leading farmers’ are matched with local farmer groups to avoid relying on an ‘outside expert.’ Services of agricultural extension have been improving since the early 1990s. Yet, as anywhere else, old paradigms of interaction or instruction do not change quickly. The extension system is still conceived of in unidirectional (top-down) terms. One hears references, for instance, to how the state extension program ‘guided’ farmers to grow fruit trees after it moved away from central planning and the policy of rice self-sufficiency in every region. The mentality of blanket solutions still lingers, with state extension programs promoting the planting of thousands of hectares of cinnamon, plum, and apricot trees across the uplands in the 1990s. This has already led to market gluts, not to mention increasing the risks of disastrous infestations of insects or plagues associated with mono-crops. Until recently, agro-forestry models were rarely developed or adapted specifically for midland and highland areas. Policy makers are only beginning to ‘discover’ upland agricultural development and to tailor agricultural extension programs to locally specific ecological and production environments, income levels, and areas inhabited by ethnic minorities.

Doubtful that new discourses will be put into practice, some analysts have suggested that the “leadership is reluctant to link participatory development to the income gap, gender gap, environmental degradation and empowerment of the poor” (van Broekhoven 1996: 16). Although participation has become a prescription of virtually every development agency, it is rarely considered for what it means in a local and historical context, in terms of both formal and customary institutions. Van Broekhoven’s (1996: 15) observations go some way toward providing an appreciation of the changing institutional context and meaning of participation in Vietnam:

The open door policy and people-centred approach to development, two cornerstones of doi moi, have changed the extremely ‘top-down participatory approach’—not a contradiction—which characterized the post-war, pre-doi moi years. Now, compared to the paternalistic, authoritarian participatory structure, there is a shift to ‘two-way participation.’ The mechanisms to express oneself are the ones previously used to channel and control the implementation of top-down commands: People’s Committees and Councils, women’s, farmers and youth mass organizations, the street and neighbourhood groups. The women’s organizations, established as political associations at the grassroots level, are in a process of trying to redefine their roles and responsibilities.
MARD and UNDP (1998: 40) emphasized that “mass organizations which truly represent the local view can also assist the development process by making Governments more sensitive to local needs and ideas.” The repercussions of these changing discourses and their reflection in new institutions are explored in the next chapter.

This chapter has outlined the main theoretical discourses that inform the dissertation—instiutions and institutional change, vulnerability, social capital, and post-socialist agricultural restructuring—and how they are reflected in new development discourses in Vietnam. The process of rural economic restructuring and the quasi-privatization of land in Vietnam that is outlined in the next chapter can be seen to reflect a global shift in rural governance towards private property rights and individual land titling to strengthen incentives for production, innovation, and investment. In the following chapters these concepts will be reexamined in the context of contemporary processes of economic restructuring in Vietnam from the national to the household and intra-household levels, particularly outlining the trade-offs of the new economic approaches and the implications for livelihood vulnerability.
Chapter Four.
Land, Institutional Change, Rural Governance, and Development in Vietnam

Reforms of market institutions in rural Vietnam have been far-reaching. Through the issuing of long-term leases for land-use rights, management authority was devolved from communes and collectives to households. Drawing on both primary and secondary sources, this chapter examines the ways in which 'new rules of the game' and new institutional structures are renegotiated and take on new forms in a market economy in rural Vietnam. Their implications for new patterns of vulnerability are the subject of this chapter.

The chapter begins with a brief historical overview of land relations and institutions in Vietnam up to the late 1990s. This includes discussion of the process of land reform and collectivization following the revolution; the prevalence of the household economy in overall production levels during the collective period; the series of land policy reforms comprising decollectivization; the practices of land transfers, exchanges, leases, mortgaging and inheritance; trends in differentiation of various types of landholdings; and problems of implementation of the new land policies. The second section examines the restructuring of agricultural collectives, some of which have been recently converted into new service cooperatives, and the resulting gaps in service provision. The third section extends the analysis of vulnerability through the restructuring of formal institutions. It provides a brief overview of shifting systems of welfare and poverty reduction, taxation and credit, local social networks that are being constructed or reconstructed through institutional restructuring, including those shaping access to information. The final section identifies how new identities are being forged through the quasi-privatization of property.

Land Relations and Institutions in Vietnam

This section places current institutional shifts in land relations in Vietnam within a historical context. Over the centuries, land distribution in Vietnam has been far from equal and attempts to reform the land tenure system have wavered. As early as 1397 evidence can be found of efforts to ensure equity and prevent the concentration of landholdings. During the Tran dynasty, Le Quy Ly prohibited the holding of more than ten mau of rice lands to anyone except those of royal blood (Minh Quang Dao 1993). Following the disruptions of the Ming Chinese invasion (1407-1427), the land tenure system became very unequal. In response, emperor Le
Thai To (1428-1433) adopted an ‘equal field’ system (*quan dien*), to ensure some land was distributed to all. Originating in China, this system, also known as a ‘personal share land’ system (*khau phan dien*), stipulated that those of the same rank and social status were to receive equal amounts of land. Personal share land was to be redistributed on an egalitarian basis every four years (Long 1973: 5-6). Beginning in the mid-15th century, Le Thanh Tong promoted the ‘southward expansion’ (*nam tien*) to take over new lands in central and southern Vietnam following a series of military conquests. Yet, even with this spout to release the steam of population concentration in the Red River Delta, land accumulation continued in the centuries following this initiative, and central authorities’ enforcement of land reform laws at the village level was rather weak.

In 1708, Vinh Thinh pronounced restrictions on large rice landholdings. Later in the century, thousands of northern villages were abandoned due to famines, floods, wars, high taxes, and expropriations by landowners. In the late 18th century, the Tay Son brothers left an inconclusive legacy of land tenure reforms. Some argue that latifundias were done away with while others suggest the system remained unchanged. In the early 19th century, Emperor Gia Long reinstated the Le land system and later eliminated lands concentrated in the hands of high officials, princes, and nobles. In the reign of Emperor Minh Mang many unused private lands were reverted to communal lands (Minh Quang Dao 1993).

Besides the ‘personal share land’ that was redistributed every four years in accordance with family size and land area, land concentration was further constrained by a system of communal landholdings. Communal or public lands (*cong dien*) have a long tradition in Vietnam, sustained by the worship of tutelary deities and rituals in each village’s communal meeting place, known as a *dinh*. The *dinh* was an essential part of every village or commune in the Red River Delta (but was less common in other parts of the country). Although there was significant variation in the types of communal lands in each village and through different historical periods, there were roughly four categories of ricelands (Long 1973: 8):

- *luong dien* (or ‘salary land’), given to soldiers as part of their salaries;
- *tro suu dien* (or ‘tax assistance land’), used to help the poor pay their taxes;
- *hoc dien* (or ‘study land’), used for paying teachers and supplying students with education materials; and
- *co nhi* and *qua phu dien* (‘orphans’ and widows’ land’), which was for helping orphans and widows.

While they were not subject to sale, communal lands could be rented for up to three years. The lands were managed by the village council of notables (*hoi dong tien chi*) and village chiefs (*xa*)
truong). These two groups also represented the village to the emperor in issues of taxes, labour obligations, and other matters.

In terms of livelihood vulnerability, 'moral economists' have upheld the merits of such customary institutions in corporate villages for their role in providing social safety nets and political stability (Scott 1976; Duong 1985). From this perspective, communal lands represent a risk-sharing arrangement, and 'free-riding' is minimized given the small scale of the village-level institutions (Minh Quang Dao 1993). Such perspectives emphasize horizontal social capital over vertical forms, pointing to how neighbours and kin would share labour and in-kind goods and how landlords had moral obligations to ensure the subsistence requirements of their tenants. These views were challenged by political economists such as Popkin (1979), who suggested that such institutions of economic security were in fact not so effective, that patron-client relations (what I term vertical social capital) were more exploitative than mutually beneficial, and that the only real safety nets were those provided by extended family, especially the eldest son, for old-age insurance (Minh Quang Dao 1993). A further argument of political economists was that peasants are less risk averse and are motivated more by the prospects of profit (or acquiring mandarin status) than had been acknowledged by moral economists (Popkin 1979).

The communal land structure has been criticized by political economists and Vietnamese policy makers for encouraging inefficient production and agricultural stagnation, thereby impeding modernization. High rents and debts were thought to prohibit farmers from purchasing additional fertilizers for improving the fertility of their land (Minh Quang Dao 1993). Moreover, owing to the perceived insecurity of property rights (as per the evolutionary theory of land rights outlined in the previous chapter), communal lands further inhibited migration—as peasants feared they might forfeit their rights—and inhibited improvements in land—owing to fear of the land being repossessed by others, such as those dominant in the village (Vickerman 1986: 30). Vickerman noted a parallel in these two senses with problems in agricultural cooperatives in the post-revolutionary period. In this view, then, a permanent allocation of landholdings would offer greater prospects for efficient production for poorer and better-off farmers alike.

In 1875, the rates for land tax across the country were equalized to alleviate the burden for peasants in the northern region, which was particularly prone to natural hazards. Opinions vary as to the extent of culpability of the French colonial system for rural immiseration during the colonial period, but generally the French seem to have exacerbated an already existing process of polarization and growing landlessness (Duong 1985). In the 1860s and 1870s in
Cochinchina (*Nam Bo*, the southern third of the country), French colonizers offered all communal and abandoned lands to French citizens and collaborators. But Minh Quang Dao (1993) noted that the French were less interested in ownership or management of lands *per se* and more in raising revenue to support their administration and military.

Henry (1932) calculated that, in Tonkin (*Bac Bo*, the northern third of Vietnam) by 1931-1932, 90 percent of landowners laboured on land smaller than five *mau*, an area that in aggregate comprised about 37 percent of the territory of Tonkin. Communal land comprised twenty-one percent of all land in Tonkin and 25 percent in Annam (*Trung Bo*, the central third of the country), and only three percent in Cochinchina. During the colonial period, some communal lands in northern Annam had disappeared, aggravating the unequal land tenure there. Nguyen Van Vinh (cited in Minh Quang Dao 1993: 90) estimated that in the same period, 53 percent of all families in Annam, and perhaps two-thirds of rural producers in Cochinchina were landless. According to Henry (1932), 2.5 percent of landowners controlled 45 percent of the agricultural land in Cochinchina, and 72 percent of the rural population controlled only 15 percent of the lands.

An early policy of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) was to issue an order to reduce land rents and cancel all debts for rents owed by tenants, although the implementation of this order met with difficulty. By 1949, a new system was developed to temporarily allocate rice land, with priority given to tenants of the same land. Between 1953 and 1955, a series of rent reduction and land reform campaigns took place in successive waves (Moise 1983).17 Poor peasants and labourers were the main beneficiaries of the land reform. Excesses of the 1953-1955 campaigns and purges were later acknowledged in the ‘rectification of errors’ in 1956, which led to the returning of appropriated property to some households that had mistakenly been classified as landlords or rich peasants.

Land reform in itself could not address the problems of high population density and low productivity that plagued northern Vietnam and underlay rural poverty. The prospects of developing economies of scale and increasing output made collectivization an appealing option for Communist leaders. These goals were sought more through agricultural collectives than state farms. Unlike in other socialist countries, state farms in Vietnam were never a central element of agricultural production. The majority of state farms that did exist were located in upland

---

17 During this same period, following the 1954 Geneva Accords that effectively divided the country in half, hundreds of thousands of peasants migrated south. This was largely spurred by rumours and other scare tactics of the United States and Saigon governments (Moise 1983).
plantation areas for tea and forestry enterprises. The state sector supplied only two percent of total agricultural output (Nguyen Xuan Lai 1967) and occupied only four percent of agricultural land.

Table 9 presents a summary of the successive stages of collectivization and the increasing scale in both the number of households and the number of hectares per collective at the national level. The parallel experience for Thai Nguyen is documented in Chapter Six. This can be contrasted with the intense scale of collectivization in some Eastern European countries with which Vietnam sought to keep pace. In Bulgaria, for instance, by the late 1950s collectives already averaged 4,200 hectares in size, a massive consolidation compared to the average farm size of just four hectares in 1944. But the quest to maximize productivity continued, with state farms and collectives in Bulgaria being amalgamated into agro-industrial complexes that averaged 24,000 hectares in 1971 (Creed 1998).

Table 9. Stages and Scales of Collectivization in Vietnam

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage of collectivization</th>
<th>Scale: Number of households or people per collective</th>
<th>Scale: Number of hectares per collective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1953</td>
<td>Mutual aid teams</td>
<td>Groups of several households</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1959</td>
<td>Low-level collectives:</td>
<td>10-20 households each</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Neighbourhood level; several per hamlet</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1963-1965</td>
<td>Shift to high level collectives:</td>
<td>30-50 households</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Hamlet level; one per hamlet</td>
<td>25-50 hectares</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966-1969</td>
<td>High level collectives:</td>
<td>100-150 households</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Village level; one per village</td>
<td>80-120 hectares</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970-1971</td>
<td>High level collectives:</td>
<td>4000-6000 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Commune level; one per commune</td>
<td>400-700 hectares</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974-early 1980s</td>
<td>Agro-industrial unit:</td>
<td>100,000-200,000 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• District level</td>
<td>15,000-20,000 hectares</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Taillard (1983: 138-139).
Although motivation for collectivization was high at the outset, by the late 1960s and into the 1970s it had waned considerably. This is explained in part by the end of the war in 1975, after which point people were no longer roused by pleas to support soldiers at the war front. But more generally, the increased size of collectives led to higher transaction costs. As explained by Schmitt (1993: 153):

Transaction costs … include the costs of acquiring and processing information which is not free, the costs of monitoring and supervising, and also the costs of enforcing contracts between economic agents which are necessary for reducing the risks and uncertainties associated with pure market transactions.

Of these three factors, the costs and difficulties of monitoring each member’s labour contributions (via the workpoint system) was a particular organizational disadvantage for large-scale collectives. Workpoints for collective agriculture in many countries tended to be allocated on the basis of workdays rather than quality of labour.

An emerging body of research documents villagers’ discontent with collectivization in Vietnam. Farmers north and south cite poor management as a key reason for the failure of collectives. In one instance, a woman in Cu Chi district, near Ho Chi Minh City, complained of being coerced into joining the collective when it was established in 1978, or else face the loss of her garden land on which she produced fruits and vegetables for sale in the market. On her allocated rice land she was expected to meet a high quota of rice production, but the insufficient supplies of fertilizer she was given meant that in order to meet the targets she was forced to purchase additional fertilizer using her own money. Leaders of the collective were democratically elected but later took advantage of their position at the expenses of others. Collective managers would sit in the shade watching others work and at the end of the day
would assign themselves points for a day’s work. Even after the collective became defunct in 1988, the woman from Cu Chi was pressured to forfeit to former collective leaders some of the fertile land that she had inherited from her mother. Highlighting several of these concerns, Kerkvliet (1995) discussed five key problems with the system of collectivized agriculture: the lack of incentive to work diligently, the lack of upkeep of collective property, the stagnation or deterioration in living conditions, the administrative burdens, and the undermining of family production units.

Jokes abound in everyday conversation in Vietnamese, poking fun at and indirectly criticizing the system. A common Vietnamese expression is cha chung khong ai khoc: no one cries [at the funeral of] a common father. Another is lam su khong ai quet cua chua: with many monks in a pagoda, no one will bother to sweep. Both indicate the problem of shirking responsibility for collective tasks. Problems arose, for instance, when no one bothered to fix a terrace which broke during a rain storm at night, or no one pitched in if it started to rain while the rice was laying out to dry. On a smaller scale of household management, many people now argue, they more willingly will fix their own terrace or move their own grain. Many Vietnamese insist that despite many communal traditions, they are very individualistic people. They frequently characterize themselves by saying that if a Vietnamese were to battle a Japanese one-on-one, the Vietnamese would be the victor, but if the same encounter had two groups face each other, the Vietnamese would never be able to cooperate and win.

Symbiosis of Household and Collective Sectors

As discussed in Chapter Three, the symbiosis of small, private plots and large-scale, collective organization of production in the socialist period—in Eastern Europe as in Vietnam—is evidence of the complex reality underlying a superficially monolithic system (Abrahams 1996). Abrahams (1996: 13) observed that in the last years of the socialist system in Eastern Europe, states struggled to keep private plots under tight control, weighing the trade-offs between them and “the needs of the system under whose umbrella they operated.” Analysts increasingly acknowledge that all along, these lands were also ‘part of the system,’ facilitating the continuation of collective production. The persistence of private plots helped keep people ready for the re-emergence of private farming. Originally competing with labour commitments to the collective sector, the private plots absorbed increasing supplies of labour as collectives were disbanded.
In April 1959, at the 16th Plenum of the Party Central Committee, the household plot—
that came to be known as the ‘five percent land’—was authorized:

considering the peasants’ activities and with a view to enabling them to use their
labour during their spare time, a plot of land shall be allocated to each family, not
exceeding, for each member of the family, five percent of the per capita cultivable
land in the village. (cited in Nguyen Xuan Lai 1967: 122)

Depending on the size of the household and the area of land it contributed to the
collective, ‘five percent land’ allocations varied from 100 to 350 m² per household in the Red
River Delta province of Hai Hung (Nguyen Van Chinh 1997: 9). In the northern districts of Thai
Nguyen large plots sometimes reached a size of one mau (3600 m²). To the extent that surpluses
were available, households were permitted to sell produce in small amounts at a low price via
state channels. If they wanted to get a higher price, trade in excess of the quotas or sell restricted
crops, they did so through other intermediary channels. Private traders would avoid the main
roads and buses where they could be stopped and discovered. One woman told me of stashing
tea inside a dried gourd as she traveled from Thai Nguyen to Hanoi to make her regular rounds
to customers.

In mountainous areas, with greater cultivable areas, an additional plot for cotton or tree
crops was provided to supplement the family’s needs. Additional plots were also given, where
viable, for growing hemp, the produce of which had to be sold to the State Trade Agency on a
contract basis. The household plots remained collective property and could not be sold. Some
stretching of the five percent stipulation was tolerated around large cities and industrial centres,
since households in these areas provided valuable poultry and pork to the urban population.
Moreover, cooperative members were permitted to own from one to three cows, calves, or
young buffalo, depending on the region, in order to supply the collectives with more draft
animals. The collective reserved priority in using the draft animals for a certain number of days
of work per year (Nguyen Xuan Lai 1967: 125). Raising livestock collectively never became
extensive. In a survey cited by Nguyen Xuan Lai of 845 collectives, collective breeding
provided only 1.6 percent of the total income.

Given the extent of the hidden economy and market interaction that never disappeared
completely, it is misleading to interpret recent reforms in Vietnam as implying a simple shift
from plan to market. Collectivization was never complete. Analysts have varied in their
characterization of the relation between the collective and family economies. Bhaduri (1982: 52)
asserted that the “the coop provides the backbone to the entire material life and security of a
north Vietnamese peasant… while the family economy plays a complementary side role in
improving the quality of his [sic] life.” Whether it was complementary or predominant, many agree that the ‘five percent land’ was often the most well-developed of all agricultural land in a commune, sometimes three times more productive than collectively farmed land. The proportion of farmers’ incomes that derived from the household economy (as opposed to the collective economy) rose from 50 to 80 percent between 1960 and 1980 (Dao The Tuan 1998). Along the same lines, Beresford and Fforde (1996: 16) estimated that even at the height of the system, probably only half of the total volume of agricultural output came from collective production.

Some private enterprise activity was tolerated all along, particularly, Fahey (1998) notes, among female-headed households. Overall, 90 percent of meat and vegetables continued to be produced and sold by women. Seen in this way, the tradition of household economy and small trading—despite the stigma—served as a safety net to reduce vulnerability during the collective period, while at the same time alleviating the burden of the state or collective to provide more extensive social protection. As discussed earlier, this tradition facilitated the economic transition during decollectivization.

Nguyen Xuan Lai (1967: 188) estimated that for an average family, the income from the household economy could be broken down as follows:

- 36 percent from animal husbandry (three-quarters of which came from the sale of pigs and manure, with the remainder from poultry)
- 24 percent from various crops (of which, 58 percent from staple food, 25 percent from vegetables, and 17 percent from fruits)
- 18 percent from cottage industries, and
- 22 percent from other income

Nguyen Xuan Lai documented the coexistence and complementarity of collective and private (household) economies in the mid-1960s period of collectivization. In his view, the state, collective and ‘family’ sectors strengthened each other, developed harmoniously and progressed together. Collective work provided the staple food for peasants, while the household economy—particularly animal husbandry—brought in most of the cash income, which permitted the purchase of products to supplement the diet. Thus, private breeding, he noted, ‘still’ constituted the main source of meat to the population, particularly in urban areas. In addition to raising livestock and other agricultural endeavors such as vegetable and fruit cultivation through the household economy, Nguyen Xuan Lai remarked that in the Red River Delta province of Ha Dong, 135 different trades and sidelines activities of peasants were documented as supplementing farm incomes. The author acknowledged that many ‘simpler’ trades were more
profitable as private undertakings, although collectives did attempt to take over the management of those requiring a larger workforce and greater investment (such as brick and lime kilns).

Nguyen Xuan Lai recognized that a key attribute of the ‘family sector’ was its alleviation of under-employment in the countryside through “a rational use of labour, insufficiently used by the cooperative” (1967: 121), not to mention supplying nearly all foodstuffs aside from rice. Writing in the early 1970s, Ngo Vinh Long (1973: 10) likened the merits of this system of collective and ‘five percent lands’ to the land tenure scheme of the 19th century. The ‘equal field’ system, he wrote,

at least had helped to keep land from becoming overly concentrated in the hands of a few. The village communal land had also helped in the solving of various welfare problems. In fact, except for the difference in scale, the personal share land could be compared to the ‘private plot’ or ‘five percent land’ and the village communal land to the ‘cooperatives’ practiced today in North Vietnam. In spite of its problems, the Nguyen land system worked reasonably well.

Nguyen Xuan Lai affirmed that only a socialist revolution could make possible the provision of sufficient rice for all peasants, still having some margin of surplus to be supplied to the state for quotas and taxes. While acknowledging the value of the household economy sector, he felt that

emphasis should be laid on the development of the cooperative [collective] sector, which alone can ensure an expansion of the cultivated area, and increase of the yields, of the production of food and industrial crops, thanks to its good organization and the means at its disposal to carry out irrigated work and apply science and advanced technique. The cooperative sector, by supplying staple food to the cooperative members... ensures the progress of the family sector and constitutes the basis of its development (Nguyen Xuan Lai 1967: 121)

Reading this in retrospect, one wonders how many people in Vietnam feel this way today. In 1967, Nguyen Xuan Lai (1967: 127) was equally critical of ‘rightist’ mistakes “consisting in favouring and granting too many privileges to the family economy, at the expense of the cooperative... [wherein] everything done by the family economy seemed better.” Critical of ‘leftist’ mistakes attempting to restrict, eliminate, and stigmatize (as capitalist) activities of the family economy, he asserted that such efforts stemmed from

an over-simplified egalitarianism, which assumed that the more the means of production are collectivized, the better the cooperative will function, and that the more vigorously labour is controlled, the more production will increase, that under a socialist regime, everything should be concentrated in the cooperative, all the cooperative members getting the same income. (Nguyen Xuan Lai 1967: 127)
The Seeds of Decollectivization

Poor management and an overly rigid centralized planning system hindered cooperative production throughout the country. Low state prices for agricultural commodities in the late 1970s further undermined the economic viability of agricultural collectives and provided a material disincentive for collective work (White 1988: 143). Following reunification in 1975, attempts to collectivize in the south met with considerable resistance and in many areas collectives were established in name only. By the late 1970s, collective production in the north stagnated, hindered by a high birth rate and an increasingly limited cultivated area. This situation was aggravated by artificially low state prices for rice procurements. Moreover, after the Sino-Vietnamese conflict in 1979, subsidized consumer goods became scarce in the face of cuts to Chinese aid and trade.

To address these concerns, agricultural producer prices were increased between 1979 and 1981. Initiatives on the part of local administrative units and farmers themselves led to a slow expansion of ‘bottom up’ reforms and de facto decollectivization with unofficial land allocation and production contracting. In 1977-78, experiments with household output contracting for cultivating secondary staple crops were permitted in some areas in an effort to boost incentives and producer autonomy. In an attempt to keep pace with on-the-ground transformations in production organization throughout the country, Directive 100\textsuperscript{18} in 1981 legitimated the contracting out of certain production tasks to households and individuals. The partial liberalization of the agricultural sector at this point was largely a pragmatic move aimed at improving the operation of the collective system rather than fundamentally undoing it.

The increased autonomy for family farmers led to an increase in incomes, but the retention of the work point system and weak price change provoked another squeeze on farmers’ incomes by 1982 (Beresford and Fforde 1996). Moreover, this Directive failed to address the centralized nature of decision-making. Crop selection continued to be made without sufficient consideration of local conditions. Inputs provided by the state were not always delivered on time, and the contracted amount of produce was not always procured as stipulated. Although agricultural output rose steadily from 1981 to 1986, production stagnated in the three years following. Production quotas remained high, given that the collectives were still supporting large administrative units and social programs (Lipper 1996). Moreover, price

\textsuperscript{18} Also known as Contract 100, Khoan 100.
reforms in 1981 and 1985 forced a rise in the price of rice, yet the relative price in relation to the price of inputs remained disadvantageous for producers (Jansen 1997).

Resolution 10 and the 1988 Land Law went further in reforming collective agriculture by formalizing the allocation of agricultural land directly to households through longer-term land-use rights (from 10 to 15 years) and by eliminating the work-point system. This Resolution further freed up prices of grain and inputs, privatized the distribution of inputs, decreased land tax, and provided more freedom of crop choice. As of 1989, farmers were no longer required to sell a contracted amount of rice to the state. Following the announcement of land allocation, there was a temporary surge in early marriages in some areas in order to maximize a household's allocation of residential land (Beresford 1994: 38).

The depth and breadth of the Vietnamese policy reforms by this point probably surpassed China's in terms of the reduction of collective and state controls on private farming (Selden 1993: 244) and elimination of quota grain procurements. As with earlier policies, reforms such as Decision 10 in Vietnam merely legitimized what was already occurring in practice in many areas. In the north and central regions where collectives had been strong, the allocated land plots had been formerly managed by collectives. By contrast, in southern regions of the country, despite the national policy, land-use rights were frequently reinstated for land formerly cultivated by the same households. This constituted a de facto restitution, although it is rare to find studies using this term to describe the phenomenon.

Decision 10 soon became outdated and lacked clear regulations. A number of elements, including the prohibition against transferring or mortgaging land-use rights restricted economic productivity and access to credit. Under the more decisive 1993 Land Law, land allocation was finalized with households being issued a certificate verifying their long-term land-use rights. 'Red Book' Certificates (bia do or so do) were issued, granting household five rights: to transfer, exchange, mortgage, lease and inherit their plots to others. The terms of the leases were 20 years for annual and 50 years for perennial crop land. Although the state retained formal ownership of the land, leases are expected to be renewed upon expiry. Under the new policies, farmers themselves decide what to grow and where to market their produce, and land can be converted from rice to other crops without permission.19 As with the previous reforms to land policy, the 1993 Land Law merely legalized (rather than initiated) the land market that had already been operating underground (Dao The Tuan 1997). The 1993 Land Law represents the

19 However, converting agricultural land to aquaculture requires special permission.
foundation for shifting from self-sufficiency and central planning to a market economy. The reforms in the agricultural sector constituted some of the most radical aspects of the overall doi moi (renovation) policies initiated in Vietnam after 1986. Table 10 presents an overview of the key elements of institutional restructuring in agricultural production through successive land policies.

Table 10. Chronology of Land Policy Reforms for Decollectivization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Directive 100 (1981)</td>
<td>• gave more autonomy to farmers, responding to food shortages and pressures from farmers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• households were allocated plots of land to cultivate under contract to the cooperative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• production was sold to the state at a fixed price, and any surplus could be consumed by the household or sold on the market</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• collectives (cooperatives) retained responsibility for distribution of inputs and marketing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land Law (January 1988)</td>
<td>• allocation of agricultural land directly to households, based on number of labourers in household; land was to be reallocated regularly according to changes in number of labourers by household</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and Decision/Resolution 10 (April 1988)</td>
<td>• long-term land-use right contracts (10-20 years) were offered to households (strengthening property rights)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• endorsement of farm household as independent economic unit with decision-making authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• crop prices were set by the market; elimination of subsidies, and of the work-point system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• crop choice could be determined by households; marketing of produce and provision of inputs were no longer state-controlled; farmers no longer had to provide contracted amounts of produce (usually rice) to the state</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• introduced the classification of land into five categories of intended use: agricultural, forestry, residential, special-use, and unused land</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land Law (July 1993)</td>
<td>• permitted five rights: the transfer, lease, exchange, mortgage and inheritance of land-use rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and Decision 64 (September 27, 1993)</td>
<td>• land-use leases were granted for terms of 20 years for annual crop land and 50 years for perennial crop land, with extension upon expiration provided that users continue to exercise the specified land use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• land tenure security was enhanced by the issuing of land use right certificates (Red Books, bia do)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• the land user has responsibility to protect, improve and manage the land, and pay tax based on the land value</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Jansen (1997), Christ and Kloss (1998), and ADB (1997).

There were some differences in allocation criteria associated with the 1988 and 1993 Land Laws. The land allocation that followed the 1988 Land Law was based on the number of labourers in the household. Children under 12 were calculated at one third of a full labourer, youth aged 12-15 counted at half the rate of a full labourer, and people 16-59 as full labourers. Men 60 and over and women 55 and over counted as half. This policy disadvantaged households with a high dependency ratio. Allocations under the 1993 Law, by contrast, were based on household size rather than a calculation of number of labourers. Some point in 1994
was the usual cut-off date, with some regional variations (CGFED 1996). Yet, it is unclear to what extent this was actually followed, since in many places the differences in land allocations between 1998 and 1993 were said to have been negligible. This may reflect a reticence to provoke any further insecurity in rights to lands already allocated. Despite assurances by Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) officials that agricultural land allocation would be done only once, this position was disputed in some places where farmers had been informed that, in order to accommodate new families, their land allocation might indeed be modified in future.

The egalitarian distribution of agricultural land was considered a necessity to avoid exacerbating rural unemployment and curb the influx of rural migrants to the cities. In an effort to make the allocations of agricultural land egalitarian, every household tended to receive pieces of land of different qualities, often ending up with many small plots. However, such fragmentation, while equitable, can impede mechanization and labour productivity and increase travel time between plots. In the northern midlands and mountainous region, the average number of plots per household, according to an ADB survey, was 11, although the survey reported a maximum of 42 scattered plots in some households. Plots were less fragmented in southern provinces, due to the larger-scale production and more even land quality compared to parts of the north as well to allocation being based more on a *de facto* restitution (ADB 1997: 25). Some efforts are now underway by the state and international agencies to encourage the amalgamation of plots, but changes have been slow in practice.

A further effort to ensure equity in landholdings was the establishment of ceilings on landholdings. As specified in Article 44 of the 1993 Land Law, the land ceiling for annual crop land (i.e., land that is replanted annually) is 3 hectares in provinces of the south and 2 in the north. For perennial crop land (e.g., for tea plants) it is 10 hectares in lowland communes and 30 hectares in mountainous and midland communes (ADB 1997). There is no formal ceiling on forest land allocations. Enforcement of the land ceilings, particularly in the south, has been limited. Moreover, while helping to promote effective land use, land ceilings can at the same time constrain the amalgamation of lands for efficient larger-scale production. There has been some discussion of introducing options for special permission to exceed land ceilings on these grounds (ADB 1997). Under Article 78 of the Land Law, land can be leased for up to three years, with leases extended pending authorization. The 1995 ADB survey reported that leasing land from communes was much more common than from other households. However, some of
my interview subjects in Thai Nguyen suggested that it was more common for land to be leased from people who work in non-agricultural or non-forest activities than from the commune.

Article 45 of the 1993 Land Law stipulated that five percent of the agricultural land to be allocated was to be kept by the commune as ‘reserve land’ and leased out, with the profit to be used for public welfare. This might include constructing or improving rural communication systems, electricity supply, schools, offices or health clinics (ADB 1997: 60). Such land might be allocated in the future, perhaps to soldiers or invalids. Divergences arise over the status of ‘reserve land.’ Not all communes have reserve land. Survey results from the ADB revealed that the reserve land option was only practiced in northern areas of the country, where most communes kept much more than five percent of agricultural land in reserve. There have been accusations that local officials have withheld land and refrained from allocating it, not for the benefit of all local residents but rather for their own enrichment (Oxfam 1996).

In the midlands and highlands region, grazing land (mainly on gentle slopes) has somewhat unclear status, often determined on a village-by-village basis. Every commune was instructed to keep some land for grazing, to be shared between one or two villages. Land for grazing tends to be either farm land that has reached the end of its growing cycle (with low fertility), or forest land that had been cut but may have up to 15 years of regrowth. This regrowth of vegetation can make grazing difficult, yet cutting the forest in grazing areas is prohibited. In some instances this land is unofficially allocated, so households must instead graze their animals on their own or others’ allocated forest land, which at times can produce land-use conflicts with those attempting to plant forest gardens crops.

The 1960s and 70s collectivization frenzy and the drive to expand the agricultural frontier for rice production had been underwritten by a mentality that viewed forests as wasted space. Trees were cut ruthlessly to extend the area for agricultural production. Given the function of trees in preventing erosion and overflowing of dams and as windbreaks, this strategy often led to disastrous consequences. But even once this strategy was altered, illegal deforestation continued into the 1980s. Recognizing the potentially better management of forests under individual allocation, Vietnam embarked on an ambitious and pioneering effort to allocate forest lands to households alongside the allocation of agricultural lands. This initiative, known as Program 327, included ‘forest land’ allocated for production (e.g., fruit and tea trees) as well as reforestation and forest protection purposes. Farmers can grow agricultural crops on land for production or forest protection but not on land declared as natural forest. In some cases land was randomly assigned to households, but in many other cases forest land was allocated to
households already utilizing the land in question, thereby merely confirming the status of existing use-rights distribution. The form of allocation further disrupted existing patterns of resource use to the extent that more than one household had sometimes made use of the same land. Most forest land not in the hands of state forest enterprises (lâm truong) was allocated to households, but some was allocated to communes, which in turn could rent it out (e.g., to be used for cinnamon or fruit trees or other industrial crops) to raise funds for commune activities.

Despite acclaim for the land policy reforms from the majority of the population, the issuing of land-use right certificates was still incomplete in 1999. By early 1998, 86 percent of all agricultural land had been allocated, and 7.8 of 9.6 million households had received land-use rights (MARD and UNDP 1998). The pace of issuing of land-use certificates varied by region, being slowest in the central coast and Red River Delta region and most advanced in the Mekong Delta region. In Thai Nguyen province, by mid-1998 certificates had been issued for 80 percent of agricultural lands in lowland areas (this was to be completed by the end of 1998) and 38 percent in the upland areas (which were to be completed in 1999). The cost for households was 3,000 dong (US$ 0.20) per hectare for a certificate. By 1998, 61 percent of forest land in Thai Nguyen had been allocated, but most to state forest enterprises, which then contracted or leased it to households.

Slow allocation and certification of agricultural and forest lands has been a point of contention in the implementation of the new Land Law, potentially limiting people's confidence in land tenure and hampering the development of a land market. The granting of certificates has been held up for a number of reasons, including confusion over guidelines, lack of funding, inaccurate documents having to be reissued, and the lengthy process of doing accurate cadastral surveying, particularly in the north. Temporary certificates have been issued in some areas, and certificates have had to be re-issued in others due to inaccuracies on the originals. In areas where the forest land allocation is not completed, some households planted trees on bare hills in the hope that it would be allocated to them as a result (McElwee 1997). Surveying, allocation and certification of forest land has been slower than that of agriculture due to a number of factors: lack of funds, deficiencies in the law, poor administrative capacity and poorly trained staff to process applications and map the complicated terrain (Christ and Kloss 1998). MARD and UNDP (1998: 16) further acknowledge that “lack of transparency and progress in land allocation in forest areas may well be an important constraint to rural development in poorer districts of the North Mountains, North Central Coast and northern part of the Central Highlands.” In the Central Highlands, delays in the issuing of land-use certificates increased the
amount of unofficial land trading and led to deception and illegal occupation of land. Few studies have examined this phenomenon of informal land transfers, exchanges or leasing in Vietnam to reveal the interplay of local practices with national policy.

Exercising New Land Rights

Land in Vietnam is now almost fully ‘privatized,’ state marketing has been abolished, and the cooperative structure has evaporated. Property rights in China’s agricultural sector, by contrast, have not shifted as far toward ‘free markets’ as is true for Vietnam. In China the agricultural sector is comprised of a two-tiered system of private plots and village collectives, which manage land contracts and provide services. Land rights in China are granted to villages, which are in turn empowered to reallocate land from one household to another. Rights to transfer or lease land in China vary from village to village (Li 1999). In 1992, close to half of total rural income in China was still derived from collective sources (Bowles and Dong 1994: 65). However, marketing and commerce appear to be more extensively reformed in China than in Vietnam, reflected in the greater degree of economic diversification, particularly in rural industry, which constitutes the primary engine of growth in the Chinese countryside.20

As in China, rural land markets in northern Vietnam are as yet underdeveloped. Differentiation in rural Vietnam is based less on land than on commerce and various forms of assets, including livestock. The number of official land transfers, exchanges, and leases to date has been small. Transfers in the south have been somewhat higher, linked in part to the greater market integration, the larger diversity of alternative livelihood opportunities, as well as to the de facto restitution of land to former owners, leaving a number of farmers landless.

Commenting on the lack of options for farmers wishing to expand their production Henin (1999: 218) describes how, in the northeastern uplands province of Lang Son,

leasing hill land privately is rarely an option. First, land-rich families are reluctant to part with hill land that carries productive trees, and second, renting barren land to grow trees is economically unattractive because of the relatively slow process of growing trees.

The reluctance of farmers to sell (or, rather, to transfer their land-use rights) is a characteristic common across much of northern Vietnam. This underlines how identity is linked to people’s

---

20 Kerkvliet and Selden (2000) explain how the roots of China’s success in this field lie in the industrialization of rural collectives in the Cultural Revolution decade and the earlier emphasis on self-reliance and decentralized industry. By contrast, Vietnam’s collectives were mainly restricted to agricultural production. Most of the surplus that accumulated from collectives in the early years went to support the war efforts rather than being used for industrialization and diversification of the rural economy, as it was in China.
attachment to their land. Moreover, agricultural land is viewed as a vital social safety net. As in many parts of the world, land is more enduring than other assets and is more reluctantly sold on the market (Agarwal 1994b: 10). This is a concern to economic planners, who consider the low number of land exchanges to negatively affect labour efficiency, productivity, and incomes.

The lack of legal literacy concerning land rights has also had some bearing on the low number of land transfers. This raises questions about the state’s administrative capacity for implementation of land allocation and certification. Some have criticized the degree of confusion and misinformation over the legal significance of land-use certificates, even among local authorities. Others have complained of the lack of consultation, inadequate information, and inconsistencies in implementation. People have little legal recourse to redress grievances regarding the allocation process (such as being asked to sign blank forms). Women in particular knew little about new policies, since they rarely attended village general meetings. In a household survey carried out by ADB in 1995 among 2072 households in 12 provinces, 65 percent of households could not identify any of the five rights (to transfer, lease, exchange, mortgage and inherit land) granted through the 1993 Land Law. Only 14 percent of households were aware of all five rights. The ADB report indicated that knowledge was greater in the north, and suggested that this may be due to the higher ‘people’s cultural standard’ (dan tri) or to the greater centrality of land for people’s livelihoods in this region (ADB 1997: 54).

In comparison with rural land markets in northern Vietnam, the land market across urban Vietnam has been much more active. Some individuals have become extremely wealthy through inside knowledge of opportunities for speculation on urban real estate, particularly through changes in land zoning. For urban residential land, there are various administrative levels at which transfers can be registered, with fees increasing the higher up the administration one chooses to go. This leads to huge discrepancies between actual allocation or ownership and the official records for various levels of administration. This phenomenon is also suggestive of the false dichotomy implied by the distinction between official and informal transfers of land.

A controversial element of the new production relations emerging in Vietnam’s agricultural sector is contract farming. Still on a limited scale, this form of market integration is growing quickly. Contract farming links small-holders to commercial agro-industry while avoiding primary production being concentrated in large capitalist or socialist production units. Through contracts to a larger enterprise, a small-holder is provided with inputs, output processing, and marketing services. While contract farming in Vietnam remains generally
understudied, the position of women and youth or children within it remains even less understood.

The rural agricultural labour market in Vietnam is still limited, particularly in the north. This is in part because overall farm sizes are small. Wage labour is much more common on the larger farms and plantations in the southern and Central Highlands provinces and on smaller southern farms engaged in triple cropping. Wage labour is also becoming common for manufacturing activities in some rural villages of the Red River Delta in northern Vietnam. To the extent that there is an agricultural labour market in the northern midlands, opportunities for women are quite limited.

Landholdings and Differentiation

Differentiation among households, villages, and regions can be shaped by characteristics of the livelihood or farming system and by the degree of market vs. subsistence orientation. To contextualize the analysis of vulnerability in relation to land, this section reviews the extent to which land is an important asset shaping patterns of differentiation and well-being. Table 11 and Table 12 demonstrate the regional differences in average landholdings and differences between the poor and nonpoor. According to van de Walle (1998: 111), factors of terrain and population density are key in explaining regional variations, such as the difference between the Red River and Mekong Deltas, where the average area of cultivated land per person is 702 and 1977 m², respectively. Rural areas of southern Vietnam have significantly more land per person, and more irrigated land per person, than in the rural north. But disparities between the poor and nonpoor are also much higher in the south (see Figure 4). Results of the Vietnam Living Standards Survey of 1992-93 revealed that poor households in the south have on average less than half as much land as the nonpoor, whereas land endowments in the north are relatively equitable—although the poor do tend to have less irrigated land. Many poor households in the southern third of Vietnam are landless (van de Walle 1998: 111). Moreover, landholdings are more strongly correlated with living standards in some regions than in others. All three regions of the south reveal a pronounced positive association between size of landholding and per capita expenditure levels. In general, the distribution of irrigated land appears to be more equitable than or about the same as the distribution of all land. (van de Walle 1998: 112)
Table 11. Average area of land per capita of the Poor and Nonpoor in Rural North and South Vietnam, 1992-93 (m²)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of land</th>
<th>North</th>
<th>South</th>
<th>National</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nonpoor</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irrigated, annual crops</td>
<td>414.8</td>
<td>333.4</td>
<td>360.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonirrigated, annual crops</td>
<td>288.9</td>
<td>378.2</td>
<td>348.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perennial crops</td>
<td>55.0</td>
<td>50.8</td>
<td>52.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>173.8</td>
<td>126.1</td>
<td>141.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>932.4</td>
<td>888.6</td>
<td>902.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 12. Average area of land per capita in Rural Vietnam by Region, 1992-93 (m²)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Type of land</th>
<th>Northern Uplands</th>
<th>Red River Delta</th>
<th>North-Central Coast</th>
<th>Central Coast</th>
<th>Central Highlands</th>
<th>South-East</th>
<th>Mekong Delta</th>
<th>National</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Irrigated, annual crops</td>
<td>229.3</td>
<td>521.2</td>
<td>307.9</td>
<td>325.9</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>484.5</td>
<td>713.1</td>
<td>434.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nonirrigated, annual crops</td>
<td>679.2</td>
<td>78.7</td>
<td>349.3</td>
<td>321.2</td>
<td>1015.5</td>
<td>823.1</td>
<td>905.9</td>
<td>531.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perennial crops</td>
<td>76.7</td>
<td>31.8</td>
<td>58.9</td>
<td>42.8</td>
<td>398.3</td>
<td>354.9</td>
<td>256.6</td>
<td>131.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>311.0</td>
<td>69.8</td>
<td>112.8</td>
<td>50.3</td>
<td>27.2</td>
<td>101.3</td>
<td>101.5</td>
<td>125.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1314.2</td>
<td>701.5</td>
<td>828.8</td>
<td>740.2</td>
<td>1458.0</td>
<td>1763.7</td>
<td>1977.2</td>
<td>1222.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4. Distribution of Total Land and Irrigated Annual Cropland by Region in Vietnam, 1992-93
Van de Walle’s analysis is helpful in contrasting agricultural landholdings, yet mentions nothing of differences in other types of land. Agricultural land was generally quite equitably allocated in terms of size, yet somewhat less so in other respects, such as land quality, fragmentation, and access to irrigation. Moreover, in the Red River Delta, there is greater differentiation in holdings of home garden land, coastal lands used for raising seafood, and land with trees planted to provide protection from typhoons. Holdings of these land types thus constitute new bases for inequality. Regional differences can be identified in this regard as ponds, livestock, and garden land are more common in the north than the south.

The allocation of forest land has similarly been an important axis of differentiation and the subject of some controversy. Unlike the rather strict criteria for agricultural land allocation on the basis of household size, forestry land has been allocated on the rather looser criteria of households’ capacity to productively use and protect the land. This has, de facto, favoured allocation to better-off households, with poorer households often receiving less or no forest land. In other cases, households have been excluded from forest allocation due to a lack of information about details of the process, criteria and deadlines for applications, or fear of being charged high taxes. Research in Ha Tinh province (Smith 1997) and Thanh Hoa province (Carr 1998) confirmed that forest land was concentrated in the hands of richer households, thus restricting income-generating opportunities for poorer households. In some villages the variation in sizes of forest allocation are extreme: two to 20 hectares in parts of Thai Nguyen and one quarter to more than six hectares in a village in Thanh Hoa (Carr 1998).

One consequence of the allocation of forest lands is the loss of access to former common lands, particularly crucial for grazing of animals and collecting fuelwood and other forest products. Those households that received no forest land allocation suffer disproportionately from this process of enclosure of common lands. This is particularly critical for some households that earn up to 65 percent of their income from forest products. These instances are suggestive of the need for some degree of state intervention for social efficiency to ensure that poorer households are able to participate in and benefit from natural resource management (Morrison and Dubois 1998: 38).

In a number of areas, including the central province of Ha Tinh and some Red River Delta provinces, some households have received only a portion of the land that was due to be allocated to them because of owing money to the cooperative from unfulfilled quotas in the past. The land that was withheld has been rented out by the cooperative to other farmers until such time as sufficient rent has been collected to cover the debt, when the land will be returned to the
original household. In some areas, land was even reported to have been withheld in cases where households failed to implement family planning (Tran Thi Van Anh 1997). Land withheld as a result of debt affects up to 15 percent of households in some delta villages (Tran Thi Van Anh 1995), and more than eight percent of households in some villages in Hoa Binh (Smith 1997: 164). The amount of withheld land can at times be equivalent to 40 or 50 percent of a household’s allocation (CGFED 1996: 37), forcing household members to seek wage labour. Loss of land due to indebtedness to moneylenders is another trend, particularly acute in the Mekong Delta, where a growing proportion of farmer households in different provinces are landless or have insufficient land for their subsistence.

State Capacity for Implementation and Enforcement

The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development’s (MARD’s) position on social equity concerning land issues is that:

in the long term, the establishment of a land market is essential to continued improvement in agricultural productivity and expansion of the credit system to fund improved productivity. The needs of any resultant landless group can be better addressed through social rather than land policy. The main changes required for agricultural land are increased legal freedom to transfer and to change land use in response to markets without being subject to undue community pressure to conform. (MARD and UNDP 1998: 30)

In allocating land to households, the state divested itself of the responsibility for management of agricultural lands and forest resources. In its place, management authority was transferred to the household unit. This move was designed to provide security of land tenure and clearly delineated boundaries. Taking farmers to be the most appropriate managers of land and protectors of forests, the policy of allocating forestry land was anticipated to curb the expansion of agriculture and better protect forests (Morrison and Dubois 1998: 20). In other words, in an effort to increase productivity and make land management more efficient, there has been a growing emphasis on households managing land resources and a decline in state control, both directly and through state enterprises and government agencies. Yet, it has never been entirely clear to what extent the reforms reduced or enhanced state controls:

Provision of this ‘sense of ownership and responsibility’ was somewhat diluted by early attempts to introduce land use planning and land allocation: initially the government specified how allocated land should be used. Thus allocation could be seen as another vehicle to control the use of land—there was little dialogue with the actual users of the land. In addition, allocation requires that recipients of allocated land are sedentary, and continue to use the land as specified. (Morrison and Dubois 1998: 20)
The degree of state control over land management appears to fluctuate. In theory, with decollectivization of agricultural production, farmers now have the option to switch out of rice production into other crops. The price for rice has been extremely low in recent years, particularly in 1997, leading to a greater push on the part of the farmer to switch to more profitable crops. And yet, perhaps out of fear of losing self-sufficiency in rice, a policy change was introduced in early 1997 such that in some strategic rice-growing areas, including Nam Dinh province in the Red River Delta, farmers had to apply to the commune for permission to take land out of rice production. These observations raise questions around the changing role of the state and its influence as a consequence of the various policy reforms. Further questions can be raised regarding environmental protection and enforcement issues.

A strange correlation was established in Thai Nguyen between lottery sales and deforestation. It is rumoured that in the three to five years prior to 1997, many people in Thai Nguyen gambled on lottery tickets and cut and sold trees from the forests to support their habit. Since then the television lottery—a child of doi moi—was shut down as the government realized its negative social and environmental consequences, and the forest was said to be growing back. The state’s policy of allocating forest land to households was designed to prevent deforestation. In many cases this appeared to be working, although in others land located far from residences was difficult to protect. Measures for forest protection have varied over time. The use of fines largely failed, as did security guards. Recently there was a shift to forest protection teams, but scattered plots of forest land remain hard to protect. Morrison and Dubois (1998: 41) note that ironically... the forest may be better protected on production land than on protection land, since farmers have rights to the products of the forest and are therefore more likely to conserve and manage such produce. Moreover, the individual farmer has little power to protect the forest (for example, from illegal loggers). (emphasis added)

In such instances, suggestions have been made that allocation to individual households may be less appropriate than other institutional arrangements such as allocation to groups of households, who could then rotate responsibilities for ensuring protection of forest lands. This underlines the need for greater flexibility in allocation processes.

Commenting on the difficulties of enforcing forestry regulations, one NGO project coordinator working in Thai Nguyen explained that “No one follows the law here. People cut their own trees out of necessity.” Authorities may turn a blind eye out of sympathy for poor farmers, or sometimes expect a bribe for doing so. Other problems of environmental protection arise around the establishment of national parks or biospheres—a trend promoted by many environmental protection agencies internationally. The environmental buffer zone around Cuc
Phuong National Park (just south of the Red River Delta) was immediately deforested upon being established. Local residents as well as hopeful newcomers began to grow corn for a declared two-year period before the bare areas of the zone were scheduled to be replanted with acacia trees through Program 327. Ironically, the buffer zone had more residents after its establishment than before despite the intention of keeping the population low. Creating a buffer zone and declaring national park status is the worst thing one can do for environmental conservation, explained one foreign NGO project coordinator, since it implies the in-pouring of international funds, which attracts new migrants and encourages the cutting of national forest to grow crops. The land then becomes eligible for funds to ‘replant the forest.’ Program 327 encourages deforestation, he further reasoned, on lands that will then be replanted with a monoculture of acacias or whatever is the latest ‘flavour-of-the-month.’ Insecurity over expected changes in property rights can clearly provoke ecological havoc. When the state handed over forestry control to individual households in Lijiang county, Yunnan province, in southern China, farmers immediately deforested the land and sold the trees, fearing the policy might be repealed (Pat Howard, pers. comm., 1997). These observations further underline the need for carefully managed and researched community-based approaches to resource management, taking into account local livelihoods, needs and incentives.

Lack of clarity and dialogue around the legal framework of Program 327 for reforestation led to people believing that trees that they replanted would be theirs to harvest upon maturity. Program authorities in Hanoi, on the other hand, considered the trees to belong to the state, and that local people would receive only a small compensation for planting and tending the trees. In the allocation of forestry lands, many households were unaware of the deadline for application and were left ineligible. Others chose not to apply for fear of having to pay taxes and not being capable of using the land productively.

Beyond the legal framework and procedures, land classifications are a further area of considerable confusion due, in part, to the number of agencies involved. Agricultural land allocations were administered by the General Department of Land Administration (GDLA), while the allocation of forest lands was channeled through the Department of Forest Protection. The constellation of other agencies responsible for forestry management and uplands development are indicated in Table 13. The fact that separate agencies are responsible for the allocation of agricultural and forest lands, and that the two allocation processes have

---

21 Recently, through Decree 163, forest land allocation came under the jurisdiction of the GDLA.
taken place at different times, is problematic, and can lead to inconsistencies in approaches. In practice, for rural producers both types of land are essential to their livelihood strategies. Moreover, a good deal of agricultural production (tea and other slope land crops, for example) takes place on what is classified as forest land. ‘Forest land’ includes both land having natural or man-made forests and bare lands with the potential for forest cultivation. The General Department of Land Administration (GDLA), the National Institute for Agricultural Planning and Projection, and the Forest Inventory and Planning Institute each have their own land classification systems (Morrison and Dubois 1998: 4-5). Problems emerge in classifying land as bare or unused when it is in fact exploited for agricultural and forestry production. Inaccuracies in classification also lead to confusions of responsibility in land-use planning, such as whether to classify land used for shifting cultivation as agricultural or forest land (Morrison and Dubois 1998: 6). The choice of classification category will favour different actors depending on whether the objective is meeting afforestation targets or allocating land to households, for example.

Table 13. Agencies Dealing with Land Allocation and Upland Development

| General Department of Land Administration | • responsible for land administration and classification and land use planning at national level; at provincial level it is reflected in Department of Land Administration |
| Forest Inventory and Planning Institute | • responsible for assessing forestry resources and preparing national inventories and forest development plans |
| National Institute for Agricultural Planning and Projection | • agency for agricultural planning and resource assessment |
| Forest Science Institute of Vietnam | • national research institute |
| Land Cadastral Department | • recently established under MARD; extends to district level; implements land allocation |
| Committee for Ethnic Minorities and Mountainous Areas | • Created in 1992 and upgraded to ministerial status in 1993; involved with sedentarization program; has subcommittees at provincial and district level |
| Department of Fixed Cultivation and Sedentarization | • established in 1968 to orchestrate resettlement programs |
| Mountainous Ethnic Pro Development Corporation | • implements pilot projects in ‘centres of development’ areas |


Government discourse has recognized these concerns to some extent. One of the five elements of the 1997 government strategy for rural development was to assist households to operate in new market economy structures and to implement land certification and leasing more
flexibly (MARD and UNDP 1998: 21), suggesting that the institutional will does exist.
Moreover, MARD and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) coordinated a national
workshop on participatory land-use planning and forest land allocation in December 1997. One
of the priorities arising from the workshop was to “clarify the legal framework for FLA [forest
land allocation], reach consensus on the treatment of women in the allocation process, and
widely publicize the clarified procedures for forest land allocation” (MARD and UNDP 1998:
30, emphasis added). MARD admits to complications in the process of forest land allocation:

In upland forest areas significant questions of land use rights remain unsolved. State
forestry enterprises retain legal control over large areas of degraded land which is used
for crop production by many poor families. Until classification of this land is
reconsidered and the rights of the enterprises and current farm users are clarified in a
new law, sustainable development will be retarded. (MARD and UNDP 1998: 16)

An important element affecting land allocation outcomes is the method of
implementation, including the degree of participation of and consultation with local population.
This varies greatly by region, and by the particular approach of various collaborating agencies,
which have included the FAO and a number of NGOs (including Oxfam, the Swedish
International Development Agency, and CIDSE, a European church-based NGO). The state’s
top-down, target-driven program of planting five million hectares of forest within 12 years, for
instance, impedes the approach of going slowly and consulting with local people. Land
allocation procedures could be improved with background research on where and how people
use land resources to determine the most effective allocation. By contrast, much confusion was
created in areas where allocation happened all at once. Morrison and Dubois (1998: 28) sum up
the implications of not addressing the concerns of local resource management:

Cultivation across the boundaries of villages is common in some areas, yet allocation
does not take account of the fact that families can own or use land in other villages—
this can lead to conflicts, but may be avoided if land use planning were to take place at
commune level rather than village level. Failure to recognize traditional boundaries
and claims on areas of land during the land allocation process can actually decrease
security for farmers, although the process is intended to increase secure tenure.

Reconfiguring Collective and Cooperative Institutions

Decollectivization, in general, and the allocation of land, in particular, have brought
about a new set of formal and informal institutional constellations. The coming years will likely
see a flourishing of institutional forms for agricultural producers as farmers experiment to find
the most adequate scale and mutually beneficial dynamics of interaction. The reorganization of
institutions to better meet market demands and the needs of rural producers represents a move
away from government 'delivering' development to the people. New discourses emphasize the
competition between and complementarity of different sectors: “rural development will be
favoured where ... provincial enterprises and cooperatives compete with private suppliers of
services” (MARD and UNDP 1998: 39-40). A greater diversity in organizational and property
rights forms—reflecting the building of new institutions and a move away from old-style
collectives—is now flourishing, and enjoys official endorsement:

In some cases single households can best organize their economic and social relations,
in others various forms of cooperation are best. The management of irrigation through
water users’ organizations, and local savings and credit through people’s credit funds,
are two examples where cooperative action has clear potential benefits. (MARD and
UNDP 1998: 40)

Through the policy reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, agricultural production collectives
(hop tac xa san xuat nong nghiep) were phased out, in some cases being dissolved completely,
in others being reformed or remaining in name only. Between 1988 and 1994, 2950 collectives
(accounting for 17 percent of all collectives) were disbanded (Harms 1996). Following a new
cooperative law passed in March 1996, a number of former agricultural production collectives
were converted to service cooperatives. In the past, collectives coordinated most aspects of
production (especially of rice) and also collected tax, mobilized labour for public works, and
performed many other tasks. By contrast, cooperatives operating successfully in the post-land
allocation period generally have a more narrow range of tasks, including coordinating irrigation,
drainage, and pest control, and in some cases providing technical advice, seeds, fertilizers, and
other inputs. In rain-fed areas, farmers in some cooperatives can pay to have water pumped into
their fields during water shortage.

A note should be added here on the distinction between collectives and cooperatives.
Professor Dao The Tuan (pers. comm., 1998), among others, emphasized this distinction, using
collectives to refer to the ‘cooperatives’—as they are more commonly called—that are
associated with the period of collectivized agriculture (in the 1960s-1980s in northern Vietnam).
During this time, both land and labour for production were usually pooled, and membership in
collectives was for the most part compulsory. As in many socialist countries, the lack of
autonomy of collectives vis-à-vis the state made the distinction between what was the property
of the state, a collective, or a cooperative rather meaningless (Hann 1998). Since the
International Labour Organization stipulated voluntary participation and autonomy from the
state as two criteria to define a cooperative, Dao The Tuan reserved the use of the term
cooperative to refer only to the new service cooperatives that emerged since decollectivization. I have adopted this distinction for my analysis.

According to a Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) survey in 1993, out of 16,314 existing collectives, only 17.5 percent (or 2870) of them could be successfully converted to service cooperatives. Another 41.7 percent could be 'partly reconstructed' while the remaining 40.8 percent existed in name only (JICA and MPI 1996: 51). The latter fared poorly due to weak managing boards, poor leadership, and lack of attention by local authorities (Dang Duc Dam 1995: 68). However, they may continue to perform some social functions and collect cooperative management fees and commune government levies. The number of non-operational collectives is increasing due to members' refusal to make further contributions to cooperatives. Such inefficient organizations constitute obstacles to the development of the household economy (Harms 1996).

The regions with the highest proportion of collectives that could be successfully converted (i.e., over 30 percent) were the Red River Delta and Central Coast, where farmers were relatively homogeneous and their lands fairly small. In these areas, individual farmers were unable to manage irrigation systems alone, hence the need for cooperatives. The regions with the lowest proportion of potentially convertible collectives (under 12 percent) were the Northern Mountain region and the Mekong Delta, where irrigation systems managed by collectives were not well-developed. At the end of 1992 the Northern Mountain region had 7645 collectives (comprising 46.8 percent of all collectives in Vietnam) but only 12 percent of these were considered to have the potential to be reconstructed as service cooperatives. A further 39.1 percent could be partially reformed while 48.8 percent existed in name only (JICA and MPI 1996: 49). The permanence of cooperatives in the current period seemed to depend on the extent to which the former collective managed irrigation in any given locale. Unlike other equipment, irrigation facilities cannot easily be divided among farmers (JICA and MPI 1996: 51). In a few cases, responsibility for irrigation management was transferred from the collective to commune authorities or informal farmers' groups.

The Agricultural Cooperative of Dong Bam commune, Dong Hy district is one example of a successfully transformed cooperative that is now better managed. Resources are used more efficiently and costs of production are lower. Its administrative costs have been drastically reduced by cutting its staff from nearly 100 supervisors, technicians and advisory committee members to just a handful of individuals. Machines are not left on all day wasting electricity and water is no longer wasted because each member specifies how much water he or she requires
and terraces and canals are reinforced to avoid water leakage (*Agricultural Cooperative of Dong Bam Summary Report, 1974-1996*).

Up to 35,000 or 40,000 new voluntary farmers organizations and cooperatives had appeared throughout Vietnam by the end of 1993 (Tran Thi Van Anh and Nguyen Manh Huan 1995: 203; JIVA and MPI 1996: 52). These varied forms of ‘new cooperatives’ were promoted by the state, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), and even the World Bank. Such organizations provided services for farmers that they were generally unable to provide for themselves individually. Harms (1996) developed a rough typology of new ‘collective groups’ according to activity. Although there can be considerable overlap, he distinguished the following types: irrigation coordination groups, joint liability groups to access bank credit without collateral, specialized producer groups (e.g., shrimp farmers, cane producers, gardeners, etc., who support each other, exchange experience and access technical assistance as a group), marketing groups, and production groups (e.g., collectively exchange labour or machinery or make joint purchases of inputs). Rotating credit schemes (traditionally known as *ho*) are also common activities of farmers’ groups. Dao The Tuan (1996: 21) observed that in southern Vietnam such organizations were more common than in the central and northern parts of the country where collectives had a longer history and where peasants were more prone to wait for the state to pass a new policy on the changing forms of cooperatives (which it did in 1996).

Alongside formally-structured new cooperatives, other types of arrangements are emerging in the form of solidarity teams or informal producer groups in order to meet various needs of farmers. Coordination and maintenance may be lacking in areas where cooperatives are absent. To address these gaps, small-scale irrigation networks are sometimes coordinated not by cooperatives but by local and kin-based groups. Such small irrigation groups or ‘water users organizations’ among farmers with adjoining fields meet together to coordinate their irrigation needs and avoid disputes by reaching a consensus on irrigation schedules. These kind of customary arrangements, used in place of larger-scale cooperative management, raise the important issue of appropriate scale in resource management and again point to the necessity for a diversity of forms of productive organization to address diverse needs and interests at the local scale.

Opinions varied among officials and development agency staff as to the prospects for new associational forms to emerge. In order for development agencies to promote new associational forms among farmers, they emphasize the need for ‘cooperation’ but not necessarily via old-style collectives. Although the majority may be in favour, those farmers that
already have machines and other means of production are often the most reluctant to join new cooperatives. This raises the issue of unequal distribution of benefits within cooperative arrangements. A representative of the Thai Nguyen province Association of Cooperatives argued that, in the past, farmers with plots nearest pumps and canals received more water and that now it is more equal since “after years of cooperation, people have a sense of mutual help.” Others, including one district-level Agricultural Department official, suggested the reverse, pointing out that cooperation between households for irrigation was better coordinated in the past and that more disputes have arisen in the current period over poor service and favouritism in irrigation management. These contradictory reports serve to underline the diversity of experiences of collectivization and cooperative forms both now and in the past.

Farmers in many areas had a bad perception of the former collectives and had difficulty imagining that new service cooperatives could be any different. One elderly Nung woman warned that “if there were a collective here now, there’d be more hunger.” Mistrust of cooperative structures is a major obstruction for improved management. People are afraid of giving a lot and getting little in return. This problem may be less of an issue in areas where collectives of the past were fewer or less corrupt. Dao The Tuan (pers. comm., 1998) advocated greater appreciation for the commonalities and differences among cooperative forms and to recognize that even in the market economies of Canada and the US there can co-exist strong family farms with strong voluntarily-organized cooperatives. He underlined the need not only to criticize collectives but also to acknowledge their contributions historically and to recognize that, despite decollectivization, forms of collectivization persist in Vietnam, such as when tools are informally pooled between farmers for mutual benefit. What is perhaps often not recognized is that mutual assistance and self-interest (e.g., through joint ownership of machinery) may not be incompatible motives.

Dao The Tuan’s comments underline the problem of misunderstandings around cooperative management. This viewpoint was reinforced in an interview at the Association of Cooperatives in Thai Nguyen. Introducing new organizations and procedures which aren’t well understood by people is inherently complicated. This lack of understanding of new institutional approaches is a problem not only among farmers but also among lower-level officials responsible for policy implementation. When asked in 1998 about the formation of new cooperatives, a Department of Agriculture official in one district in Thai Nguyen replied that they had only ‘received orders,’ but that nothing had happened yet on the ground. The district officials were receiving training workshops in preparation for the new cooperatives. This points
to a further problem. While many new cooperatives have emerged, it is unclear to what extent they are truly voluntary, spontaneous, and autonomous from the state. Farmers sometimes viewed them as a continuation of the former institutions, and the leadership, often the same individuals as those that headed former collectives, might have the same mentality. For the Chinese case, Croll (1994: 107) reports that despite government encouragement, in no cases she observed did households independently establish economic associations. Rather, cadres often closely coordinated such associations. Households in China remained more dependent than expected on the village due to new demands made of peasants that were beyond the capacity of individual households. Moreover, a key distinction in current discourse between the old collectives and new cooperatives in Vietnam is supposedly the devolution of decision making about labour allocation and land use to households. Yet, it could be argued that the cooperatives that nowadays operate to provide irrigation coordination are not actually voluntary for those who require their fields to be irrigated. Moreover, the leadership may not have changed.

Reduction of risk is a critical factor in many production decisions. Farmers who have had experiences of being unable to repay loans obtained to raise their production are often afraid to apply for credit again. Farmers involved in a Vietnam-Finland project in Cho Don district, Bac Kan province (just north of Thai Nguyen) reported a strong desire to establish producer groups for the collection, processing and marketing of non-wood forest products. Farmers here claim to prefer organization in collective groups over individual risk-taking and entrepreneurship (Kiuru et al. 1997). Factors to ensure the success of producer groups are many: cooperative discipline among members and conflict management; credible, experienced leadership; credible and efficient marketing system; appropriate technical support; institutional support; demonstrable success (Kiuru et al. 1997: 60).

Effective financial management is a further key factor in the success of cooperatives. Many collectives face large debts, due in turn to farmers inability or unwillingness to pay off debts to the collective. The fees collected for irrigation and related services are often insufficient to allow the collective to pay off these debts. This is a central impediment to the successful transformation of old production collectives into new service cooperatives. A final issue is the need for a cooperative federation to represent the members, provide information, guidance and training, and act as liaison between individual, autonomous cooperatives (FAO 1994).

Farmers’ groups, new cooperatives, and the possible formation of a cooperative movement or federation are indicative of a new institutional framework emerging in Vietnam. This raises issues about civil society in Vietnam. Foreign analysts often draw attention to the
limited civil society development to support market economic development in Vietnam. Some foreign agencies have raised doubts about whether an autonomous civil society that could pressure the state to provide services will be able to emerge:

local government, households, and traditional institutions in Vietnam are so closely intertwined that the simple dichotomy between state and civil society is insufficient for understanding the context of extension. ... Virtually all local structures (even informal ones) are intermingled with local governmental authorities. ... Truly independent civil institutions are largely illegal. There is rarely a clear separation between state and civil society. (FAO 1994, cited in Morrison and Dubois 1998: 17-18).

Sidel (1995: 293) reiterated the above assertion, noting that it is (still) inaccurate to apply the term non-governmental organization to “the range of Vietnamese research, social action, religious, community, and other groups” that form part of the emerging non-profit sector in Vietnam. However, in writing about post-socialist societies more broadly, Burawoy and Verdery (1999: 6) suggested that “...socialist civil society percolated outside (and even within) the formal apparatuses of power, supplying the necessary lubricants for the party state to function even while challenging its monopoly of power.”

Such distinctions are analytically complex. It is further complex to interpret the current role of mass organizations in Vietnam, including the Women’s Union, Farmers’ Association, Veterans’ Association, Youth Association, and the more recently formed Gardeners’ Association. Some have dubbed these as ‘quasi-governmental agencies’ (Vu Tuan Anh 2000), since they act as channels between ‘civil society’ and the state but remain closely allied to the Communist Party. Since doi moi, many mass organizations shifted roles considerably and began to play an important part in implementing the national poverty reduction program through “mobilizing resources, teaching know-how and transferring knowledge, sharing experiences, helping the poor with capital and labour, with special attention being given to poor women” (MOLISA 1999: 14-15). However, their roles in fulfilling these important functions are often hindered by limited experience and funding.

Disintegration of Mechanisms for Cooperation

The allocation of land and issuing of certificates has for the most part been favourably accepted by the population. Female and male farmers now enjoy greater autonomy in decision making over what and how to produce on their allocated plots. They have more incentives to produce since they can sell any excess on the market and have greater avenues for sideline activities and non-farm employment. Time and again farmers I spoke to praised the shift away
from collectivization for giving them the opportunity to manage their time and labour themselves. Moreover, as a consequence of being able to reap the rewards of their own labour, they work more productively now—or at least more intensively: the lack of economies of scale, especially in the north, hampers productivity increases. The new system is not without its constraints. Despite policy discourses hailing the household economy and development of rural markets, there are significant trade-offs brought about by decollectivization and the quasi-privatized household production system.

New vulnerabilities are shaped in part by institutional gaps in the structure of services for farmers. The scale of administration and decision making for many former collective responsibilities has shifted to households, complicating the coordination of tasks such as control of pests and access to water. In this way, the disbanding of collectives represents a breakdown in (formalized) collective action for protection from various shocks and stresses. Adger (2000a) noted that decollectivization undermined the ability for collective actions to maintain infrastructure and ameliorate flooding hazards from coastal storms. A parallel decrease in the power of collectives to orchestrate long-term goals has been identified in many post-socialist countries (e.g., Muldavin 1996 for northeastern China). In some non-irrigated areas of northern Vietnam and across much of southern Vietnam, cooperatives have ceased to exist. The disbanding of collectives in irrigated areas and the abandonment of organization for maintenance of irrigation and other public works can lead to problems. Cooperation between households for irrigation was often much stronger in the collective period. Now if one farmer wants to grow corn but a farmer in the next field is growing rice and needs irrigated water to pass through the field of the first farmer, she or he cannot do this without permission of the first farmer, opening the way for land-use conflicts to emerge.

Related land-use conflicts have arisen over competition between cultivation and livestock, particularly since the allocation of forest land permits farmers to plant crops in areas that have traditionally been used for grazing animals. Rather than using allocated grazing areas (which are not available in all villages), in many forested upland areas people let livestock roam freely where they can trample or eat planted seedlings. Farmers complain that because of free-grazing animals it is difficult to use such lands for growing anything other than eucalyptus. Henin (1999: 169, n.12) noted that “Families usually delimit their plots with ditches rather than fences. Ditches, however, are rarely dependable enough to keep cattle at bay, and grazing

---

22 This is less of a concern in much of southern Vietnam where these tasks were taken over by commune
animals tend to inflict considerable damage on young trees and hill crops.” Moreover, children who often take the animals to graze may not be aware of newly planted areas (McElwee 1997).

The control of pests such as rats is a further area that has been affected by the decline in collectives. In the past, pest control strategies were determined by the head of collective or work team, but now decisions are made at the level of each field or farmer. The same is true of pesticide applications, as each farmer decides where and when to spray. As long as pest problems do not get out of hand, this small scale management can in some ways be more effective but when problems escalate, pest control represents another area that can suffer in the face of a decline in systems of coordination. Pest control in agricultural crops was also easier in the collectivization period because everyone would plant and harvest at the same time, so pests would have less opportunity to eat grain than when the harvest is staggered. During the period of my fieldwork in 1998, northern Vietnam experienced a rat plague that threatened the environment and agriculture. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimated that 33,000,000 tonnes of cereals and grains were damaged by rats each year (Viet Nam News 1998/03/09). Yet, rather than identifying links between the worsening of this situation and changes in agricultural organization, most news articles I read instead attributed it to the consumption of rat predators such as cats, dogs and snakes.

A related concern in light of the disbanding of collectives is health safety. Many people complain that health problems have mushroomed in recent years as the application of agro-chemicals has also grown dramatically, including the use of contraband chemicals imported from China. Many deaths are attributable to toxic poisoning from agro-chemicals, and public education around proper use is inadequate. Monitoring the use of such inputs is nearly impossible. Collectives formerly provided protective clothing, masks and boots for those who worked on a special team for spraying pesticides. Now, however, people often use only a face mask because it is too expensive to buy a whole outfit when they only spray a small area of land.

On the theme of collective assets, many farmers interviewed for this study commented on the controversies that emerged over the division of livestock when collectives collapsed. Some immigrants who settled in Thai Nguyen from more northern provinces after the Chinese border war in 1979 brought livestock with them and were told upon arrival in their new village that their animals would be temporarily entrusted to the collective but returned to them in the governments.
future. However, when the collectives broke up a few years later, the animals were given to other households. The division of collective assets was often one of the most contentious aspects of the process of dissolution of collectives.

Besides protective clothing and livestock, collective assets such as irrigation pumps and storage facilities are also less accessible to farmers now. The liquidation of assets when collectives disbanded provoked greater inequalities. In some poor communes in Thai Nguyen, the selling-off of irrigation pumps to outsiders (since the local people were unable to afford them) led to a significant decline in the area of irrigated land for the village as a whole. This contrasts with trends elsewhere, in which the irrigated area increased with the intensification of production through the household economy. In another instance in Lang Son province,

Because of the general lack of irrigation infrastructure, the distribution of irrigation water is essentially a family responsibility. Individual farmers built irrigation ditches to bring water from streams and canals to their fields. Unlike regions where village cooperatives exist, no village in Thuy Hung [district] has assembled work teams to build up or maintain the irrigation infrastructure, which, according to villagers, was more extensive and better organized during the brief periods of collective agriculture. 

...The leader of Na Ho [hamlet] commented that 'one definite advantage of collective farming is that water supplies are much more reliable.' (Henin 1999: 219) 

Henin noted that there were no plans to build a new reservoir locally, as no family was willing to give up land to satisfy communal needs. Since virtually all land had been allocated already, there was no space that could be easily appropriated by the commune administration for this purpose. Reflecting the constraints of new scales of administration provoked by decollectivization, Henin (1999: 219) observed that irrigation problems now lie beyond the capacity of the community, and would have to be designed and implemented at a district or provincial level (to provide capital, labour, and expertise).

Even where cooperatives (formerly collectives) continue to operate, albeit with reduced functions, it is becoming harder to motivate farmers to contribute labour or money to public works such as irrigation and drainage facilities, or roads, or even to attend meetings to discuss such matters. At the same time, farmers are dissatisfied with the lack of maintenance and improvements to local infrastructure, including roads, irrigation canals, and public wells for drinking water (Henin 1999: 256). Degradation of public works infrastructure is a key concern associated with the reversal of collective institutions. In the past, if a collective needed a large number of people for a job, such as to build a road or reinforce a dike, it could mobilize sufficient labour. Collectives were able to decide on activities for common benefit such as irrigation, roads, and schools. It was easier to manage these things when the collective
‘represented’ the whole community and was able to divert ten percent of the income for such tasks. With the household economy, it is harder to convince farmers to contribute to these things. The absence of a coordinating body is also linked to the lack of collective crop storage facilities; people instead resort to make-shift means to store crops in their own homes. A well-designed tax system could help to address these problems, although further consideration must be given to people’s creative strategies of resistance and the lack of a culture supporting taxation for such purposes.

Marketing and provision of inputs are another dimension of the expanded market economy that poses problems for farmers. In areas without cooperative services, farmers are unable to access agricultural inputs at wholesale prices. Moreover, without experience or networks for marketing their crops, many farmers are at the mercy of outside merchants who visit the village to purchase produce. Such farmers have little information on market prices and alternative outlets for their goods. Whereas cooperatives coordinated distribution and ‘marketing’ in the past, there is now a dearth of coordinated marketing systems; households on their own are often unable to find market outlets. While a state extension service has become established in the past decade, it offers no assistance in marketing. It has been heavily criticized, moreover, for promoting single crops across vast areas and millions of farmers, inevitably subjecting them to the fluctuations of a poorly developed market economy. Efforts of farmers to improve their incomes by marketing agricultural produce are complicated further by the instability of the emerging market, subject to market gluts and dramatic price fluctuation. Even selling handicrafts to tourists by ethnic minority women in the Sa Pa area offers very precarious income prospects.

In addition to the factors mentioned above, a number of other obstacles have yet to be addressed in the development of marketing systems, particularly in the uplands. Alternative non-farm employment in rural areas, such as food processing and other forms of rural industry, is vastly underdeveloped. Post-harvest drying and storage facilities (e.g., for fruit, wood, and cereals) are also lacking. Thai Nguyen province in 1998 had only one joint venture for tea (with Japan) that provided investment to construct tea processing facilities, and one Canadian NGO in the province was supplying credit for tea-drying bins to be used at the level of one or a few households. Processing facilities are needed to enable rural producers to engage in value-added production and to prevent poor farmers being forced to sell when the prices are low. Poor roads to transport goods for sale pose significant obstacles, particularly in remote areas and for food that perishes rapidly.
To synthesize the themes of institutional change developed above, a characterization of the reconfiguration of household status and functions through property rights reform in agriculture is given in Table 14. A summary of the functions of various institutions for agricultural production during the periods of collectivization and decollectivization is provided in Table 15. The key institutional gaps faced by farmers in the current period, as discussed in various sections of this chapter, can be summed up as follows:

- lack of coordination of water supply in some areas
- problems in mobilizing labour and funds for maintenance of public works (irrigation and drainage canals, roads)
- problems of coordinating pest management
- lack of coordination for marketing among farmers to negotiate better prices for larger scale sales, and transportation of goods to market
- lack of coordination to purchase inputs at wholesale prices
- lack of access to machinery, animal traction, protective clothing for pesticide spraying (former collective assets)
- lack of collective facilities for storage and processing of produce (e.g., mill, tea dryers)
- lack of coordination and management of conflicting land uses (e.g., over crop composition and irrigation needs; between cultivation and grazing)
- lack of crop insurance or social security mechanisms in the face of vulnerability to natural disasters and market fluctuations
- credit is too small, too short-term, or too high-interest

The key point here is the connection between institutional shifts, the decline in coordinating mechanisms for collective action, and increasing vulnerability for agricultural producers. The remaining sections of this chapter examine the related institutional shifts in systems of taxation and rural credit and the implications of the institutional configurations outlined above for differential vulnerabilities.
Table 14. Reconfiguration of Household Status and Functions through Property Rights Reforms in Agricultural Production

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1960s to early 1980s</th>
<th>Late 1980s, 1990s to present</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Collectivized production (in North Vietnam)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Decollectivization and increased marketization of economy</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Basic unit of production management</strong></td>
<td>Collective; predominantly collectivized production, with work-point system (some contracting out to households in early 1980s)</td>
<td>Household ('peasantization' of agriculture)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Property ownership</strong></td>
<td>Agricultural land mainly managed by collectives, while some under state agricultural (and forestry) enterprise management</td>
<td>Quasi-privatization of productive resources through land allocation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Limited private plots ('five percent land') for home consumption and limited market sales</td>
<td>'Greater security' of land rights; liberalization of land use rights via 1993 Land Law: extension of rights to transfer, exchange, lease, mortgage and inherit land, through long-term leases for agricultural and forestry land</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Common property resources</strong></td>
<td>Managed mainly by collective Individual usufruct rights to some upland forest and swidden lands</td>
<td>Increasing enclosure: some areas managed by rural commune/village administration, but much 'forest' and 'bare' land allocated to households</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Role of collectives (cooperatives)</strong></td>
<td>'Agricultural production collectives' provided inputs and managed production and procurement of outputs</td>
<td>New 'service cooperatives' with reduced range of functions: mainly irrigation coordination and pest control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Role of mass organizations</strong></td>
<td>Largely political, mobilized people to participate in state campaigns</td>
<td>Oriented more to service delivery (especially Women's Union), providing technical needs such as credit and some agricultural extension information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Private marketing of produce</strong></td>
<td>Restrictions and social stigma; intermediaries seen as capitalists</td>
<td>Individual responsibility: emergence of intermediary traders, now considered as essential agents to facilitate economic development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Crop diversification</strong></td>
<td>Limited; rice production viewed as central to agricultural development</td>
<td>Encouraged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sideline production</strong></td>
<td>Restricted and social stigma</td>
<td>Encouraged, but limited by infrastructure and other constraints</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Compiled by author.
Table 15. Production-related Functions of Various Institutions in the Periods of Collectivization and Decollectivization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period of collectivization</th>
<th>Period of decollectivization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Meso level</strong></td>
<td><strong>Meso level</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Collectives / production teams</strong></td>
<td><strong>New cooperatives</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- provision of inputs (seeds, fertilizers, pesticides)</td>
<td>- some coordination of irrigation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- provision of machinery and animal traction: irrigation pumps, tractors, buffalo</td>
<td>- some coordination of pest management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- coordination of irrigation and pest management</td>
<td>- some technical advise/information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- provision of technical advise</td>
<td>- some provision of inputs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- coordination of production decisions (crop composition, planting schedule)</td>
<td><strong>State agricultural extension service</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- mobilization of labour and funds for public works maintenance</td>
<td>- provision of technical advise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- distribution (‘marketing’) and transporting of produce and provision of storage facilities</td>
<td><strong>Mass organizations</strong> (quasi-government organizations, e.g. Women’s Union)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- some social security mechanisms in the face of floods or other natural disasters</td>
<td>- some credit programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- provision of credit not required</td>
<td>- some training on agricultural extension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Micro level</strong></td>
<td><strong>Micro level</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- less significant for productive activities</td>
<td>- some collaboration with NGO, international and state programs in provision of financial supports and special services</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Compiled by author.

**Shifting Systems of Welfare and Poverty Reduction**

The economic transformation through *doi moi* in Vietnam has opened up more opportunities and benefits for some groups, while others have been left more vulnerable to livelihood insecurity and potentially volatile markets. Entrepreneurship is now embraced, and tolerance of a degree of disparities is seen by policy makers as necessary for economic development. The structural adjustment process represents a move toward greater enrichment, but also a move away from the redistributive and egalitarian policy orientation that
characterized the past. This form of neoliberal agenda, or what is referred to in Vietnam as 'market economy with socialist orientation,' is linked to greater degrees of differentiation between households as well as between regions. Economic restructuring leads to restructuring of social relations within these households and regions. Bringing forms of power and vulnerability into an analysis of social and spatial change, this section and the following analyze some of the trade-offs implicit within the institutional shifts of decollectivization and the property rights reforms outlined in the previous sections of this chapter. I do not aim to make a systematic review or assessment of national programs here but merely to provide sufficient context for my institutional analysis of agriculture and land issues and the implications for vulnerability.

A state employee I knew in Hanoi told me of a recent encounter she had with the medical system when she needed medical assistance. Rather than using her health insurance card to admit herself into a state hospital through the standard procedure, she relied on personal connections. A doctor friend of her relative called a specialist doctor that he knew and the specialist agreed to make a house call to her home after hours. After examining her, the doctor recommended that she be treated in hospital. The woman checked in to the state hospital where the specialist doctor worked, and received special attention through her personal connection with him. After she was released, she asked her relative’s friend (who had recommended the doctor originally) how much would be appropriate compensation. She then bought a basket of food items, placed an envelope with the money inside, and presented it to the doctor who had treated her.

Formal fees for health services are a new phenomenon in Vietnam. Under-the-table gifts-cum-user fees, as in the instance described above, were given in the past but on a more modest scale. In another instance, a woman farmer near Thai Nguyen City summed up her assessment of the health care system by saying, “when people go to the hospital, they should have lots of money or they can [be left to] die.” There has been a parallel growth in informal expenses for access to improved quality of education and other services. After-school classes have become a must for success at all levels. Drop-outs have also been on the rise as rural households face pressure to increase production. As both state and private sectors reorient themselves for the market economy, the changing institutional constellations underway in Vietnam are producing greater rural-urban gaps, regional disparities, and inter-household differentiation. As emphasized at the outset of this chapter, development models and development discourses in Vietnam, as elsewhere, are being rewritten in the context of decollectivization. As the nature of welfare provision and safety nets is being redefined, poverty
takes on new characterizations and forms of regulation. Capacities for much of the population have been somewhat enlarged despite reductions in social entitlements or welfare provisions. In other words, although *private income* has increased for most of the population, *social income*—through subsidized or free public services—has declined, with the increase in two-tier systems of healthcare and education. White (1992) has described this type of reform as a shift from *support-led* to *growth-led* welfare. In the former, social provisioning contributes to greater equality of wealth and access to education and health services. Growth-led welfare comes through productivity increases and diversification of the economy, but it generally carries the consequence of greater social inequality. Policy makers in the current context must wrestle with how to move beyond frameworks of equity *versus* growth, to consider the possibility for equity to create increased efficiency and productivity (White 1992).

An analysis of livelihood vulnerability must include attention not only to income, social institutions, gender relations and property rights, but also to access to, and benefits derived from, a series of social and public services—education, health services, roads, water supplies (Ellis 1998). These services may be provided by the state or by collectives. Collectives previously offered funds for hunger relief and operated schools, health clinics, and daycare centres. Many forms of social safety nets that were previously available through collectives to assist disadvantaged households have now been eliminated. Bui Thi Lan’s (1994) study in Tuyen Quang province found that without this support, poor people become isolated from the community. However, these cutbacks have not been universal. In his study in Lang Son province, Henin (1999: 256) noted that cooperatives continued to provide single-parent families with labour for ploughing fields, harvesting crops, and repairing houses, to recommend poor farmers for bank loans, and to disburse small loans at no interest to poor families afflicted by illness.

The social security system in Vietnam includes a number of components: social protection, hunger eradication and poverty reduction (HEPR), social insurance, health insurance, and employment and unemployment services (MOLISA 1999). The HEPR program became a national program in 1998, having been a national campaign since 1994. At the same time as the above changes were being implemented, the state maintained certain social safety nets, including the Social Guarantee Fund for Veterans and War Invalids, Social Guarantee Fund for Other Relief, and the Contingency Fund for Pre-Harvest Starvation and Natural Disasters (Vu Tuan Anh 2000). There have also been advances in certain production-related services for farmers, namely in the agricultural extension system and rural credit. However, on
the local implementation of policies for poverty reduction, van de Walle (1999: 117) described how "Poverty-related policies abound, but implementation and coverage rely primarily on local authorities and resources, which are rarely adequate. One result is an enormous variance across provinces in making assistance available to the poor and vulnerable…"

As for social support provided by the state, retired civil servants, soldiers, and state workers still receive small pensions, and special houses (nha tinh nghia) are provided for war invalids. Approximately 80 percent of welfare transfers in Vietnam are for pensions for retired or disabled government or state-owned enterprise employees and for war veterans (World Bank 1995). Yet, these are not necessarily the most needy groups. This means that less support is available for poor households, who must instead depend to a greater degree on informal social safety nets. This lack of official support can also contribute in extreme cases to social disruption. In its 1995 report on poverty targeting and strategy in Vietnam, the World Bank recommended reallocating social funds to target impoverished groups. This was reflected to some degree in the 1996 budget, in which the social protection expenditure rose from nearly 11 percent to over 16 percent. The HEPR fund also went some distance in meeting this objective.

Changing systems of social security encompass both formal and informal social safety nets. The shift away from a planned economy with subsidized social protection is redefining major social institutions and leading to greater dependence on informal and familial networks of social capital for both economic development and welfare provision. One example is kin-based credit, especially for major outlays such as buying a motorcycle or building a house. This underlines the relevance of examining *intra-family transfers* as source of support (and differentiation), particularly in the context of cutbacks in state subsidies and social programs.

Many analyses (e.g., Thanh-Dan Truong 1996) have emphasized that as state social services become increasingly limited, changes in social service provisioning (already limited to begin with) have shifted the burden and responsibility for social reproduction onto the family, and particularly women, as a substitute safety net. This is particularly noted in the arena of childcare, since a number of rural daycare centres formerly provided by collectives were closed down. The number of crèches declined dramatically from 41,977 in 1985 to 13,348 in 1989-90 (Ministry of Education 1991). Similarly, in Laos, "by 1990, agricultural cooperatives had been abandoned. The child-care centers supervised by young mothers and older grandmothers at … cooperative villages had disappeared and child care-taking had reverted to traditional forms" (Ireson 1996: 223-223). The experience of these shifts at the intra-household level can be further disaggregated by the cross-cutting factors of life cycle and class, as women without extended
families or money to pay for private services are disadvantaged by closing of daycare centres. The de-socialization of childcare services implies a “disintegration of social infrastructure that had supported women in their reproductive responsibilities to be on equal footing with men at the workplace” (Thanh-Dan Truong 1996: 2).

Part of the strengthening of economic development institutions to promote productive participation in market activities includes the restructuring of institutions of social protection and human resource development. Studying Eastern European experiences, Rondinelli and Litvack (1999: 18) observed that the following elements were key in social safety net policy: pension systems, unemployment benefits, health and social insurance, and social assistance programs. These authors noted that decollectivization brings about the need for a series of new organizations and fiscal arrangements:

(a) providing social services and increased access of the poor to basic education and health services; (b) opening access to credit for the poor...; (c) expanding productive employment opportunities and sustainable livelihoods for those who are unemployed or under-employed; (d) increasing the participation of the poor in the development and implementation of poverty alleviation policies and programs to assure they are needed and appropriate; (e) providing an adequate social safety net to protect those excluded temporarily or permanently from the market; (f) pursuing policies that promote economic growth and increased productivity so that new opportunities are available for the poor to improve their living standards; and (g) increasing people’s capacity to use resources in a sustainable and environmentally beneficial manner. (Rondinelli and Litvack 1999: 19)

Yet, for Thanh-Dan Truong (1996: 23),

while the dismantling of the collective system has been a necessary response to its inefficiency in so far as production is concerned, policy makers did not give sufficient consideration to its efficiency in insuring a network of social services crucial to the reproductive process. ...[A]lbeit with their limitations, since Doi Moi was introduced there is a total neglect of the area of reproduction of human resources. This has allowed ad hoc household-based strategies to emerge without the clear possibility of cost-sharing between various institutions. Indirectly, these ad hoc reproductive strategies contribute to the exacerbation of social disparity, creating diverse patterns of gender inequality...

Even acknowledging the diversity in household structures, and its implications for intra-household relations, some analyses overlook the significant economic ties between households, particularly through networks of extended family and lineage. Intra-family transfers and support, through the pooling of savings, can also shape varying degrees of vulnerability between households. Nearly half of all households make or receive intra-family transfers—representing a significant form of private insurance, particularly from young to old (van de Walle 1999). Indicative of these economic networks, a study in Thai Binh province in the Red River delta
found that relatives remain a significant source of assistance; 61 percent of rural households borrowed money from family members (beyond the immediate household) before turning to any other source (Vu Tuan Huy 1996: 54). This suggests the need to look beyond the nuclear family or household to understand networks of social relations, support and responsibilities in which an individual is embedded.

Governance and Rural Finance: Taxation and Rural Credit

The effectiveness of local governments to administer schools, roads, and other services varies. Henin (1999: 220) reported that in some communities in Lang Son province, no system of taxation had been put in place to provide adequate road maintenance and upgrading. Agricultural tax rates are set by the national government, but additional fees may be levied by the commune. There are seven qualities of agricultural land for tax purposes. The best quality land is taxed 550 kg of paddy per hectare and the lowest, 50 kg. In Quang Son commune in Thai Nguyen province, most lands were of poor quality. Class five and seven lands, respectively, yielded only 75 and 50 kg rice per sao\(^{23}\) (or 2100 and 1400 kg per hectare) per season. The Vietnam Living Standards Survey 1997-98 revealed a national average of 4.8 percent of household expenditures used for taxes, fees, and contributions. This figure was highest in the Red River Delta and lowest in the southeast. The northern uplands ranked fifth of seven regions in this measure, with just 3.8 percent of expenditures used for taxes.

Rural development is not only an issue of access to land. Rather, it depends upon a set of institutions—including taxation, credit, agricultural extension information, and access to markets—which support agricultural production in a market economy context. Banks and other financial service institutions are a further part of the set of economic institutions for market development, which are considered essential for the development of capital markets and the private sector more generally (Rondinelli and Litvack 1999). In the period of collectivization, credit for production was largely unnecessary as the collective provided most of the inputs and implements for cultivation. In the current period, however, lack of capital is the most significant limiting factor for farmers (JICA and MPI 1996: 67). However, official credit is becoming much easier to obtain than was the case just a few years ago, due to the establishment of The Bank for Agriculture and the Bank for the Poor, the two main lending institutions for farmers. The Bank for Agriculture expanded its loans from 3.3 billion VND in 1990 to 16.7 billion VND in 1995.

\(^{23}\) See glossary for units of measurement and their equivalents.
Loans to households (compared to state enterprises and cooperatives) grew from zero in 1990 to 78 percent in 1995 (JICA and MPI 1996: 61). Given the restricted scope of the Bank for Agriculture in meeting the needs of millions of households, in 1993 the Government established an experimental People’s Credit Fund, a voluntary collective organization to receive deposits and implement loans. By 1996 there were 173 People’s Credit Funds in 14 provinces (ADB 1997: 66). In conjunction with the national Hunger Eradication and Poverty Reduction (HEPR) program, the Bank for the Poor was established in 1996 to offer additional credit options to poor households. Its funding comes in part from the state and international agencies but “domestic non-state budget sources” comprise 60 to 70 percent of the total fund, signifying the degree of self-help in the program (MOLISA 1999: 15). In the face of limited availability of funds for bank loans, some analysts have pointed to the “overwhelming emphasis on self-help credit for income-generating activities” (van de Walle 1999: 117). Group collateral programs represent an alternative model for lending in Vietnam, operating on a limited scale with small amounts of credit.

Mortgaging land (as sanctioned by Article 77 of the 1993 Land Law) constitutes an important source of credit. In China, by contrast, farmers are unable to use their land-use rights as collateral for bank loans. An ADB survey of 2072 households from 24 communes in 12 provinces conducted in 1995 revealed that 37 percent of households in Vietnam were using their official or temporary land certificates to borrow capital from banks. Most households surveyed by ADB (1997) felt that the right to mortgage land was the most important of the five land rights. However, it is questionable how much credit could be acquired upon mortgaging lands in remote upland areas where the land has little market value. The ADB survey further documented the range of sources of credit drawn upon by rural households. Thirty-seven percent of households borrowed from banks, 13 percent from private credit funds with fixed interest rates, and 6 percent from development programs with low interest rates. A further 8 percent borrowed from private sources (such as relatives or close friends) with no interest rate, and 2 percent used small credit groups or cooperatives. The number of households borrowing capital for investment in production had risen significantly, suggesting a growing capital resource base among rural households, and their growing adaptation to a market environment (ADB 1997: 27-28). Henin’s (1999: 213-14) study in Lang Son province found that loans from relatives were twice as frequent as bank loans, and of these kin-based loans (particularly those of the highest value), 23 percent were for medical treatment; 23 percent were for weddings and funerals; 30 percent were used to buy food and medicine; and nine percent were to invest in the
family farm. High-interest, private loans from shopkeepers or other loan-sharks can reach 20 percent per month. In the south, indebtedness through 'hot credit' deals has forced some farmers to sell their land. In the north, people unable to repay are more likely to lose furniture or other assets but so far not land. Besides official loans and informal sector 'hot credit,' there is a long history in Vietnam of locally organized revolving credit funds in which everyone in a group contributes some amount on a regular basis, which is loaned out to one member in rotation or to the highest bidder in the group. Such traditional systems of rotating credit operate on smaller scales in many villages across Vietnam, often being drawn upon for building houses or making other investments. These systems have great cultural significance as symbols of Vietnamese traditions of mutual assistance and community spirit.

Gender discrimination and discrimination against poor or illiterate households can emerge in access to credit. Women applying for bank loans can suffer multiple disadvantages: having to travel long distances, hassles of paperwork and literacy requirements to understand the forms, in addition to having to provide acceptable collateral. These circumstances can force women to turn to informal credit sources at much higher rates of interest. The Women's Union in many communes provides an important service in provision of small loans at low interest to women. Women are assisted making applications, which is especially helpful for women with limited literacy skills.

Household economic strategies are being revised and diversified in multiple ways. Those households that have the means have frequently converted rice land to gardens, subsidiary crop land to land for perennial trees, salinized coastal land to aquaculture ponds, and bare hills to fruit tree orchards (ADB 1997). In the midlands in particular, farmers with more capacity for investment are able to expand their production of highly valuable crops, for example, lychee trees. Some middle-income farmers are diversifying into VAC farms (combining garden, livestock, and fish pond) so as to have a variety of produce to sell throughout the year. For others, however, capital for start-up costs can be prohibitive. Switching out of rice requires substantial credit to prepare the land and purchase new seeds or seedlings or to construct fishponds. In the development of an agricultural commodity production system, entry costs to markets for new crops are often prohibitive for the poor. Two additional concerns with credit are that the size of loans is often too small to make a significant enough investment to improve incomes and that the loans are too short-term. Moreover, the lack of well-established
in institutional support structures such as crop insurance, to facilitate conversion from rice to cash crops, further complicate farmers’ efforts to secure new income prospects.\(^{24}\)

**The Reinforcing of Micro-level Social Capital**

The analysis of vulnerability presented here concentrates less on the physical infrastructure and other technical constraints to livelihood improvement than on social and institutional aspects that enable or restrict entitlements to land. This analysis goes beyond the material assets of land, labour and capital to explain how exclusion and vulnerability crosscut ethnicity, kinship, settlement patterns, gender, and intra-household differences. Two types of non-material assets have received considerable attention in recent years by scholars and development practitioners: *human capital*—referring to health, know-how, and entrepreneurial and other skills—and *social capital*.

From their review of numerous studies in China and Vietnam, Luong and Unger (1999) point to parallels in both countries between intra-village economic stratification in the 1990s compared to the pre-collectivization period. I hypothesize that this *intra*-village differentiation can be explained by the accumulation of *micro*-level social capital among people who are able to convert their social assets into economic gain. This may operate through relations of kinship, ethnicity, community, or political affiliation, among others. Such connections and informal networks explain people’s capacity to negotiate or contest rules or gain access to resources (credit, information, or opportunities), advantages that, acting alone, one might otherwise be unable to access.

Social capital at a more *meso* level has been affected by the disbanding of former collectives. As described earlier, the consequent institutional gaps have not been sufficiently addressed by new institutional forms. Declines in these *meso*-level formations of social capital can in part explain new patterns of differentiation and vulnerability between villages. In its experience of social safety nets and institutional reforms, Vietnam might be likened in some ways to other ‘post-socialist’ nations. In Hungary, Moser and McIlwaine (1997a) observed a lack of community experience with collective action, to voice needs and assert demands. This lack of community social capital—reflecting the difficulty of reconstructing relations of trust—

---

\(^{24}\) Farmers in Dong Tien village (Omon district, Can Tho province) recounted to me an incidence in which many households had borrowed 900,000 dong (about US$80) from the central government to participate in a longan tree project in 1996. Longans had been grown successfully in other neighbouring regions of south Vietnam but 1996 turned out to be the third year of major floods in this area, which ended up destroying all the longan trees planted through this pilot project (amongst other crops). Despite this and the fact that organizers should have foreseen the need for dikes to protect from floods (a costly undertaking), participants were required to repay the 900,000 dong
impeded the capacity of local people to respond to the degradation of infrastructure and other services. These authors further noted that despite the lack of (macro- and meso-level) social capital for community mobilization, (micro-level) social capital, manifested in relations of reciprocity at the inter-household level (for credit and childcare), constituted important informal social safety nets for poor households.

In discussing social capital based on enduring ties of kinship and ethnicity in the current economic context, I want to avoid the impression of a complete restoration of pre-revolution traditions in rural Vietnamese society. While there is some evidence of this (see Kleinen 1999), there are also trends towards a disintegration of traditional values and social relations, inter-generational distancing, and a general decline in moral hegemony. In interpreting these parallel processes my analysis emphasizes the trade-offs between the restoration of old social relations and the emergence of new ones.

Describing cultural processes in China—in the context of labour contracting rather than household agricultural production—Lary (1997: 237) writes of a ‘cultural reversion’ in which “employers of labor have reached into China’s traditional social and cultural systems to find ways of recruiting and using workers. Relying on contract labour signals a reversion to a traditional system in which family and local connections determined employment and in which the individual deferred to the family.” Lary thus makes a negative assessment of the resurgence of systems of labor recruitment based on tenacious cultural norms of loyalty and tradition in a localized rural society, seeing such uses of social capital as decidedly exploitative rather than mutually supportive. That there is a down-side to social capital is not always recognized by scholars, a point emphasized in the discussion in Chapter Three on moral economy, customary institutions, and vertical versus horizontal social capital. The re-inscribing of ethnic and kinship (or fictive kin25) ties in social networks is further evidenced in the structure of trade and distribution of forest products in Thai Nguyen and Bac Kan provinces. As noted in a report by Kiuru, Lehtonen et al. (1997: 60), “family ties and official political positions play an important role in the distribution of products from and within [Cho Don] district.” In addition to arranging of transport and marketing of produce in large quantities, coordination for storage facilities is a further area in which informal networks are increasingly drawn upon.

---

25 A common Vietnamese expression exemplifying the significance of networks of neighbours over far-away kin is ‘sell distant kin, buy close neighbours.’
The role of lineage or kinship in economic and social relations might be described as the genie of tradition—long repressed in a bottle—at last being released. The fate of lineage historically has been the subject of much debate. Contemporary interest in the power of lineage and kinship relations appears to be growing. UNESCO recently initiated a program on genealogy (gia pha) in Vietnam, and some scholars talk positively now of how lineage (ho) can be harnessed as a force for development (Prof. Pham Xuan Nam, pers. comm., 1998). In the period of French colonialism, efforts were undertaken to eliminate the influence of lineage in village administration. Lineage relations are thought to have been further weakened by land reform and collectivization (Werner 1983: 54). However, rather than declining during the collective period, in many highland villages one or two influential lineages—generally those that arrived first to clear and farm the land—retained their influence over whole valleys. They continue to control irrigation and occupy major posts in the village or commune administration. The same families were officers in the colonial period, the leaders merely changing their uniform to fulfill official positions in pre- or post-revolutionary Vietnam. In such settings, newcomers settling in the area can experience significant disadvantages. This is documented in the case study in Chapter Seven. In some pioneer regions, however, economic advantage is less correlated with any dominant lineage. Instead, mutual assistance based on relations of neighbours may be more prevalent than lineage (Dreyfus 1995).

In the period of collectivization, production collectives replaced many of the village’s former roles. In the period of decollectivization, however, village organization is in some ways being restored to its former status. Liljestrom et al. (1998: 241) found that reviving the title of village head in Tuyen Quang province was important for consolidating community culture and identity. The Red River Delta and elsewhere in Vietnam traditionally had in place village-level social institutions, such as social funds and communal lands, designed to reduce risk. Village-level funeral funds are common, with every household contributing one kilogram of rice and 5,000 dong (US$ 0.35) to the household that lost a family member. Reciprocal arrangements for labour exchange—for ploughing, transplanting, weeding, harvesting, building terraces and ponds, and repairing homes—have a long tradition in Vietnam. They have remained popular—or, in other areas, have re-emerged—among kin, neighbours and friends. Henin’s (1999: 203) research in Lang Son province suggests that no one is paid in cash or in kind for such services. The hiring of labourers is still uncommon, except in a few villages suffering from shortages of labour in harvesting anise. In these villages, half the households hire labourers from outside the village at harvest time.
At various levels of administration, parallels can be drawn between new and old elites, adapting to the current-day ebbs and flows of opportunities for converting their political capital. In China, there is strong involvement of local government in business, and under decentralization, highly motivated autonomous local bureaucrats are sometimes able to bypass central government decision-making to better suit their interests (Youtien Hsing, pers. comm., 1999). In Vietnam, some retired state officials or academics have formed their own NGOs to attract opportunities for projects and contract work with international development agencies. Jenson (1997: 22) observed that

Another element of the new rich, not so well captured by the statistics, are those in positions in state enterprises and government whose greater autonomy gives them control over the firm’s surplus or those that can grab the ‘fringe benefits’ that come from positions of monopoly and from control over assets or that are associated with the inflows of foreign investment and aid.

Jenson’s comments hint at corruption, which is certainly a factor in the face of temptations and opportunities for personal gain in the market economy context. Despite these observations, Luong and Unger (1999) offered an alternative interpretation from their examination of the enrichment of rural cadres under the current system in China and Vietnam. Rather than relying on corruption to explain the economic success of local officials, these authors cite the skills in leadership and business management that such people gained from their former positions. These include decision-making skills, the ability to manage large amounts of money, manage workers, and deal with red tape. During the collectivization period in Vietnam, some individuals were able to accumulate capital through networks and connections, such as through state channels of commodity trading, access to trucks and warehouses. This financial and social capital can now be invested in production.

On the changing nature of political capital, Luong and Unger (1999: 146) observed that in China “a more pluralistic system of patronage is developing” as the former narrow structure of rural power gives way to more diffuse patron-client relations. Zweig (1997: 4) also perceived a transformation of relations between local cadres and farmers in China, noting that “cadres now have fewer collective resources to use as incentives to gain compliance with state agricultural plans.” Yet, at the same time, Lary (1997: 250) found that nowhere is the revival of the traditional family more obvious than at the top of society. The PRC [People’s Republic of China] leaders started their political careers attacking their own families. Individual attacks gave way to mass attacks by young intellectuals on the ‘feudal family.’ This stage was followed by efforts to mobilize the Chinese to break the old bonds and create new people [socialist men and women]. Their conceptions of the family have modified over time and now include a regime in which
the status of child or grandchild of a high Party cadre is the best guarantee of success at home and abroad.

Marriage alliances are another way of consolidating political capital. Ireson (1996, citing Stuart-Fox 1986) noted a rise in marriages among politically, economically, and culturally prominent families in Laos' capital city, Vientiane, in order to consolidate alliances between old and new elites.

An interesting parallel among many ‘transitional’ countries is the way individuals and households exercise creative employment strategies bridging the state and private sectors to tap into the resources and benefits of each. Beyond the agricultural sector per se, Verdery (1996: 215-216) points out a phenomena in Romania where workers employed by the state engaged in entrepreneurial activities in the ‘second economy’ using equipment, material, or the physical premises of their formal job unofficially. Yet, the success of such entrepreneurs was dependent on their integration in state-sector employment, which provided an avenue for siphoning off resources. In parts of Eastern Europe, maintaining a family member active in collectives and state farms permits access to machinery and other services (Abrahams 1996). Describing China, Lary (1997: 249) wrote that “The best way for an urban family to benefit from the new economy while keeping some of the security of the old system is to keep a base in the state sector, where rewards may be low but the benefits [e.g., housing] considerable, and send other members to work outside in the private sector....” Examples abound in Vietnam of people working part- or full-time in the state sector and part-time in the private sector, taking advantage of the benefits of both. In Vietnam, even for those working part-time in the private sector, holding an identification card as a state sector worker is necessary for accessing the state hierarchy to gain authorizations. Although the pay is low, there is a strong preference for state sector jobs, given the travel and networking opportunities, among other perks (Goodkind 1995a). Such perks can often also be gleansed by affiliation with a particular network connected to one or more well-positioned individuals. This is sometimes referred to in Vietnam as an ekip (from the French équipe or team).

As Lary (1997: 238) noted of China, “local ties, once swamped by a universalist ideology that stressed class ties above all else, are now ascendant in the cultural vacuum left by the atrophy of that ideology.” Formally suppressed for many years, local connections have now been let loose. The doi moi period has fomented the advent of local identities and revival of personal ties. Paradoxically both globalism—through greater insertion in the international economy—and localism might be used to describe the ideological shifts implicit in the country’s
new economic trajectory. The spatialities of these processes of cultural transformation or reformation within economic transition are captured well when Lary (1997: 238) describes how “the new contract workers owe their ability to move to local connections, the reemergence of local identities, and the reactivation of local and personal ties” (emphasis added). Through the case study in Chapter Seven, I suggest that the degree of local autonomy to adapt national policy is linked to the reinforcing of local identities. Key bases for identity include lineage/kinship, village/region, and ethnicity. These common identities can determine social capital, manifested through labour exchange (to doi cong), informal credit (phuong ho) and other forms of mutual assistance. To the extent that the development of new cooperatives is still weak, people are organizing their own labour-sharing arrangements in line with customary practices of kinship or neighbour relations.

For the most part, these various trends have yet to be studied in detail in Vietnam. For this reason, I am reluctant to make any conclusive statements other than to recommend that future research could usefully monitor the changing nature of horizontal and vertical social capital at meso- and micro-levels in rural areas. This could include examining the conversion or recycling of capitals, particularly among those who are straddling and strategizing across state and private sectors. Another area of limited research to date includes individual and intra-family strategizing in employment to take advantage of various resources and benefits (and compensate for trade-offs or institutional gaps) among the state and private sectors. Further research could usefully focus attention on these interfaces.

Social Networks and Access to Information

The greatest needs for developing this area are new techniques and science. (82 year old San Diu man, Nam Hoa commune, Thai Nguyen province)

In the past, work was only physical, but now people need knowledge as well as physical labour to get ahead. (Kinh woman, Dong Dat commune, Thai Nguyen province)

Isolation from information, trade and market networks, physical infrastructure and institutional structures (credit, land, labour) limit the opportunities for off-farm diversification and employment and worsens seasonal income variability. These factors reduce the capacity of households to withstand shocks, smooth consumption, participate in the benefits of market reforms, and obtain adequate social welfare services. (van de Walle 1999: 116)
In the market economy, land, capital and labour are no longer sufficient: information and entrepreneurial skills constitute key assets for economic success. The market economy demands innovation, and new techniques must be sought out individually. Many transitional economies face an urgent search for economic opportunities. Paralleling this is an increasing demand for information on income-generating opportunities and related entrepreneurial skills. Individuals with better technical expertise and know-how—from previous knowledge or social networks that afford them privileged access to information—are able to apply it to production and reap the benefits. This is true for agricultural and forest products alike. For some households, productively managing forest land is new, and they have little experience in agro-forestry techniques. The conversion to non-rice crops by many farmers is constrained by the limited availability of information on alternative crops that are ecologically viable and have the best prospects for profit. Limited access to technical information about ‘improved’ crop varieties means that farmers face long crop cycles and lower yields, growing what buyers consider to be inferior quality traditional varieties of grain that can only be sold at a reduced price at the mill.

In Son La, a midlands province, many farmers converted from upland rice to mulberry (for sericulture) and sugarcane, especially along the National Highway Number 6, where farmers have better access to trucks which can transport the sugarcane. In this region, mulberry and then sugarcane are the most economically efficient activities, according to one informant, but to grow mulberry one needs many skills and technical knowledge from extension services. Local farmers consider it easier to grow sugar to sell to the factory.

In many cases, policy procedures have not been clearly laid out for farmers or even for local officials. In a context of weak extension services and an agricultural labour force with low technical education, knowledge in Vietnam is a scarce commodity, and it is generally through personal contacts that some people are able to gain an upper hand. Luong and Unger (1999) identify entrepreneurial or artisan skills as a key factor shaping rural differentiation in China and Vietnam. Through experience in the army or school, some people have been able to travel, and gain exposure to ideas, techniques, or specialized training (e.g., as a mechanic). Upon returning to their village, these individuals may be able to mobilize their knowledge for agricultural production or small businesses.

Geography and isolation are key factors limiting flows of information. As noted by Kiuru, Lehtonen, Wikberg et al. (1997), having a large number of middlemen in the distribution system reduces the flow of market information—regarding prices, buyers, volumes, end-uses, quality, etc.—to primary producers. Access to information can also vary by region. Farmers in
southern provinces have prior experience with a market economy and have more business acumen and marketing skills and are better able to take advantage of their land resource base. Within Thai Nguyen province, the geography of information can be mapped on a more micro scale. In the southern part of Phu Luong district, closer to Thai Nguyen City, farmers tended to be more knowledgeable about production techniques so their main priority or obstacle was a shortage of investment capital. By contrast, for people in the northern part of the district lack of knowledge was more a problem in addition to lack of capital and poor infrastructure.

State channels of agricultural extension—in conjunction with the Farmers’ Association and sometimes the Women’s Union—are improving, but they vary by region in the quality and quantity of service. For many, television is a more reliable means of acquiring information, although because of limited media literacy in a commercial economy, many farmers take advertising messages at face value. Tykkylainen (1998) points out the need in transitional economies for establishment of improved information dissemination mechanisms for local, untrained entrepreneurs in need of advice. The development of local associations—be they new cooperatives or less formal groups—could meet this need to support small farmers in diversifying their farm enterprises.

**From New Institutions to New Identities: Perceptions of Land and Property**

Decollectivization can be interpreted as a reformulation not just of economic relations, but of identities and meanings. Linked to my discussion of customary institutions and social capital earlier in Chapter Three, I explore here how decollectivization shapes new identities and mentalities. Comrades no more (the term never stuck among the general populace anyway), people are adopting the market mentality with more gusto than ever before. Many Vietnamese increasingly see themselves as entrepreneurs and consumers, the stigma on private trading now largely lifted. Identities can shape opportunities and constraints. Through their identities, people take advantage of social capital in different ways, be it for commercial endeavors or provision of welfare. Changing institutional forms and property rights thus serve to reconstruct identities of gender, ethnicity, kinship, household and place.

The decline in collectivist ideology and state-orchestrated communal identities has provoked a shift toward identities based more in locality, kinship, and ethnic group rather than the nation-state. Weddings, village festivals, and other ceremonies are much more lavish (some might say ‘excessive’) now than in the collective period. Alongside recent ideological and discursive shifts in Vietnam, one finds a revival of traditions extending into the spiritual sphere:
Collectivism was once assumed to be the answer in the economic sphere, and materialism in the cultural sphere [scholars and government officials declared], with no room for religious beliefs and practices. State ownership of the means of production and an elitism that condemns popular ‘superstitions’ are now both discredited. (Hunt 1995: 117)

As one manifestation of this, visiting fortune-tellers has again become widespread to obtain advice for important decisions in career and personal life.

Land is embedded with economic, socio-political, and gendered meanings. Land has symbolic and spiritual elements, being the focus of agricultural festivals. Central to political power and social status, land produces wealth and sustains livelihoods. Changing property rights and allocation of land to households in rural Vietnam has brought about new conceptions of private property and boundaries. Through this process of decollectivization, the meanings of land have shifted. Where it was once a productive resource for a community or society, land is now considered virtually private property. Following Abrahams (1996), I seek to understand land as a type of property in a symbolic system, both a commodity and an element of social and moral value. The relevance of this discussion for understanding vulnerability parallels the discussion of identity above. Behaviour is often shaped by perceptions of ownership and rights of access. Property ownership and its protection constitute elements of distinction. An emerging market in Vietnam brings consumer goods and new houses. As spatial symbols demarcating private property, fences signify ownership. The growing significance of boundaries and markers is suggestive of the reactivation and regeneration of quasi-private ownership rights. In this way, the new regime of property rights is producing cultural shifts and new conceptions of private over collective property.
The shift from state to household forestry reflects a search for new institutional arrangements to support new forms of forestry management. Yet, the process of surveying, mapping and registering land—a form of reordering the countryside—also implies the categorizing of people into household inventories and into an ordered administrative framework of the state, making it amenable to development planning. The process of cadastral mapping—with its pretense to objectivity and scale—creates security for some, but vulnerability for others, particularly in instances of enclosure of common property. The measuring of property borders to render them unambiguous and formalized in order to create an environment of secure land rights, is not perceived the same way by all peoples. Verdery’s (1994) research in Transylvania shows how changes in landscape can compound conflicting land claims. Inadequate and inconsistent mapping worsens the confusion. Commenting on this phenomenon, Abrahams (1996: 11) argues that “these conditions challenge the idea of a landholding as a solid, fixed resource whose extent and location can be readily ascertained by simple investigative procedures.”

Linked to property and its protection is the problem of theft. Theft of small livestock or poultry or even fruit was a growing concern among farmers during my fieldwork in 1997-98. Unharvested rice was harder to steal, although I heard some reports of this occurring. Some women expressed to me a preference for raising cows instead of pigs, in part because cows are harder to steal. In forested areas of Thai Nguyen, theft of bamboo shoots and cinnamon or fruit tree seedlings was common. Risk of theft can sometimes be a consideration in crop choice. Some said that theft was more serious in the past, especially in the 1980s, but others suggested
that it was becoming increasingly serious in the late 1990s. Young people sometimes joined
gangs and stole in groups. Some men stole crops to sell for alcohol when their wives would not
give them money for alcohol. Others stole for food. To prevent theft, some farmers had to
resort to sleeping in the forest, especially in bamboo shoot season.

This chapter began by noting that agricultural restructuring, the market economy, and
privatization call for a variety of institutions to reduce factors that can threaten livelihood
security. The new discourses and institutional forms brought about through doi moi reflect a
reorientation of Vietnam’s approaches to economic development, land management,
organization of production, and marketing of goods. This is paralleled by new approaches to
social protection—what White (1992) refers to as a shift from support-led to growth-led welfare
provisioning. It is increasingly recognized that building a developmental state may require
tolerating greater social differentiation and mediating trade-offs between efficiency and equity
in order to ensure production incentives in the face of a disintegration of the ideology of (state-
led) cooperation. With market liberalization, as Adger (1999) reminds us, social vulnerability
can at the same time increase through the breakdown of collective institutions that served as
protection from extreme events, yet it can also decrease in other ways with the evolution of the
market economy.

This chapter showed that there have been significant historical fluctuations in efforts to
ensure equity in land tenure. Even after policy makers had opted for collectivization after the
revolution, they continued to tolerate a significant role for the household economy within an
overall collectivized agricultural sector. The nature of recent institutional restructuring of
Vietnam’s agrarian sector since the 1980s has been extensive in terms of land policy and
property rights as well as organizational forms. Implementing the property rights reforms has
met with a series of problems, including significant ambiguities in the status of some lands (e.g.,
for grazing, reserve, and forest), and lack of transparency in some areas. There needs to be
further consideration of the widespread implications of the loss of collectives as a mechanism of
coordination for agricultural production tasks, maintenance of infrastructure, and related
services upon which farmers depend. How some farmers are better able to compensate for these
‘institutional gaps’ in turn shapes patterns of vulnerability among different social groups.

26 In Vietnam, wives are frequently the managers of the household’s finances. Husbands turn over their income to
their wives, who in turn periodically disburse money to them for certain expenses, including cigarettes and alcohol.
However, sometimes a husband, or even a wife, keeps some undeclared ‘black funds’ (quy den) from his or her
Through an analysis of norms and networks, social capital is shown to shape uneven access to information, credit, technology, and markets. Its influence over access to land is considered in the case studies and broader discussion in the following three chapters.
Chapter Five.
Gender, Land, and Rural Livelihoods in Vietnam

Compared to the early 1990s when the doi moi reforms were in their infancy, most people in Vietnam are healthier and have more diversified diets, and improvements in overall standards of living are evident. The emerging economic context in rural Vietnam offers new opportunities for the generation of wealth. These factors point to how vulnerability decreased in some ways with the expansion of the market economy, as people’s capacity to provide for themselves improved and they were more able to access services, particularly through private channels. Yet, within the process of enrichment and expansion of the household economy, differentiation of opportunities and vulnerabilities have also been growing. The benefits of economic reforms are spread unevenly between regions, urban and rural areas, ethnic groups, and between and within households.

Gender is an important factor shaping marginality and dispossession. Access to land, information, and other resources is often mediated by gender. Property rights over land are a key determinant of the differentiated livelihood opportunities among rural women and men. The economic and property rights restructuring in Vietnam is transforming the way that households and individuals access resources. The quasi-privatization of agricultural land can be said to enclose individuals within households, since their main channel of access to land is via the household rather than the collective. This chapter analyzes how shifts in institutional structures shape new forms of access to, and exchange of, land, and how these shifts may be gendered.

Relatively few studies have offered an analysis of gender-disaggregated entitlements in terms of changing institutional regimes. I address this gap by contrasting experiences of collectivization and decollectivization to demonstrate how the reforms to property rights through the quasi-privatization of land have brought about new conceptions of gendered property and the restoration of a pre-revolutionary gendered institution: inheritance of land. In highlighting the gender-differentiated impacts of changing property rights, this chapter identifies the institutional arrangements through which women and men are able to stake claims or are prevented from doing so. Rather than offering a one-sided analysis that portrays Vietnamese women as unilaterally oppressed by patriarchal and market relations, I offer a more nuanced portrait of the enabling and constraining institutions shaping women’s and men’s claims to

---

27 Portions of this chapter were previously published in Scott (2000a; 1999).
various assets. The notion of social embeddedness of institutions is used to explain how these institutions shaping entitlements to land are gendered.

The first section of this chapter discusses Vietnamese gender relations and the sources on the one hand of strength, autonomy, and economic independence of Vietnamese women, and on the other, of the largely patrilineal characteristics of Vietnamese family and kinship relations. Equality gains from socialist policies are also explored and problematized. This is followed by an analysis of the reworking of the family-household and the gendering of household vulnerability in the context of decollectivization. This analysis considers the implications for gendered resource use and workload and access to information and credit, through its examination of economic and property rights restructuring through the periods of collectivization and its later reversal. The subsequent examination of land rights analyzes gendered differences in accessing land via state allocation, market transfers and inheritance.

The next section, setting the stage for the case study, sketches the demographic characteristics of female-headed households in the Vietnamese population. The central question addressed in the case study that follows is how household structure and headship—specifically, different types of female-headed households—interface with new land policies through kinship-mediated institutions to reshape patterns of vulnerability. My analysis concentrates on vulnerability as manifest through access to land at the level of the household, outlining how different types of households embedded within networks of marriage and kinship relations can experience enhanced or restricted entitlements to land. Household-level interviews from one village in northern Vietnam are drawn upon to demonstrate emergent patterns of differential entitlements to land. I develop a typology of female-headed households, linking types of household structures and uxorilocal vs. patrilocal residence patterns to vulnerability in land entitlements. I give particular attention to inheritance—an institution that has taken on renewed importance in the context of decollectivization. This typology—emphasizing the diversity of institutional arrangements of female-headed households—is proposed as an analytical outline for future research.

**Vietnamese Gender Relations**

Gender relations are revealed through a range of practices, representations, roles, and resources. Gender identities in Vietnam are influenced by folklore, religious beliefs and traditions (particularly Confucianism and Buddhism), revolutionary and war experiences, government policies and laws, and changing economic environments. As economic
opportunities diversify, gender practices have become fragmented and subject to renegotiation, with women and men mapping out responses in unfamiliar terrain. It should be noted that this discussion of Vietnamese families characterizes ethnic Kinh, particularly in northern Vietnam. While some of these characteristics are shared among other ethnic groups, the overview here is not able to account for the significant diversity of family relations among ethnic minority groups in Vietnam.

Women in Vietnam have a number of traditional seats of socio-cultural, economic, and political power. Some power stems from the bilateral kinship system and associated gender complementarity outlined in Chapter Three. Compared to China, Vietnamese women’s status in the family and society is considerably higher, and women have a high level of involvement in marketing goods and managing household finances. The value placed on ‘family harmony’ in Vietnam is well captured in the proverb, ‘husband and wife in harmony can scoop the East Sea dry’ (thuan vo thuan chonh, tat bien Dong cung can). The activities of women imply significant control over resources and access to spaces—forms of control and access not afforded to women in many other countries. Women have also traditionally enjoyed a number of mechanisms of support and protection within the village. Many village temples had funds from communal land to support widows. Women further participated in village-level rotating credit arrangements. A more practical observation regarding women’s mobility relates to women’s customary dress in trousers, which facilitates their riding motorcycles, although the modern motorbike, designed with women in mind, also make this possible in mini-skirts.

Vietnam is one of only two countries in the world that boasts women’s museums—one in each of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. Photos of women war heroes, including acclaimed Mothers of War Martyrs, are also portrayed in many museums around the country. One photo common to several museums depicts three women taking part in the Ba Dinh uprising in Thanh Hoa, captured by the French in 1886. Other heroic women in the country’s history up to the founding of the Indochinese Community Party in 1930 include the Two Trung Sisters, Lady Trieu, Lady Y Lan, and Bui Thi Xuan. The Women’s Museum contains a statue of Vo Thi Sau, an adolescent girl who had been sentenced to death by the French in 1952.

For centuries, Vietnamese women have dominated commerce and many handicraft industries. Yet, curiously, Luong (1998: 291) noted that “statistical data also indicate that the role of women in industrial entrepreneurship has suffered a decline in the 20th century, including the socialist era—despite the Marxist state’s emphasis on gender equality.”
There have been a striking number of women heroines in Vietnamese history who still enjoy considerable renown, some after more than two millennia. Following the revolution, streets across the country were re-named to bear names such as Hai Ba Trung and Ba Trieu. The Two Trung Sisters (Hai Ba Trung) led the first insurrection against Chinese invaders in 40 AD
by directing an army of 80,000 with 38 female generals. Later, a 21-year-old peasant woman led another rebellion against Chinese invaders in 245 AD. Literary tales further celebrate the strength of Vietnamese women and their sacrifices, the most famous of these being Nguyen Du’s *Chuyen Kieu (The Story of Kieu)*. As another example, writing of the poverty of Vietnamese peasants in the 1940s, Pham Cao Duong (1966: 148, cited in Long 1973: 46) observed a “tragedy [in which] a husband holds the plow while his wife, his son, his daughter-in-law, and his daughter act as buffaloes, pulling it. They hitch to their shoulders ropes padded with pieces of torn matting lest the ropes cut into their flesh.”

A Vietnamese proverb reminds people that “when the enemy reaches the house, women must defend” (*giao den nha dan ba phai dang*). Such images in the popular imagination were resurrected and ingrained in people’s consciousness through struggles for national liberation and later during the 1965-1968 bombings, when the North Vietnamese state campaigned for support with its dictum “three readinesses, three capacities.” For men, this entailed “the readiness to fight, to join the armed forces, and to be assigned any task for the country” and for women: “capacities to take care of the family and encourage male family members to fight, to take charge of production and other tasks, and to serve the war and prepare to fight” (Luong 1992: 202).

‘General of the interior’ (*noi tuong*) is a label colloquially conferred on women. Women’s mythical influence over men is the subject of many jokes among Vietnamese men, particularly those concerning the existence of a so-called *hoi so vo*, an association of men who are afraid of their wives. In other instances, if a husband returns home after being away for a period of time, other men joke that he had better behave now that he is again under his wife’s *quan ly* (management). Describing her strategies of intra-household decision-making, one woman told of how, in making renovations for her house, her husband tried to impose his own ideas, even though she had spent more time in looking at various plans and coming up with a more sound proposal. Thus, she had to ‘gently’ convince him of her idea—in a characteristically feminine Vietnamese way—so he could then make the decision ‘himself.’ This example speaks to the complexity of gendered negotiations in decision-making practices and the superficiality of many mechanically applied research methods that attempt to document them.

In raising the topic of gender equity with nearly any educated Vietnamese man, one will likely be told that gender equity is a non-issue in Vietnam. Legal codes dating from the Le dynasty (1428-1788) (also known as the *Hong-duc Code*) have been associated with an ‘old feminist tradition’ in Vietnamese society. What is unique about the Le dynasty codes is the
protection and equality of property rights in inheritance that they provided to women, enhancing women’s status significantly compared to their Chinese counterparts. The codes also provided for the right to divorce and protection from violence. In a study of ancient land registers in Tu Liem district, near Hanoi, Nguyen Duc Nghinh (1993) found that a quarter of land-owners were women. While 45 percent held fewer than three mau, nearly nine percent held 10 to 20 mau. Under the Le Dynasty laws, women could even be entrusted with huong hoa, land reserved for ancestors’ cult. Yet, whereas the Le code ensured a widow’s rights to keep inherited land upon remarriage, the Chinese and Nguyen codes denied this (Ta Van Tai 1981: 130). Werner (1983) observed that although women were not given access to communal land, they could own private land. Accordingly, women benefited as the proportion of private to public land increased in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Equal rights under the Le codes were not assured in all contexts, however. Inheritance of huong hoa, the lineage’s patrimonial property, continued to be endowed to the (male) lineage head. “Male heirs, even of a junior status, i.e., sons of secondary wives or female serfs or slaves, had priority over female heirs ...to avoid the extinction of the family’s name for lack of male heirs to carry out the worship” (Ta Van Tai 1981: 101). Moreover, women’s rights to property had weakened considerably by the 19th century. The later Gia Long Code of the Nguyen dynasty (1802-1945) “was a faithful copy of almost all the statutes and substatutes of the [Chinese] Ch’ing Code” (Ta Van Tai 1981: 99). Despite the emphasis in public discourse on women’s equality given to women’s long-standing formal rights to inheritance, there is little talk of the potential gap between tradition and practice. Few studies have examined practices of women’s inheritance as compared to rights supposedly guaranteed by law. The later case study attempts to address this gap.

Vietnamese Family and Kinship Relations

The characteristics described above illustrate the operation of some social norms and customary institutions that shape women’s empowerment. As shown below, these coexist with patrilocal residence patterns and kinship and family relations influenced by Confucianist traditions of patrilineal ancestor worship (tho cung), which disempower women and increase their vulnerability. Kinship systems in Vietnamese (ethnic Kinh) society are influenced by both the bilateral system characteristic of other parts of Southeast Asia and by the patrilineal tradition in China. A characterization of the diversity of female-headed households is developed later in this chapter.
In describing social norms for Vietnamese women, class and education represent important differentiating factors. Confucianism tended to be stronger among educated upper classes. Luong (1992: 71-72) describes the male and elite-oriented kinship model of Vietnam’s pre-colonial and colonial elite. This system emphasized patri-villagelocal residence, spatial separation of men and women, and women’s domestic roles in contrast to men’s public-domain activities. Where women did participate in the labour market and contribute an income to the household, this did not augment their authority in the patrilineal family.

Women’s control over household resources and commercial activity does not necessarily accord them a higher status if we examine the Confucian and Buddhist value systems which scorn professions that are concerned with profit. In the Confucian conception of social order—with scholars at the top, representing exemplary moral behaviour, and merchants at the bottom, suggestive of self-interest and a lack of morals—Vietnamese women had an easier time fitting into society as merchants than did men.29 This was so, Luong (1998) explains, because of the additional factor of women being ideologically constructed as inferior in Confucian thought. In this way men faced a greater moral dilemma than did women by engaging in commercial activity.

Though divided by class and status, villages of northern Vietnam were unified through extensive social ties. Luong (1992: 61) emphasizes that village institutions from the household to communal levels were dominated by a “class-structured, kinship-centred and male-oriented hierarchy”—the latter despite women of all classes participating in the labour force. The identity and status of a person in Vietnam are tied closely to his or her group affiliation. A person’s identity is thus not primarily defined as an individual but as a member of a family and lineage, as well as a village. A woman’s identity is closely linked to her role as daughter and, later, as wife and mother. There is significant social pressure for women to marry before age 30, by which point they begin to be seen as ‘spinsters.’ The family, for both husband and wife, constitutes an important source of social support and protection. Yet, upon marriage, social norms prescribe that a woman abandon much of her association with her parents as she adopts a new identity with her husband’s family, often outside of her native village. Daughters are often referred to in Vietnamese expressions as ducks, who grow up and fly away.30 This socially constructed institutional arrangement places married women in a more vulnerable position,

29 The four classical professions were scholars, farmers, artisans and merchants (si, nong, cong, thuong).
30 The parallel relation from the perspective of parents in law is reflected in the expression ‘dau la con, re la khach’ (‘a daughter-in-law is like one’s own child; a son-in-law is merely a guest’).
lacking intra-family support from her side of the family. One poor woman I spoke to, for instance, explained that although her father was reasonably well-off, she did not like to ask him for money because after marriage this was considered inappropriate. Instead, she sometimes borrowed from her sister.

Even in pre-colonial times in Vietnam, extended families were less common than nuclear families. This marks a significant difference from China. This characteristic has been noted to have had positive implications for women's position in Vietnam, given their greater degree of independence from parents-in-law (Werner 1983). Trends in rural and urban areas in Vietnam are similar in that two-thirds of households are nuclear, 23 percent are extended households, and only about four percent of households comprise people living alone (Desai 1995). In extended households, in southern Vietnam, it is four times more common for married couples to reside with the husband's parents than with the wife's. In northern Vietnam, however, the difference is 15 times, suggestive of the stronger Confucian tradition of patrilocality in the northern region. This figure is consistent with a separate survey conducted by the Institute of Sociology in Thai Binh province in the Red River Delta, which revealed gendered residential patterns after marriage. In 68.8 percent of cases, newlywed couples settled, if only temporarily, with the husband's parents, while only 4.4 percent settled with the parents of the wife. The latter figure was 6.0 percent in urban areas and only 2.8 percent in rural areas (Vu Tuan Huy 1996: 32). Even if a husband works away from home for extended periods of time, returning home only a couple of times per year, it is more common for a wife to live with her husband's parents than her own.

Further regional differences can be observed in patterns of endogamous vs. exogenous marriage. Village endogamy is more common in the Red River Delta (Kleinen 1999: 38, Gammeltoft 1999: 53). By contrast, in southern Vietnam, village exogamy was more prevalent (Hickey 1964: 91) and in the northern midlands, presumably due to settlement being more recent and village institutions less dense (Hy Van Luong, pers. comm., 2001). This seemingly dichotomous distinction between endogenous and exogamous marriage is somewhat more fuzzy in practice, particularly since people in Vietnam distinguish between marriage to a person of the same hamlet vs. of the same commune (Gammeltoft 1999: 53, n.3).

The practice of polygamy was made illegal through the Family and Marriage Law of 1959. Although statistics on the extent of polygamy are hard to come by, there is general agreement among social researchers that it continues to be widespread, regardless of ethnic group. In many villages in Thai Nguyen, a man can have two wives living across the street from
each other. “The social attitude towards divorce, the fear of principal and minor wives that
divorce might put them in worse economic circumstances by depriving them of land and
sustenance, and the low status of single or divorced women all contribute to a tacit acceptance
of [the practice of de facto polygyny]” (Ungar 1997: 291). Polygyny—marriage to more than
one woman—is related in part to son preference. Mai Huy Bich (1991: 54-55) cites a 1988
survey carried out in Thach That district near Hanoi which confirmed that “all local men
without male progeny had taken second-rank wives with public approval in spite of legal
prohibition.” The author further explains that when a second-rank wife’s parents pass away, it is
the responsibility of a first-rank wife to organize proper funerals for them, as she would for her
own parents. For wives unable to produce a son, especially critical for those married to the
eldest son in a family (con ca), Vietnamese tradition dictates that she should accept her
husband’s taking a second wife or else adopt a son, often a nephew of her husband, so as to
ensure the same bloodline. Sons from outside the lineage may be adopted, but primarily only for
securing additional labour for the family.

Son preference is further evidenced in the lower fertility rates for women who already
have one son. In contrast, women whose first children are female are much more likely to
continue having children until bearing a son. This is reflected in the unbalanced sex ratio among
young children in recent years, especially as family planning campaigns have become more
widespread. The emphasis on sons in Vietnam is important for ensuring survival of a family’s
lineage and for having male progeny to continue the practice of ancestor worship. It was
traditionally believed that the extinction of a lineage constituted a ‘crime.’ It was the
responsibility of a wife to propagate the lineage of her husband and a cause of shame if she were
unable to do so.

Sexual promiscuity is by some reports becoming increasingly common, especially by
men in positions of authority, such as directors of companies and institutes, who have money to
spare. The commodification of sexuality through prostitution is said to have increased rapidly
with the advent of the mobile phone (for ‘call girls’). Some attractive female university students
work as prostitutes as an easy way to make money, particularly if they are poor and don’t want
to or can’t find other work. A related concern is the rate of abortions in Vietnam, rumored to be
among the highest in the world. In Thai Nguyen province, abortions in state clinics cost 30,000
dong (slightly more than US$ 2) and 200,000 (slightly less than US$ 15) privately. Private
clinics are sometimes favoured since there is less paperwork required. Demand is greatest after
Tet (Lunar New Year) and summer holidays. Not all abortions, however, are linked to children
conceived out of wedlock. Abortion is sometimes used as a method of contraception among married couples and is particularly promoted through family planning campaigns for couples that already have two or three children.

Socialism and Gender Equality in Vietnam

Women have very high rates of participation in the labour force, close to 75 percent of the female population, according to the 1989 census. This represents fully 90 percent of the male rate (cited in Wisensale 2000). The agricultural sector in Vietnam has long been dominated by and dependent on female labour. A feature of collective agriculture was that the rural labour force consisted of a majority of females, since military mobilization of men for many years left women to manage farming activities on their own. As one example, due to the draft after 1979, involving armed conflicts with China and Cambodia, the local, mainly agricultural labour force in Son Duong village, Phu Tho province was 68 percent female (Luong 1992: 183). The situation was similar elsewhere. Since the war years, women have been conspicuous in forming road construction crews and occupying virtually all the positions of street sweepers and garbage collectors in Hanoi. Women’s roles in administrative positions increased dramatically during war-time, but fell back afterwards. The loss of jobs in the state sector under doi moi restructuring was also significantly higher for women than for men. Between 1989 and 1992, of all state sector workers, 22.5 percent of males, and 27.9 percent of females were laid off (Goodkind 1995b). Yet, as mentioned in Chapter Four, an important factor in the decline in poverty through the doi moi period has been the resuscitation of women’s commercial, informal sector activities, particularly to compensate for the loss of formal employment (Fahey 1998).

Gendered labour practices in agriculture vary significantly, based on the war experience (males fighting at the front and subsequent high male mortality), the extent of seasonal male and female migration and non-farm employment, ethnic group, and life cycle. Moreover, the gender division of labour in Southeast Asia has been characteristically fluid. A further difficulty in drawing any characterization regarding the gender division of labour is the different perception that men and women have of the relative contributions of their own and each others’ labour. A study conducted in the Red River Delta by the Research Centre for Gender, Family and Environment in Development found that “men think they are participating [in agricultural work] more than the women say they do, and that they are participating [on] more equal footing with women than the women say they do” (CGFED 1996: 41).
On top of these factors, regional variations within Vietnam can also be cited. As an indicator of such differentials, women's participation in a national integrated pest management program of farmer field schools between 1994 and 1996 revealed that in the north, 37.2 percent of all participants were women compared to 8.5 percent in central Vietnam and 7.6 percent in south Vietnam (FAO 1997: 1). The high participation in the north is likely related to the longer history of collectivization and socialist policies encouraging women's involvement in the Women's Union and political, economic, and social affairs in the public sphere. Many years of war also accustomed women to manage most of the economic and social affairs of the village while men were at the front, although in subsequent periods of peacetime women have also faced significant reductions in official postings.

In the nationalist patriotic and socialist ideology, especially during the war, gender differences were often downplayed. Socialism's answer to 'the woman question' was to erase differences and integrate women into the labour force. Socialist images of women labouring in industry and agriculture were portrayed on billboards and monetary notes. Discourses of the Vietnam Women's Union reflected this Communist Party policy stance. The socialist system in general and agricultural collectivization in particular were supposed to have exploded the myth of women's inferiority to men (Mai Thi Tu and Le Thi Nham Tuyet 1978: 218). Yet, some analysts challenge the notion that state policies actually produced any fundamental differences in gender relations: "socialist measures to equalize the position of men and women in society have not led to a real change in deeply felt cultural beliefs about male and female roles and positions" (van Broekhoven 1996: 14). Although often providing important social and educational services for women, the collective system in China and Vietnam alike may have offered less liberation to rural women than many analysts generally assumed (see Judd 1994). Luong (1992) explains these stumbling blocks in terms of the interplay of 'contradictory currents in Vietnamese ideological formation.' He cites the contradiction between the Marxist espousal of egalitarian relations and a hierarchical sociocultural model based on the patriarchal notion of family harmony. Luong underlines how village life involved an ongoing tension between the ideology of socialist collectivism and "a hierarchical sociocultural model centering on the kinship unit," despite the feudal class structure being abolished after the revolution. This observation highlights the strength and continuing role of the family in village activity, an element even more obvious now that the household economy has received official endorsement in the period of decollectivization and doi moi.
In Vietnam, as in China, analysts are observing a revival of family loyalty and family authority (particularly via the household head) in the context of decollectivization and the marketization of the economy: "The family as an economic unit is flourishing again, after the battering it took from socialist political movements. Family authority has been reasserted and family ritual and ceremonies reborn" (Lary 1997: 249). With the reemergence and legitimation of private enterprise, rather than becoming more individualistic, Lary (1997: 238) observes that in China, dedication to the family is a further element in the durability of this system: "The young contract worker understands that, for the sake of his [sic] family, he must go away to work. He knows he must put his family’s interests before his own and suffer to help the family—as previous generations of sojourners have done." This notion of suffering and sacrifice is common also to Vietnam. However, as a social trend, the reinforcing of family values and the sacrifice of the individual to support one’s family that Lary describes is not universal in Vietnamese society (nor is it in China). Social breakdown and globalization have also meant that traditional identities based on family and village have become fragmented as people increased their contact with urban and international spheres.

The Vietnam Women’s Union has fulfilled an important role since its foundation in the 1930s as a vehicle for moving forward women’s rights. Since doi moi, it is the mass organization that has undergone perhaps the most significant reorientation. Whereas its primary functions used to be family planning and political propaganda (generating awareness and mobilizing support for national campaigns), since the reforms, the Women’s Union has strengthened its role in promoting economic activities at the household level. Its metamorphosis reflects a shift from a mainly political orientation to one that is more practical, technical, and service-oriented. The Women’s Union offers credit for poor women, and when credit through this channel is unavailable, helps women with the paperwork to apply for credit through the Bank of Agriculture or Bank for the Poor. In line with the state’s shift to lift the stigma on personal enrichment and entrepreneurship, in 1998 the national level Women’s Union changed its focus from subsistence needs to encouraging economic development and the household economy. Although more active now, the Women’s Union remains uneven in its coverage and is non-existent in some places. It is often weaker among ethnic minority women and also in southern Vietnam. The Women’s Union has taken on an important role in promoting legal literacy, making women aware of their rights and opportunities. It has offered an important

---

31 Many women have also left home as contract workers to help their families.
channel for collaborating with NGOs in implementing development projects, taking advantage of the Women's Union’s extensive network that spans the national to the hamlet level. In the recent shift in development orientations ‘from women to gender,’ the Women’s Union has been self-critical of its family planning work for formerly only targeting women.

Despite these practical activities—indicative perhaps of welfare and economic efficiency objectives—since the economic reforms the Women’s Union has played an ambiguous role in terms of an agenda of women’s empowerment. While providing much-needed credit for small investments (e.g., in livestock), the Women’s Union in Thua Thien Hue province in central Vietnam also orchestrated ‘good housewife contests’ and facilitated credit from the Bank for the Poor for women in the Hue market to get new hairdos in order to be more attractive to tourists! The president of this provincial Women’s Union reported that the organization teaches women to maintain the Vietnamese (or more precisely, Confucian) traditions of work, morality, beauty, and speaking when appropriate. Such practices reveal considerable ambiguity surrounding the vision of women and gender relations being promoted by this organization. The multifaceted and complex outcomes of decollectivization are discussed further in the next section.

**Reworking the Family-Household through Decollectivization**

To understand how land policy and practices have shaped and been shaped by gender, it is helpful to examine more broadly the reconfiguration of the household and its status, both *de jure* and *de facto*, in the context of changing land policies. During agricultural collectivization in northern Vietnam, from the 1960s to the early 1980s, the economic functions of the family household were de-emphasized, with collectives substituting for the peasant household as the principal unit around which production was organized. Yet, collectivization in Vietnam was never all-encompassing. In order to produce extra crops for home consumption, households were usually allocated ‘five percent lands.’ The household economy for agricultural output thus remained important by volume, often having much higher productivity rates, even if proportionally much smaller in terms of land area, than the collective sector.

Vietnam, like China, has experienced successive waves shaping and reshaping the household unit over time as policy sways between favoring collective as against domestic institutions. At this juncture, domestic organization and activity are the centrepiece of the rural development plan in China (Croll 1994). The same might be said of Vietnam. Policy changes have served to redefine the status and functions of the household, and the family-household as an economic unit is flourishing again. Decollectivization implies not only a reworking of
relations between state, market and household but also within households themselves. The renewed status of the household as production unit brings about new responsibilities for tasks that were formerly determined by the collective, in particular the division of labour and the allocation of resources, including land inheritance. Whereas assets in the collective period were pooled and employment guaranteed through membership in a collective, now inheritance and kinship networks are being rekindled for economic gain. Land conflicts of various sorts, including intra-family disputes over inheritance, have emerged in this process of shifting land relations and property rights. Decollectivization can thus be interpreted as reinforcing differences and in some instances as also strengthening the authority of the family unit.

The economic and property rights restructuring in Vietnam is transforming the way households and individuals access resources. In her analysis of household formation, private property and the state in Indonesia, Li (1996) analyzes two mutual processes through which households are strengthened as domains for production, consumption and investment. The first is the privatization of agricultural land, which encloses individuals within households, restricting the range of relations through which they can access resources. The second is state intervention—ideological, economic and administrative—that aims to reform households as units of ownership, control and responsibility. Both processes appear to be at play in Vietnam. Changing rules of access to land are linked to changing household status. In the period of collectivization, land could be accessed on the grounds of an individual’s membership within a collective. Since the 1993 Land Law, by contrast, land must be accessed at the level of the household by state allocation or at the level of the individual by kinship-mediated inheritance or market transactions. In this way, the new land policies imply that the state no longer takes responsibility for ensuring that land be accessible to individual household members (Smith 1997: 158).

Amidst pressure to create an environment inviting to foreign investment, the 1988 and 1993 Land Laws, among other legal reforms, represent an effort to move towards a Western-style legal infrastructure. Yet, Ungar (1997: 282) questions the “tacit assumptions that a Western ‘individualist’ model may serve to rectify Confucian patriarchal practice in Vietnam.” Although there is little empirical research of this phenomenon, some analysts express concern that it can imply a disempowerment of wives vis-à-vis the (male) head of household in decision-making patterns within the household, as the head of household takes on a new role, assuming higher economic and legal powers than other members (e.g., Truong 1996; Tran Thi Van Anh 1999; Ungar 1997).
In attempting to pull together the various strands of this analysis into a conclusive statement on gender and intra-household relations through the economic and property rights reforms at the household level, I struggle to resist over-simplifications. Is it the case that women are becoming subject to increasing male authority in the household through the revival of traditional patriarchal norms, evidenced through patrilineal inheritance of land and more elaborate marriages, funerals and death anniversaries? Or are individuals within families more independent, with women gaining increasing bargaining power as their income-generating opportunities expand? Is it the case that, as reliance on informal social capital networks rises, women are disadvantaged? Or are women's own networks serving their needs adequately? Is it the case that the family, and in particular women, are being relied on as a social safety net in the face of increasing cutbacks in social services for child care, social allowances for the disabled and elderly, etc.? Are women’s workloads being intensified? Or were social services never really very extensive in coverage and women’s workloads always high—such that the situation of households (and particularly for women) is no worse now than before? Furthermore, women can now celebrate the freedom from having to attend endless meetings and from taking part in collective production groups. Those who can afford to do so may opt out of the workforce altogether in conscious rejection of socialist policies of women’s liberation via integration in production.

I portray the contrasting positions on these issues in Table 16. The reality is that both extremes of these statements are probably true in some places for some social groups. However, it must be said that the discourses represented on the left side of the table were much more common among academics (e.g., Truong 1996, Tran Thi Van Anh 1999, Bui Thi Lan 1994), while those on the right side were more prevalent among rural women themselves. The majority of rural women I spoke to admitted working very hard but nevertheless gave me the impression that in recent years their lives were more comfortable materially and that they now have more awareness—through television, radio, and training programs—of how to better care for themselves and their children. I want to avoid the suggestion that such women have a ‘false consciousness’ and that they resist coming to terms with their own oppression. At the same time, it is possible that much of the latter discourses reflect a temporary period of overcoming frustrations with the collective system without fully appreciating the constraints and inevitable differentiating mechanisms of the market system. What can be said is that the new economic and institutional context offers space for the birth of a new consciousness or identity (or
multiple identities) among women in light of a displacement of old socialist discourses of liberation.

Table 16. Ambiguous Discourses: Interpretations of ‘Household Reworking’ for Intra-household and Gender Relations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subjecting women to greater male authority in the household?</th>
<th>...Or providing women greater opportunity and autonomy?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• women must depend on their husbands or other male relatives for access to land</td>
<td>• families are more nuclearized and independent, and intra-household bargaining power is more flexible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• traditional patriarchal norms of family loyalty and authority have been revived</td>
<td>• renewal of women’s activities in markets offers women a space of control and autonomy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• strengthening of the family-household as a culturally-embedded economic unit of property ownership, labour organization and investment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• informal social capital/networks are strengthened; these may be weaker among women</td>
<td>• women have their own networks to meet their needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• in moving away from the redistributive and egalitarian policy orientation of the past, and forms of collective action to respond to crises, the burden of responsibility for cutbacks in social services are borne by women: ‘family as social safety net’</td>
<td>• social services were never significant in quality or quantity, so the workload for women is no more intense than previously, but now there are more opportunities for generating higher incomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• women’s workload is intensified</td>
<td>• freedom from endless meetings, bureaucracy, and required work groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• middle and upper class women may opt out of participating in the labour force</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Compiled by author.

Similar readings that challenge the notion of ‘decollectivization equaling women’s oppression’ can be found in analyses of China’s reforms. Judd (1994) suggests that patriarchy was strengthened by collectivization and weakened by decollectivization. She cites the rural reforms in China as being not wholly detrimental for women, since women can obtain a greater degree of autonomy and more effectively pursue their own interests in units of smaller size, such as households, as opposed to being required to join work teams. She notes that women’s work groups outside the household have disappeared, and married women show no sign of missing them. In this way, Judd concludes, the collective may have offered less liberation to rural women than many analysts assumed. Pine (1996) observed that women in Poland are being redefined as invisible in the public sphere, while women’s traditional, domestic work is emphasized—yet such a redefinition of gender practices can represent a willing and conscious shift in some cases. Bin Zhao (1997: 49) refers to this trend of Chinese women opting for
domestic life as “a post-feminist, or rather an ‘anti-feminist’ trend” among some young women. In light of the mass consumerism and ‘home modernization’ in the 1990s, some young women choose to retreat from fully participating in public life back into an increasingly comfortable domestic milieu. This represents a reaction to the previous official line on women’s liberation. In a somewhat similar vein, Maifair Yang’s (1997) film, “Through Chinese Women’s Eyes,” documents the parallel shifts in economic relations as well as ideology. The film portrays how, in the current period of economic reform, Chinese women struggle to see themselves as women rather than as men and seek to define new identities for themselves, negotiating gendered and sexualized commercial images. For Fahey (1998: 245), “the beauty contest is replacing the revolutionary war as the battleground for defining femininities in Vietnam.” Use of the traditional ao dai dress has been on the rise since doi moi began. Women post office workers wear these outfits daily. These observations serve as a reminder of the growing divergence in experiences of gender, and particularly the place of class within them, during the current Vietnamese economic ‘transition.’ The next sections examine gendered labour and land rights under changing institutional regimes.

Collectivization

Turning to an intra-household reading of the ‘collective period,’ Mai Thi Tu and Le Thi Nham Tuyet (1978) offer a glorifying portrayal of the achievements of collectivization for gender equality, wherein husband and wife each contributed to joint income, and hard-working women could earn more work-points than their husbands. In a celebratory tone, these authors (1978: 214) rejoice that

Cooperativization of agriculture meant that Vietnamese peasant women, 90 percent of the female masses, gained complete freedom both in their work and economically: when she entrusted her individual plot of land to the collective, the Vietnamese peasant became an active member... on equal footing with men and first and foremost with her husband. Gone were the days when she did the field work, raised domestic animals, did the household chores, cared for her children and other activities single-handed, while her idle husband, relaxing in the central room of the house, was nonetheless considered the ‘main pillar’ of the family. Work was paid separately from now on...

While capturing well some of the de jure objectives of collectivization policies, such a reading has some key omissions. First, it pays little heed to the de facto and on-going disproportionate contributions during this period made by women, as well as the elderly and children, to the upkeep of family plots on the ‘five percent land.’ Families often had a division of labour for sideline tasks, with children and sometimes women returning home from the fields,
engaging in fishing for small fish, crabs, shrimp and molluscs in ponds and streams (Nguyen Xuan Lai 1967). Such goods served to improve diets and supplement income. Honeybees and silkworms were also raised privately. Work on the family plot was often done in the morning or evening, mainly by the elderly or children. In Thai Nguyen, ‘five percent land’ was used, among other things, for rice, maize, soya bean, fruit trees, and sugar cane, for home consumption and for sale. Some women estimate having spent about one-third of their time tending this land, and two-thirds working for the collective. If there were no elderly in the household or if the children were too young to help, the wife would perform most of the work on the household’s plot by herself.

Second, although post-revolutionary laws in Vietnam provided for formal equality between the sexes, unequal structures persisted implicitly in a variety of forms, including uneven compensation for labour along gender lines. In the collectivized agriculture system, although there was some flexibility in tasks, ploughing, harrowing, and spraying insecticide were considered men’s tasks. Women of all income levels took the main responsibilities for seeding, transplanting, spreading manure, weeding, harvesting and threshing. In addition, women, with assistance from elderly household members and children, performed most tasks relating to animal husbandry and picking tea leaves, domestic chores and child care. Work points for the cooperative labour contributions of women tended to be lower than for men, reflecting the dominant discourse of what constituted appropriate feminine and masculine work. ‘Women’s work,’ done by hand or using simple tools such as hoes, sickles, or baskets on shoulder poles, was perceived as ‘light’ or ‘simple’ and was accordingly assigned fewer work points (Le Thi 1990: 24, cited in Tran Thi Van Anh 1997). One workday for transplanting was assigned 10 points, one workday for fertilizing got eight points, whereas one workday for ploughing or carpentry, perceived as being more challenging and technical, earned 12 and 14 points respectively (Tran Duc 1991, cited in Tran Thi Van Anh 1997). Ireson (1996: 211) noted that for Laos, labour-saving technology offered little for poorer women: with the exception of rice husking, both socialism and economic liberalization have done little to alter women’s food preparation chores. Mechanization of ploughing and threshing tasks more often replaced men’s labour than women’s.

The experience in Laos offers some insights into the complexity of institutional change and gender relations. To the extent that collectivization brought about changes in the male household head’s role in determining labour allocation and the timing of each stage of the agricultural cycle, agricultural cooperativization threatened the traditional authority of men. But
women's own land-use rights, a distinct sphere of women's authority, was also undermined by this institutional reshuffling. The complex interplay of collectivization with gendered social norms for the Lao [Thai] ethnic group was explained by Ireson (1996: 226-227) as follows. In the bilateral kinship system, traditionally

there was a tendency for women to inherit or to eventually accumulate more of the paddy land than their brothers. Brothers often married women in other villages [i.e., uxorilocal residence], either receiving a non-land inheritance upon marriage or selling inherited home village land to a resident family member, often a sister. Cooperatives [collectives], by usurping the control over agricultural labor and land, often threatened the authority of senior household men or the land rights of senior household women (Evans 1990, 131-132). ... Some village men were able to mitigate their loss of control over household labor by becoming members of the cooperative’s [collective’s] governing committee, an option rarely open to landowning women who truly did lose control of their land when they joined the cooperative [collective]. (emphasis added)

So did collectivization strengthen male authority? The answer is yes and no. Work points may have discriminated against women's work, but it did provide them some fixed compensation for their labour and limited to some extent the household head’s authority over family labour and resources. Important qualifications regarding the experience of collectivization can also be made based on ethnic group and livelihood type. Ireson observes that “since agricultural cooperatives were implemented mainly in paddy farming villages [where ethnic Lao, or Thai, predominate], cooperative [collective] organization may have had little effect on traditional family and kinship relationships in Khmu or Hmong villages” (Ireson 1996: 226-227). What collectivization did imply for Hmong and Khmu women was (1) restriction of marketing, causing their incomes to decrease, and (2) restriction of swidden areas and resettlement of people, provoking increased population pressure on upland fields coupled with the prohibition against the practice of swidden farming.

Phases of Decollectivization

Recognizing the discrimination women faced in the work point system under collective agriculture and the important control that women had over marketing activities prior to collectivization, a significant avenue for future research could involve exploring the role that women played in bringing down the cooperatives and calling for a new organization of agricultural production. Vietnamese sociologist “Dao The Tuan attributes much of the push for renovation in Vietnam to rural women and the poor who insisted on conducting petty commodity trade” (Fahey 1998: 225). Women's informal sector activities in handicrafts and marketplaces were hard to control. The control women yielded in the sphere of marketing prior
to collectivization gave them a degree of autonomy that was taken from them under collective agriculture, thus explaining a motivation for their opposition to the latter. An alternative reading, however, emphasizes the greater workloads women now face with marketing responsibilities in addition to all their usual tasks. Once again this underscores the ambiguity in interpretation and the co-existence of multiple benefits and constraints, particularly in women’s relationship to markets, which varies significantly from place to place, as well as between and among women of different social groups.

The agricultural policy reforms, namely Directive 100 (1981) and Directive 10 (1988), gradually legitimized a shift from collective cultivation to individual production by households on their own allocated plots. This began with contracts and quotas and eventually led to long-term leases being issued to each household on the basis of number of labourers. Werner (1983) provided a useful analysis of the gendered effects of this policy of household contracts, noting that it was principally women’s work that was decollectivized and made the household’s responsibility, thus it is unregulated and tends to provoke overexploitation of women’s labour. Three of the six main tasks previously performed by the collective and, under Directive 100, assigned to the household—namely transplanting, weeding, and some harvesting—are all tasks performed largely by women. Ploughing, water and pest control, and some harvesting, remained in the hands of the collective. Werner (1983: 49) highlights the significance of this shift in terms of the “increase in women’s work and domestic labour as a solution to the economic crisis and the decline in participation of women in social production and public life.”

Much is made of women’s status in Vietnam, in Vietnamese and Southeast Asian studies literature as well as by Vietnamese people themselves, as being higher than in China or India. Yet, what is not so readily acknowledged is the tremendous workload that many women must take on in order to fulfill the social norms and expectations reinforced by their family, village, and nation. The intensification of production and expansion of sideline occupations through the household economy has often led to increased workloads for women with little or no time for leisure, relaxation, or further training. This lack of time to attend training courses and meetings then explains in part why women have less access to information about new policies, programs, and technologies or other opportunities that could benefit them. Moreover, state services for agricultural extension tend to offer little assistance for the farming activities that often concern women, such as poultry, small livestock, and garden vegetables with low external inputs. The increase in activities such as gathering cooking fuel and preparing pig feed has increased the labour of women. Despite the generally low remuneration, in many cases women’s off-farm
work can generate the major share of a household’s income. In one survey in Tuyen Quang province, almost 100 percent of the rural women sampled said they got up at 4 am to prepare breakfast and feed the animals, and they started working in the fields at 5 am in summer or 6 am in winter. They returned home at noon to prepare lunch and do housework, in the afternoon going back to the fields, tending the home garden, or doing sideline occupations. They went to sleep at 10 or 11 pm (Bui Thi Lan 1994).

Although employment and some degree of economic security were guaranteed during the collective period, households with fewer labourers were somewhat disadvantaged in receiving proportionally fewer workpoints and benefits. Ireson (1996: 227) observed that, given the traditional complementarity of women’s and men’s labour in a household (in Laos as in Vietnam), collectives represented an important social safety net for single parent households in rural areas. Collective child-care centres offered scope for a better life, in that the labour of single parents could be freed up during the day for agricultural tasks, and their labour could be exchanged for other tasks that they found too difficult to perform.

Changes in patterns of resource use and workload can also be linked to differentiated control over common property. Where available, resources managed through common property regimes—such as lands for grazing, fuelwood, fodder, gathering medicinal and nutritional forest products, and water supply—were formerly accessed either through the collective or by individual usufruct rights (such as for swidden lands). These resources were subject to increasing enclosure through the decollectivization period, a phenomenon that affected men and women differently based on gendered resource use. Enclosure and allocation of these lands and resources to individual households can force changes in the collection of water, fuelwood, fodder for animals, and other forest resources. This can have repercussions in terms of the time required to access these resources, reflected in increased workloads for certain members of the household. As ecologically diverse lands are converted to industrial crops and fuelwood trees, for instance, women’s opportunities for making a living off other resources from these lands are reduced.

In constraining women’s or men’s opportunities to partake in livelihood-enhancing activities, increased workloads can aggravate livelihood vulnerability. Women’s and men’s workloads can be further differentiated by class or income level. At the risk of oversimplification, one trend is for men to increasingly specialize in marketing higher value goods

---

32 See Ireson-Doolittle and Ireson (1999) for an example.
which may be collected in the village by intermediaries in trucks, while women must still walk to markets to sell lower-value produce. In wealthier households, men may own a means of transport and work as middlemen to market goods for others. This trend of differentiation through privatization of machinery and processing equipment—increasingly common in Vietnam—is also detailed in Ireson’s (1996: 211) study of Laos:

Some agricultural cooperatives during the socialist collective period received government-supplied rice mills. Later, with the redevelopment of a cash economy..., some prosperous villagers sometimes operated rice mills as a private business. ... Only households with sufficient rice for most or all of the year, however, are able to afford (and therefore support) the use of a mill. Poorer women, then, are less likely to benefit from this important female labor-saving technology.

To better assess how conditions have changed for different social groups in the context of the reforms, age and stage in the life cycle are crucial considerations. Poverty is particularly common, for example, among couples with young children and high dependency ratios. With the reorganization and intensification of production through the household economy, a key concern is child labour, often reflected in school drop-out rates. Nguyen Van Chinh’s (1997) study documents children’s labour contributions over time to cooperative production, the household economy (on ‘five percent land’), and to school and Young Pioneer activities. Prior to 1975, schools and Young Pioneer groups mobilized labour, particularly for symbolic purposes, to involve students in work on school farms that would contribute to the school’s income. Child labour on cooperative land was minimal and usually only called upon in cases of households without a main labourer (such as when the main labourers were seriously ill or on military duty), or for households with a high number of children to feed. For example, some children under 12 would work tending buffaloes for the cooperative, as assistant labourers, for which they would be allocated work points. Child labour on ‘five percent land’ was more significant, although the plots were small. After the introduction of the output contract system in 1981, through Directive 100, children’s labour contributions increased significantly as households were allowed to keep for themselves surplus production beyond the required contracted yields. Additional inputs were labour-intensive, with many households mobilizing children’s labour to help boost production. Following these reforms, male labourers also tended to move into the non-farm sector, including seasonal migration, while wives and children were left burdened with the majority of farm labour. The above discussion has emphasized the impacts of decollectivization for gendered workloads. Women are further disadvantaged both by the poor dissemination of information about laws and state programs and by limited technical
knowledge and skills. These factors constitute further threats to women’s livelihoods in impeding access to livelihood-enhancing activities and assets.

The remainder of this section outlines changes in gendered land rights. In the current context in Vietnam, the three principal means of accessing land are (1) state land allocation and certification through the 1993 Land Law; (2) market transfers and leasing of land-use rights (this includes contract farming, share-cropping, and other arrangements); and (3) inheritance and other kinship-mediated arrangements (e.g., informal use-rights). Inheritance is becoming increasingly important; of the three, it is the most explicitly susceptible to gender bias, mediated by intra-family relations. However, as will be shown, there are de facto ways in which the other channels of land access can also pose more difficulties for women than men. Each of these is discussed in turn below.

State-issued Land Allocation

The 1993 Vietnamese Land Law mandated that land allocations be determined on a per capita basis, implying equal access for all household members. However, the rights for individual household members are not spelled out—and anomalies in the Land Law can accentuate gender bias (Ungar 1997). Vietnam’s Marriage and Family Law addresses the division of assets in the case of divorce, but it does not deal specifically with land (Tran Thi Van Anh 1997). Land-use right certificates were originally issued in the name of the household head. Although this was later revised to incorporate the names of both husband and wife, field research in 1997 and 1998 revealed that the revision was slow to be implemented. Consent of both parties is required to dispose of land, while only one is needed to acquire it. In Laos, by contrast, land registration disenfranchises women by only including the name of the (generally male) household head on the land certificate (Ireson 1996).

Many women as well as men are of the opinion that it is not really significant whose name appears on the certificate since all household members can access the stipulated land. It is generally taken for granted that it is sufficient for the husband’s name to appear on the land-use certificate. Unlike parts of Africa and other regions, in Vietnam generally there is no distinction made between land belonging to men and women—it is taken for granted that it belongs to the household as a unit. Thus it often is considered out of place to many rural families as well as policy makers to draw attention to the absence of women’s names on land-use certificates, at

---

33 The term ‘transfer’ is used rather than ‘buying’ and ‘selling’ since all land formally belongs to the state, and only the use-rights can be transferred and exchanged.
least in the cases of 'typical' nuclear families. However, responses by widows in a series of participatory poverty assessments across four provinces in Vietnam revealed that changing the name on the land-use certificate from the husband to wife after the husband’s death was extremely complicated. And, without the correct name on a land-use certificate to use it as collateral, it is difficult to secure a loan (World Bank 1999: 87). This is further evidence of how land allocation was conceived with a ‘typical’ male-headed household in mind.

An Oxfam UK/I (1997) study documented gender differences, disaggregated by ethnic group, in access to information on land policy. This study in two communes in Lao Cai province in the northwestern highlands pointed to ethnic and agro-ecological factors shaping patterns of participation by women in meetings held by the Cadastral Department to discuss the allocation process. Women in the lowlands commune and women of Kinh background attended meetings at higher rates than women in the highlands and those of ethnic minority groups. The study further reported that women continued to be unaware of the legal implications of the certificates, even in cases where women’s names had been included on the land-use certificates following consultation with Oxfam project staff. Moreover, in the process of land allocation itself, few women were involved as local cadastral staff. This reinforced the likelihood of women being poorly informed of their rights within the certification process. This example underlines how social norms and (poorly implemented) legal institutions—two factors in the analytical framework outlined in Chapter Three—can mediate livelihood vulnerability among women.

Market Land Transfers

In practice, the distinction between market- and kin-mediated access to land may not be so clear-cut since kinship and other social networks may influence land-use contract market dealings. Gender differentials in access to land through market channels have yet to be studied in detail, given how recent the legal changes permitting market transfers are. Much more land is transferred through informal or semi-legal channels but informal transfers are harder to document systematically. One constraint is the lack of information networks for women to tap into to find out about opportunities and procedures for land transfers.

Inheritance

One of the five land rights legislated to contribute to land rights security is the right to inherit land. Article 76 of the 1993 Land Law indicates that “After an individual to which the Government assigned land for planting annual [crops] and raising [aquaculture] products died,
his [sic] land use right will be left for the inheritor regulated by inheritance law” (cited in ADB 1997: 64). At the time of the ADB survey in 1995, there were only 4 of 24 communes where the survey was conducted that reported cases of practicing the right to inherit land. It is possible that in other cases, land had informally divided among off-spring but that the certificate still bore the father’s name.

Rights to equal inheritance for men and women were guaranteed by the 1959 Marriage and Family Law (modified somewhat in 1986). In the collective period (until the late 1980s), inheritance of agricultural land was a non-issue, as land was accessed through one’s status as collective member. In the context of decollectivization, however, kinship-mediated land inheritance is taking more effect, and notions of property are becoming increasingly gendered. Equal rights to inheritance are often ignored, and the division of assets among offspring are worked out differently on a family-by-family basis. Women more often inherit mobile property—such as gold or buffaloes—rather than land, particularly if they reside outside their parents’ village after marriage.

Few studies of decollectivization provide careful documentation of the gaps between rules—be they legal rights or social norms—and prevailing practices. No studies that I have encountered offer a detailed analysis of de facto inheritance patterns in Vietnam. In the opening chapter of Tinker and Summerfield’s edited book on women’s rights to house and land in China, Laos and Vietnam (Tinker 1999), questions of inheritance are not even addressed as a central analytical category. Moreover, studies tend to focus on the ‘typical case,’ reflecting social norms and making claims such as, “married women do not inherit property from their natal families” (Ungar 1997: 285). This overlooks the less numerous but not insignificant instances of uxoriloclal residence where women may indeed inherit land from their parents. It further ignores cases of land negotiations in circumstances of widowhood, separation, divorce, or second wives. The case study below describes some such instances in an attempt to fill the gap in analysis of rural reforms.

Due to the tradition of ancestor worship, inheritance may be slightly larger for the first son, who holds the responsibility of making offerings to and worshipping ancestors. In the past, in the Red River Delta and many other parts of Vietnam, influential lineages had a plot of patrimonial land, known as huong hoa, maintained by the lineage head (gia truong, a position only held by males). The profits of this land would be used exclusively for festivals and offerings for the ancestor’s cult.
The Vietnamese reforms, like Judd (1994: 34) analyzes in northern China, brought an erosion of women’s rights to land. Although land allocations were made to households on a per capita basis, unmarried daughters could not usually preserve these land rights in a patrilineal and patrilocal context, especially in cases of exogamous marriage, where daughters marry outside their own village. Although land allotments were generally calculated on a per capita basis, a daughter who married after land was allocated was generally unable to sell or rent her portion of the household’s land, since social norms tended to deny her this possibility. Moreover, since households were often allocated multiple plots of varying qualities of land, it would be potentially conflictual to determine which plot belongs to a daughter in terms of rights to sell or rent it (Beresford 1994: 38). Patri-virilocal residence is predominant in Vietnam, although cases of uxorilocal and neo-local residence also exist. Sons often receive their inheritance upon marriage, although conflicts may ensue among offspring after the father’s death, and there have been cases of land left to daughters being usurped by other family members. Among the Tay-Nung and Kinh households I interviewed in Thai Nguyen, women generally inherited land only if they had few (or no) brothers or if their husband had no land. In such cases, their inheritance was sometimes smaller than that of their brothers. As land pressures increase, inheritance of land by daughters may become less common. Fieldwork in Thai Nguyen and secondary sources from Lang Son province suggested that women rarely inherited any part of the family’s hill land (cf. Henin 1999: 171, n.14). Land constitutes a growing basis for differentiation and as time passes its concentration is bound to increase.

The Law on Marriage on Family stipulates women’s rights to an equal portion of the household’s assets upon divorce. Yet, in practice, land is often not split. The husband’s family may pay compensation to the wife for the house and land, but often at a rate much below the market value. Men may subsequently inherit additional land from their parents, causing women to end up with much less land than men following a divorce in addition to typically having to care for any children (Tran Thi Van Anh, pers. comm., 1998). Some cases have gone to court in which parents-in-law seek to reclaim a wife’s land after divorce, but generally courts have upheld the rights of the wife (Oxfam 1997).

Widows represent another case in point. If a woman becomes widowed at a young age, her identity becomes ambiguous. She may stay with her husband’s family and inherit the household’s land, assuming it was not in the name of her parents-in-law. Alternatively, she may sell land by daughters upon marriage may be more common in southern Vietnam (where the rate of village
return to her parents’ house, generally receiving some compensation for her husband’s assets, although disputes with parents-in-law are not uncommon in such circumstances. For older widows whose parents-in-law have already passed away, cases vary as to whether the land is transferred to the widow’s name or, following Confucian morality, to that of her sons. The ‘three obediences’ (tam tong) prescribe that a woman will follow the orders of her father before marriage, her husband after marriage, and her son upon the death of her husband. Indeed, even when a woman does not cede legal ‘ownership’—or, in the Vietnamese case, a land-use certificate—in practice she may forfeit to male family members the right to make decisions on the use of the land or its potential lease or transfer. This reflects the divergence between a legal right and its social recognition, and underscores the need to examine processes and not merely policies. Discussion of cases of divorce and widowhood underline Agarwal’s call (mentioned in Chapter Three) for women to have property registered in their own names to facilitate their bargaining power.

Diversity among Female-Headed Households in Vietnam

Many recent feminist analyses have drawn attention to the problematic assumption of a straightforward equation between female-headed households and poverty (Chant 1997; Jackson 1998). As Jackson (1998: 69) succinctly argues: “The point is not that women are poor but that poverty is gendered.” The case study below takes up this notion by exploring the variations in access to land experienced by different types of female- and male-headed households, rather than assuming all female-headed households to be poor. This approach applies the dissertation’s analytical framework on social relations, institutional, and organizational factors mediating access to land for different social groups. Chant (1997), among other scholars, distinguishes between de jure and de facto female-headed households. The former term refers to cases in which the female head is widowed, legally separated, or an unmarried mother, while the latter refers to instances in which husbands or male partners are away working. A further distinction, termed hidden female-headed households (Moser and McIlwaine 1997b: 27), has been applied to cases of single mothers living with their parents or other relatives, when the latter are designated as household head. The discussion in the remainder of this chapter attempts to further disaggregate and understand these categories and their implications for gendered land rights. In Vietnam, forms of female-headed households in rural areas are diverse and associated

exogamy is higher) compared to the Red River Delta (Hy Van Luong, pers. comm., 2001).
with multiple causes, many of which are different from the more typical circumstances of
divorce or common-law relations that account for cases of female headship in urban areas or in
the West.

The denominations outlined above may need to be adapted for Vietnam, to
accommodate an additional category. At least 27 percent of rural households are headed by
women. Yet, about one-third of these comprise households in which, for a number of reasons,
the husband resides with the female head—cases that in an international context might not be
labeled female-headed at all. This is particularly common among state sector workers where a
woman is assigned housing based on her employment, but it also can exist where the husband
may have been absent for some reason at the time of the registration of the household as well as
in cases of uxorilocal residence. The remaining 67 percent of female-headed households (or 18
percent of all households) are comprised of the following categories: nine percent married with
their spouse absent, five percent divorced, six percent separated, six percent never married, and
41 percent widowed (UNDP 1996). It is customary, especially in northern Vietnam, for the
eldest person in the household to be declared head of household, further accounting for
significant numbers of female headed households in the older age brackets where widows are
more numerous.

There is significant regional variation in female headship, accounting for 24 percent of
households in northern Vietnam, 26 percent in the central region, and 31 percent in the south
(Vietnam ICDS 1997: 53). Data summarizing the demographics of female-headed households in
Vietnam are presented in Table 17 and Table 18. The discussion below emphasizes the variety
of types of households headed by women in Vietnam. A key point often overlooked is that
female headship does not imply that the woman designated as household head is the primary
provider of support to the household members. A second key point related to the plurality of
forms of female-headed households is that a female-headed household is not necessarily headed
by a single mother despite the international stereotype to this effect.
Table 17. Demographic Statistics of Types of Female-Headed Households in Vietnam

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Household</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Married, with spouse at home</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married, with spouse away</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separated</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never married (with or without children)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 18. Proportion of Female-Headed Households Disaggregated by Age of Female Head (percent)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 20</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-24</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>13.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-34</td>
<td>12.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>17.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>16.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-49</td>
<td>23.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-54</td>
<td>25.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55-59</td>
<td>30.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60-64</td>
<td>30.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65+</td>
<td>31.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Over recent generations, successive wars left a demographic 'dent' in the Vietnamese population. For rural areas, in 1994, in the age brackets of 50-54 years, the sex ratio was only 69.2 males for every 100 females. In the 55-59 age bracket, the ratio is similarly striking at 73.6 (Vietnam ICDS 1997: 14). The percent of women over age 15 who were widowed was 10.7 percent, a slight decline from the 1989 figure of 11.6 percent (Vietnam ICDS 1997: 23). The figure is slightly higher in the central and southern regions than in the northern region. The number of actual widows may be higher still, as the data do not account for widows who have remarried. The high rate of male mortality during successive wars left demographic impacts not
only on the number of widowed women, but also on the number of single women who did not have the opportunity to marry, due to the shortage of marriageable men. Given that the average age at marriage is 25.1 for males and 22.7 for females, most couples are married well before age 30. Yet, in the age brackets over 30, there are significantly higher figures of single women compared to men.

The incidence of divorce or separation is a further element that can have an impact on land relations among female-headed households. Figures from 1994 indicate that 2.3 percent of rural adult females were divorced or separated. Here again, there is significant regional variation: 3.3 percent of all adult females in southern Vietnam, 2.2 in central, and 1.6 in the northern region (Vietnam ICDS 1997: 24-25). It should be noted that this figure accounts only for current marital status and not for women who have subsequently re-married.

Regional variations in headship characteristics were highlighted in a study by Hirschman and Vu Manh Loi (1996), which surveyed approximately 100 households in each of four sites: a northern city, a northern village, a southern city, and a southern village. In both cities, fully half of all households were female headed. Yet, in the northern city, 92 percent of these were cases of married women heads of household, while only 32 percent of those in the southern city were married. A much larger portion—68 percent—of the female heads of household in the southern city were widowed, single or divorced. In both rural settings, close to 19 percent of households were headed by females, and of these, 32 to 35 percent were married. The remainder were widows, often living with adult children. Half of the female-headed households in the southern village and almost two-thirds in the southern city contain extended families. Living with maternal relatives was rare in all cases, the highest figure being 13 percent in the southern city. While these distinctions are helpful, my case study demonstrates the need for finer-tuned categories of female-headed households to reveal and enable a clearer analysis of vulnerability and land rights.

The phenomenon of unmarried women mentioned earlier as a characteristic group of female-headed households in Vietnam is particularly striking in forestry enterprises, in which the majority of workers were female, living in remote areas for long periods of time with little opportunity to meet potential husbands (Nguyen Thanh Tam 1996; Nguyen Thi Khoa 1996). Some unmarried women have found ‘help’ to become pregnant, preferring the fulfillment of mothering a child even without a husband to fulfill the role of father. While such a phenomenon would have been scandalous in the past, my discussions with various interviewees suggested
that tolerance was growing as people become increasingly aware of the sex ratio imbalance and the associated difficulty for women to find a husband.

A 1989-91 study by the Centre for Family and Women’s Studies surveyed 514 peasant families and 64 forestry families in Ha Tuyen and Vinh Phu provinces (Nguyen Thi Khoa 1996). The findings suggested that 96.6 percent of peasant families were monogamous, compared to only 78.7 percent of forestry worker families. The remainder were either single mothers who had children out of wedlock or were married and subsequently abandoned by husbands who went to live with other women. Unofficial polygyny, while illegal, is not seriously condemned in public opinion. The ratio of women having children out of wedlock was 20.3 percent among forestry workers, compared to only 1.6 percent among peasant families (Nguyen Thi Khoa 1996: 227). A further distinction between the two types of families is the number of generations cohabiting in a household. Since forestry enterprise workers from the Red River Delta usually migrated to work in the ‘new economic zones’ as single adults or as a nuclear family, there were no cases of three or four generation families, whereas 19 percent of peasant families surveyed spanned three or four generations.

The discussion in this section has begun to explore the variability in types of households headed by women in Vietnam. The *Vietnam Development Report 2000* (World Bank 1999) includes an annex on poverty and female-headed households, which corroborates the finding common to many international surveys that female-headed households are, on average, materially better-off than their male-headed counterparts. According to results of the 1998 Vietnam Living Standards Survey, “mean per capita expenditures of female-headed households (using the standard definition) are some 28 percent higher than those of male-headed households (VND 3.3 million versus VND 2.6 million) per person per year” (World Bank 1999: 169). Even when female-headed households with resident males are excluded, the reclassified female-headed households still had expenditures 11 percent higher than their male-headed counterparts.

My response to these findings is three-fold. Firstly, there is a clear need to disaggregate the category into types of female-headed households, as my analysis in the subsequent section demonstrates. Scholars are beginning to challenge the recent discourses of female headship and the representation of such households as a “neat target group” packaged for development assistance (Waite 2000: 155). Although the variations are many, we might imagine a distinction,

---

35 Polygyny refers to the practice of a man having more than one wife. This term is increasingly used in gender studies in place of the more common term, polygamy, in order to distinguish it from polyandry, the practice of a man having multiple wives, which is much less common.
on the one hand, between widowed household heads living with adult children and, on the other, the less numerous, but more vulnerable, single mothers with young children. The former group tends to represent the most numerous and better-off female headed households in Vietnam, given the inter-generational support they enjoy and the greater number of labourers in the household, while the latter may lack remittances from absent husbands or other members of their extended family and be disadvantaged by high dependency ratios. Evidence for this assertion is provided in part by World Bank estimates, based on the Vietnam Living Standards Survey 1998, which link household expenditures by sex of head and household size. Excluding female-headed households with resident male partners, the results suggest that “female-headed households with one, three or four members are materially poorer than male-headed ones... However, once household size is above four members, female-headed households are usually better off than male-headed ones” (World Bank 1999: 171).

What is missing from this analysis of vulnerability, female headship and household size are at least two considerations. First is the link with stage in the life cycle. This element is centrally related to vulnerability in determining dependency ratios and availability of labourers. Research elsewhere in Vietnam, such as Dang Ngoc Quang and Buse’s (1992: 102) study in Vinh Phu province, shows a direct correlation between single women-headed households and poverty, particularly emphasizing how such households suffer from lack of labour and are the most affected by cutbacks in child-care services. An annex in the World Bank (1999: 172) report in the end acknowledges that there are “special groups of female-headed households,” particularly single parent households and elderly households, that are particularly poor and/or vulnerable, although the overall statistics are not sufficiently disaggregated to account for these distinctions.

The second element pertinent to an analysis of vulnerability disaggregated by type of female-headed households is intra-family transfers in the form of labour, income, and other assets (such as usufruct land rights) within or beyond the household. This dimension of extra-household relations blurs the distinction between household and family, emphasizing the fluid boundaries of households within the broader umbrella of resource exchange through an extended family network. Ignoring intra-family transfers can lead one to overlook important ways in which some female-headed households are less vulnerable than others. In this light, it is pertinent to recall Moser’s inclusion of social capital and household relations (or extra-household relations) as assets leading to differential vulnerabilities.
The third issue that can be raised from the *Vietnam Development Report 2000* figures cited above is methodological, concerning the problematic use of expenditure measures as a proxy for poverty. Remittances from members of their extended family may lead to the reported *income* for some female-headed households being lower than their *expenditures*. Yet, remittances were not studied explicitly in the Report. A final issue around the approach used to analyze poverty and female-headed households in the Report involves the argument, raised by Chant (1997: 27), that emphasizing material privation can obscure broader ideological, psychological and legal-institutional considerations. Such a combination of factors explains the limited participation of single women-headed households in administrative-leadership positions and mass organizations, as noted in the study by Dang Ngoc Quang and Buse (1992: 102). Such observations reinforce the call for using more than mere expenditure- or income-based measurements to understand patterns of vulnerability.

**Vulnerability, Household Headship, and Entitlements to Land: A Case Study**

The cases discussed in this section are drawn from a study conducted in 1998 on household responses to land allocation in the northern midlands province of Thai Nguyen. The case study uses data from in-depth interviews with 12 female-headed, uxorilocal and single father-headed households in one village of 50 households in Dong Hy district. Household interviews covered questions of family history, birthplace, migration and settlement history, marriage and residence patterns, means of livelihood, land size and type, kinship relations and financial transfers, and inheritance. For the purposes of my analysis of vulnerability and land entitlements, I differentiated between the following types of female-headed households:

- female head with resident husband
- (married) female head with husband absent (temporarily or permanently)
- female head widowed, abandoned, separated or divorced
- unmarried female heads (with or without children)

Despite their diversity, these categories of households are generally lumped together as ‘female-headed’ in official records. My analysis draws attention to female-headed households’ access to land but also to special cases of kinship-mediated vulnerability among *male-headed* households—particularly those in uxorilocal residence patterns, widower-headed households, and adult children of second wives. Many ethnic groups in Vietnam, the Kinh and Nung included, follow patrilocal residence, so I use the term uxorilocal to refer to the exceptions within a pattern of predominantly patrilocal residence. The main groups that have the custom of
matrilocal residence include the Gia-Rai and E-De of the Malayo-Polynesian group (Dang Nghiem Van et al. 1993). They are located in the Tay Nguyen (Central Highlands) region in southern Vietnam. My intention in describing the households in the case study below is not to present statistically representative empirical evidence but rather to use the interview findings to highlight certain dimensions and differences among female-headed households that might otherwise be missed by statistical aggregations. While the interviews are drawn from a relatively narrow geographical scope, the typology and findings may be used as a heuristic device, or as notes towards a research agenda, to consider gendered dimensions of land relations in other parts of the country. These dimensions could be quantified on a larger scale in future.

Recent studies have documented gender differences in access to land in urban areas of Vietnam (Thai Thi Ngoc Du 1999; Hoang Thi Lich 1999). This study concentrates on entitlements to agricultural and forest land in a village with relatively limited economic diversification beyond agriculture and forestry. Land is thus the mainstay of most households’ livelihoods. The village was settled early in the 20th century by a family of the Nung ethnic group, which migrated from Lang Son province, northeast of Thai Nguyen. All long-term residents in the village are Nung, with some Kinh (the majority Vietnamese ethnic group) and other ethnic minorities having married in. Since the disbanding of the collective and the allocation of land to households, there has been relatively little leasing or transferring of land. The process of land allocation in this semi-remote village, as with some others in the region, was distinguished by the phenomenon of villagers reclaiming the lands belonging to their ancestors prior to collectivization (pre-1960s) rather than following the national policy of allocating land according to household size. This process (explained in more detail in Chapter Seven) led to somewhat uneven land endowments, with longer-term residents sometimes enjoying better quality and larger plots. It also implied a blurring of kin-mediated allocations within the process of state land allocation, as younger households received a de facto inheritance and certification of land after their parents reclaimed their family’s ancestral lands.

Having established the context for the study, the remainder of this section documents the details of these distinct types of female-headed households and their entitlements to land, as summarized in Table 19.
A. Female heads with resident husband

This type is more common in cases of (1) state employees, (2) a woman’s husband being away temporarily when the household is registered, or (3) households following uxorilocal residence patterns. These households tend to be relatively less vulnerable given their lower dependency ratio—having an additional adult labourer to contribute to the household’s economic activities. My research documented one case (Interview 20) of the first and second type: a female teacher (state employee) whose husband had been away studying to be a doctor when their household was officially registered, and the residential land was assigned to her. The couple was not dependent on land for earning their living, but rather on relatively stable, if quite low, state salaries. They held no rice paddy, garden, or forest land.

Households following uxorilocal residence patterns—the third type listed above—can vary in entitlements to land depending on whether land has been inherited from the wife’s family (Interviews 1, 3). Households seemed to follow uxorilocal residence patterns in circumstances in which either the wife’s parents had few sons among whom to divide their land or the husband’s parents had many sons, such that land in the family, or perhaps village as a whole, was scarce. Sometimes, however, the land inherited from the wife’s family was smaller than that inherited by her brothers. At other times the couple bought land, to the extent that it was available, from the wife’s parents. Yet, even in cases of uxorilocal residence and land being inherited from the wife’s parents, the land-use rights certificate was sometimes registered in the husband’s name.

Patterns varied in how the household head was determined and in the degree of inter-generational support within female-headed households. In Interview 3, the household head was 27, married with one child and living with her husband and her parents. Such cases of female headship may experience less vulnerability to the extent that parents are economically active and the dependency ratio is accordingly low.

Although no cases were documented here, alcoholic or drug-addicted (and other types of economically inactive) husbands can act as a significant drain on a female-headed household’s time and economic resources. Elsewhere such households might be referred to not necessarily as female-headed but as female-maintained and managed or female-supported (Buvinic and Gupta 1997; Vecchio and Roy 1998).
Table 19: Characteristics of Female-Headed and Uxorilocal Households Surveyed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview ID</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>12</th>
<th>17</th>
<th>18</th>
<th>19</th>
<th>20</th>
<th>22</th>
<th>24</th>
<th>23</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type of household</strong></td>
<td>FH</td>
<td>FH</td>
<td>MH</td>
<td>FH</td>
<td>FH</td>
<td>FH</td>
<td>MH</td>
<td>FH</td>
<td>MH</td>
<td>MH</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>W</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>HP</td>
<td>HP</td>
<td>HA</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>HA</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>HA</td>
<td>Ux</td>
<td>Neo</td>
<td>Ux</td>
<td>Vi</td>
<td>Vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong># generations in household</strong></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>household size</strong></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong># children in household</strong></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age of wife</strong></td>
<td>30</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age of husband</strong></td>
<td>34</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnicity of wife</strong></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnicity of husband</strong></td>
<td>K</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>K</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Land inherited from wife or husband's parents</strong></td>
<td>w</td>
<td>w</td>
<td>w</td>
<td>n.1</td>
<td>h</td>
<td>h</td>
<td>h</td>
<td>n.2</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>w?</td>
<td>w</td>
<td>h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Wife's or husband's name on land use right certificate</strong></td>
<td>h</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>w</td>
<td>h</td>
<td>w</td>
<td>w</td>
<td>n.2</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>h</td>
<td>w</td>
<td>h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Size of household's rice paddy land (sao)</strong></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Size of garden land (sao)</strong></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Size of forest land (hectares)</strong></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of buffalo and cattle</strong></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Own fishpond? (yes/no)</strong></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*FH = female headed MH = male headed
HP = husband present HA = husband absent (seasonally or permanently migrating)
W = widow/widower A = abandoned by husband
U = unwed mother Vi = viri/patrilocal residence
Ux = Uxorilocal residence Neo = neolocal residence

**N = Nung; K = Kinh; O = other ethnic minority
† one sao = 360 m²

Note 1: Residential and garden land was bought cheaply from wife's parents.
Note 2: Wife's father loaned land to the couple. The land use right certificate remained in the wife's father's name.
Note 3: Husband is deceased.
Note 4: This teacher-doctor couple owned no land for production.
Source: Survey by author.

B. Female heads with husband absent

For an analysis of vulnerability, this category of female-headed household should be sub-divided in terms of social transfers from absentee spouses. A husband may or may not send remittances or return home periodically (perhaps contributing farm labour in critical periods). The presence or absence of entitlements to land further shape vulnerability amongst such households. In Dong Thu village, the wealthiest household (Interview 17) was headed by a
woman living alone. Formerly working in a nearby state forest enterprise, her husband was an
air force major in Hanoi, and her children studied at university in Hanoi. She had a large amount
of land, which she used for raising cattle and for leasing out to relatives. Her land assets plus
remittances enabled this household to accumulate significant wealth. This contrasts with the
trend for older women living alone to suffer a high degree of insecurity.

A second case of a female-headed household, however, suffered much greater
vulnerability. Interview 9 documents the case of a woman whose kinship networks, although she
was raised in the village, had not led to land inheritance. She had left the village for several
years to work in the provincial capital, during which time land had been allocated among her
siblings. Her husband, working in a factory, did not earn or remit much. These circumstances
forced her to be resourceful in cultivating a fishpond and fruit trees on the small garden land she
was able to buy cheaply from her parents.

These contrasting examples suggest the importance of remittances and entitlements to
land for a female head’s well-being when the husband lives away from the home. Another
difference implying greater cost for the latter household is the dependency ratio, as the female
head struggles to raise two young children. In this village there were no cases of wives
migrating to seek employment, but this phenomenon is more common elsewhere in Vietnam,
such as the densely populated Red River Delta. In both these cases where the husband did not
reside in the household (or returned home only temporarily), the land-use right certificates were
issued in the wife’s name, facilitating the use of the certificate for credit applications. As
indicated in Table 19 (notes 1 and 2), other kinship-mediated means of accessing land beyond
inheritance, be it as usufruct rights or purchased cheaply, can be important channels for female-
headed households to maintain their livelihoods.

C. Female heads abandoned by husband

In cases where the husband is away permanently (working or unknown circumstances)
and provides no support to the wife and family, vulnerability may be even more acute. In one
case of this type (Interview 18), the woman’s husband had left to work in Russia ten years
earlier but never returned nor sent word of his whereabouts. The woman fortunately received
some support for herself and her four school-age children from her in-laws nearby. Her meager
teacher’s salary was thus supplemented with the small plot of land provided by her husband’s
parents, testament once again to the value of family transfers for female-headed households in
vulnerable economic circumstances.
D. Widows, divorced or separated female heads

Widows of soldiers killed in action (families of martyrs, known as ‘policy families’) have generally been reasonably well provided for by the state, with small pensions and special benefits in addition to social recognition. Unlike families of martyrs, there is no special state recognition extended to other widows, who must depend instead on kinship networks for support. In one case documented (Interview 12), the land-use right certificate had not been changed from the husband’s name since his death, since the wife did not consider this important and presumably was not intending to use it for a loan application in the near future. Although appearing very poor and lacking much capital accumulation, the family did have access to land and two young adult labourers: the widow’s daughter and son-in-law. If provided with technical advice and credit, they have reasonable potential to improve their situation. To the extent that widows have support from extended family, they are often well-off, as documented in the international literature cited earlier.

Mothers faced with widowhood while still raising children, however, face the decision of whether to stay with their husband’s family (in case of patrilocal residence) or return to their parents’ house. In the former situation, a woman is likely to inherit the household’s land, assuming it was in the name of her husband rather than her father-in-law. In the latter situation, a widow often claims some of her husband’s non-land assets, although this may depend on the relationship with her parents-in-law. Such instances serve as reminders of how customary and kinship relations can mediate entitlements to land and other assets for female-headed households. Households that become female-headed due to divorce are relatively few in rural areas of Vietnam, particularly in relatively close-knit and ethnically-closed communities. Given the gaps that exist in the legalities of division of assets upon divorce (Tran Thi Van Anh 1999: 112), women facing divorce can often face high degrees of vulnerability.

E. Unmarried female heads

As explained earlier, cases of older unmarried women are especially common in Vietnam. Some women in such circumstances have become pregnant and had a child without marrying. Interview 24 reveals one case of an unmarried mother facing a high degree of vulnerability. She had had offers of marriage from some men, but without knowing their background, she was afraid they could steal her belongings and possibly abandon her. Her father had given her a portion, six sao, of land equivalent to that of each of her five brothers, but upon his death, her brothers revoked her land inheritance. They left her to provide for her young
daughter with only three sāo of poor quality rice paddy land—ranked as the second-to-lowest quality of land, only good for one crop of rice per year—and a small plot of garden land. Only her brothers have forest land. Moreover, her brothers’ paddy land is adjacent to their house, while hers is a kilometer away.

Unmarried single mothers face an uncertain future. Suggestive of the discrimination of this group in not conforming to ‘normal’ household forms, unwed women of marriageable age were ineligible for state-allocated land for their own homestead until 40 years of age (Dang Ngoc Quang and Buse 1992: 102). Unlike the social and financial support provided for widows, the state and Women’s Union have extended no special recognition to support unmarried women despite this widespread demographic phenomenon and the disadvantages of social stigma and limited entitlements that they face.

F. Special cases of vulnerable male-headed households

Single father (widower) headed households might be seen as a special case of vulnerability among male-headed households. Interview 23 (in the final column of Table 19) revealed one such case of a young father of a six-month-old child. The child’s mother had died two months earlier. Men in such instances, however, might generally experience less vulnerability than women, given their established kinship ties in the village to assist in raising the child and their greater prospects for inheriting land and remarrying.

A different type of male-headed household from the same village (not listed in Table 19) exemplified a form of disadvantage mediated by kinship relations, through the polygamous marriage of his father. One might anticipate that a male offspring from one of the founding families of the village would be guaranteed a generous inheritance. Yet, the man in question was the offspring of his father’s second wife. This factor had implications for his relationship to all of the sons from his father’s first wife, including, in Nung and Kinh custom, referring to these male siblings as ‘older brother’ (anh) even if they were younger than him. More significantly, his inheritance of land was only half as much—as well as being of lower quality—compared to that of his siblings from his father’s first marriage. Moreover, he received no forest land, while his ‘older’ brothers did. He was also unable to borrow money from his family and was forced to sell his motorcycle when a buffalo he had bought on credit died.

These results suggest the need to recognize the diversity within the category of female-headed households. The cases mentioned above linking vulnerability with special instances of male headship further nuance our understandings of the interconnections between kinship,
household structure, gender and institutions of inheritance. This serves as a reminder that gender in itself is not always the main axis of difference or disadvantage (nor is female headship *per se*). Rather, vulnerability may be shaped by a more complex interplay of gender with other attributes such as ethnicity, kinship, household structure, and kinship-based residence patterns.

**Interpretations and Implications**

The cases outlined above demonstrate the very diverse contexts through which female-headed households may arise and the differences in vulnerability associated with each, moving beyond the typical and unhelpful homogenizing of the category of female-headed households in Vietnamese national data and some international data. Not all types or cases of female-headed households are equally vulnerable or poor. Even within the single sub-category of female heads with husband present, the differences are significant between cases of state employees or cases in which the husband was away while the household was registered, and both are again distinct from households following uxorilocal residence patterns. With each we can expect associated differing degrees of vulnerability and variations in inheritance trends.

Whereas in the collective period assets were pooled and employment had been guaranteed through membership in a collective, now inheritance and kinship networks are being rekindled. In contrast to the period of collectivization when the only ‘private’ land available to households was their limited home garden and ‘five percent land,’ in the current context of land allocation and the possibility of market transfers of land, inheritance is now a very significant institution, and a clearly gendered one, which is shaping emerging differentials in land endowments. The interviews in this study suggest that households often follow uxorilocal residence patterns in instances where the wife may have the opportunity to inherit land from her parents. When a land inheritance is not available for women in uxorilocal residence patterns, or if ‘purchasing’ (transferring) land is not an option, livelihood vulnerability may increase, and alternative livelihoods beyond rice farming must be sought. Cases of females inheriting land from their parents might be much less common a generation from now as pressure on land becomes more severe, and the preference for only allowing sons to inherit land becomes less flexible.

Continuing on the topic of future projections, a generation from now pressure will increase not only on land allocated to households but also on resources managed by common property regimes. This includes areas where many people currently graze their animals and collect fuelwood or fodder—particularly those who received no forest land allocation. In their
study of female-headed households in India, Vecchio and Roy (1998: 8) observed that the poorest section of a rural community often must rely on public goods, obtained free or at below market price. Public goods can include government entitlements—such as education, housing, finance, credit, grain, kerosene and medicine—and common property resources—including wild fruits, fodder and water found in the surrounding environment and forest. And international studies suggest that within poor households, women more than men are dependent on, and responsible for collecting, common property resources (Beck and Ghosh 2000). Yet, such common property resources in Vietnam (e.g., grazing areas managed by the commune) are rapidly being eroded, and poorer households, including some of the more vulnerable female-headed households, who rely on such resources for subsistence or for supplementary income, will be most affected by the decline in common property resources. Moreover, while some male-headed households in the study village had received allocations of forest land of up to five hectares, the female-headed households without resident husbands received minimal or no allocations of forest land.

Razavi (1998: 13) calls for research to examine what social, economic, cultural and political processes and institutions are implicated in the creation and perpetuation of poverty and vulnerability. My research has analyzed the ways in which entitlements to land are mediated in this new economic and institutional context of changing property rights. This has been brought about through a series of policy reforms in the 1980s and 1990s, leading to a quasi-privatization and land allocation process. The research documented here draws attention to how the nature of entitlements has shifted between the periods of collectivization (1960-1980s) and decollectivization (1980s-present), showing how the new trajectory of development associated with decollectivization brings about new forms of vulnerability, both individual and collective. Although not often recognized, these forms of vulnerability associated with broader institutional shifts are gendered.

The current agenda for poverty alleviation is drawing attention to land rights and tenure security issues, yet economic measures cannot clearly capture underlying shifts in vulnerability. Through a feminist reading of entitlements, I have attempted to show how vulnerability and kinship-mediated land relations reflect the interplay of legal rules with broader social forces and institutions. This analysis moves beyond de jure laws, traditions, and beliefs to de facto practices. In this way gender is seen as culturally, historically, and geographically embedded at various scales of analysis. Beyond state allocation and market transfers, inheritance and other
Kinship and ethnically-based institutions constitute newly-emerging means by which women and men, as situated actors, may differentially experience entitlements to land.

**Ambivalent Implications of the ‘Reworking of the Household’**

This chapter has pointed to some of the complexities of analyzing gender and land relations, drawing attention to the diversity of household structures, to intra-household dynamics within the shifting organization of production and land relations, and to how both of these shape resource use and access. I have also conceptualized some other bases for assessing differences in experiences of the reforms at different scales. This chapter has provided an overview of a vast topic. Too few studies are available offering insights into the new relations and terms of access to resources that must be negotiated as a product of land allocation and other forms of enclosure of resources. This question can be asked in general terms as well as by disaggregating between and among women and men. Research is particularly lacking on how experiences differ among members within a household and how people in different circumstances mobilize systems at their disposal in order to reduce vulnerability and advance their interests. Experiences differ according to women’s and men’s positionality. Household structure (e.g., dependency ratios or types of female-headed and male-headed households) and position within the family may determine which women within a household perform certain tasks and gain certain benefits. Other considerations for a differentiated analysis include ethnicity, class, life cycle, livelihood type, rural vs. urban setting, and region. Moving away from universalizing generalizations, studies must further take into account national as well as local institutional contexts, considering state policy but also various forms of customary institutions (e.g., kinship systems and social norms shaping inheritance).

A detailed study of land policy impacts and responses, particularly one attentive to ‘marginalized’ groups, must be sensitive to the diversity in household structures, and intra- and inter-household experiences, such as stage in life cycle, ethnicity, or lineage, in addition to regional socioeconomic and agro-ecological differences. These factors must be accounted for if the study is to understand the relation to patterns of resource use, access, and distribution of benefits, which are spread unevenly across gender lines and through space. Acknowledging diversity and complexity can improve the efficiency and effectiveness of projects and policies, enabling them to better serve the intended groups and minimize unintended negative consequences. Throughout this chapter, I emphasized the distinction between policy and practice, in order to provide a clearer picture of the dynamics at play in rural Vietnam today. To
highlight this dichotomy, I argue that although a number of gender analyses have pointed to the potentially negative consequences for women associated with the *de jure* issue of land-use certificates bearing only the name of the head of household, the analysis must go further. Having women’s names on land-use certificates may not guarantee women’s effective control over the uses to which land is put, nor may it ensure an equal share in the benefits from its products. *De facto* disparities can also emerge in a number of indirect ways within households and among women and men in different circumstances and positions. Furthermore, the extension over time of women’s participation in production, through periods of collectivization and subsequent decollectivization, might be read less as an improvement of women’s ‘status’ and more as implying additional burdens of work with potentially detrimental effects on women’s well-being and quality of life.

Finally, Moser and McIwaine (1997a, 1997b) used the concept of *household relations* as another key asset shaping vulnerability. Yet, from my analysis it seems more appropriate to talk of family, kinship, or lineage relations in order to emphasize the degree of support (or lack thereof) between extended family members at the *extra*-household level. In other words, I interpret intra-family social resources as operating beyond the household level. Analyses of decollectivization and institutional restructuring could be further enriched through deeper analysis of the forms, sources, and consequences of social capital in creating differential vulnerabilities. Rather than focusing merely on constraints, forms of gendered collective action and social capital could be highlighted (see Agarwal 2000). This analysis might also explore the extent to which institutional structures—cooperatives, mass organizations, forms of mutual assistance, and households themselves—are being renegotiated and are adopting new forms in rural landscapes.
This chapter situates the analysis in Chapter Seven by outlining regional and ethnic differentiation and changing livelihoods in upland Vietnam. After this general discussion about issues faced by ethnic minorities in the northern upland, the second part of the chapter reviews a number of trends in the recent history of Thai Nguyen province, beginning with a characterization of the region’s demographics and land use. Histories of settlement of particular ethnic groups over time are then linked to changes in land tenure in the making of Thai Nguyen as a frontier territory. This is followed by a review of the process of agricultural collectivization, particularly its acceleration in scale over time. This is followed by an overview of current trends in land use, agricultural and forest land allocation, and rural landholdings. Finally, recent agro-forestry programs are outlined. A statistical narrative to supplement the regional characterization presented in this chapter is offered in the Appendix.

The statistics reported in the latter part of this chapter and in the Appendix are drawn primarily from 14 compilations of statistical data from Thai Nguyen province between 1955 and 1997. These documents, listed in the References section at the end of this dissertation, were acquired from the provincial statistics office and various other government departments in Thai Nguyen. The data from these sources is supplemented with national yearbook figures that were disaggregated by province, and from a special issue of *Vietnam Business* (1997) focusing on Thai Nguyen. In the event of discrepancies between sources, or within the same source, both or all figures are usually given so that readers can appreciate the complexities of the data and draw their own conclusions. A discussion of the interpretation and quality of the statistics drawn upon here was provided in Chapter One.

While my study avoids an exclusive focus on representation, it does consider the dynamics of representations (e.g., of ethnic minorities or of modernity) in reinforcing symbolic marginalization. Much research under the sway of postmodernism diverts critical attention from concrete issues of deprivation. My analysis combines a consideration of these concrete concerns as well as of constructed marginality to understand how representational categories and strategies come to have meaning in the same way as other forms of economic, cultural and political discrimination. Representation of highland areas that homogenize across space and
time can play into and reinforce forms of economic, cultural, and political marginality. As Dove (1999: 215) explains in his analysis of Indonesia, these surprisingly consistent representations often involve criticism of peasant culture, emotions, intellect, labour, settlement patterns, temporal horizon, clothing, and eating customs. The same assessment could be made of representations of ethnic minorities or indigenous peoples in many parts of the world. As examined in the opening sections of this chapter, shifting cultivators are typically portrayed as primitive, unproductive, environmentally destructive, and lacking a sense of private property, all of which serve to rationalize their resettlement—a move that is in itself represented as ‘the making of modern citizens.’

The Making of Vulnerable Livelihoods in Upland Vietnam

Describing rural Bulgaria, Staddon (1999: 205) observed that “a new politics of geographic scale is emerging, with localities struggling to shore up their positions within restructured national production systems, but also desperately seeking to make direct links with foreign concerns in order to further bolster their bargaining power.” The outcomes of restructuring in many post-socialist countries have been geographically uneven. Some sub-regions have suffered a process of peripheralization, reflecting the removal of former welfare state regional policy instruments to mitigate marginality and economic imbalances between geographical areas. This phenomenon is a manifestation of the geographical implications of ideological changes (Tykkylainen 1998).

With agriculture being the primary occupation in rural areas, there are close links between poverty, agriculture, and the rural household economy. In contrast to Eastern European countries, it is not the laid off state sector workers but (non-diversified) farming households that tend to be the most poor and vulnerable in Vietnam. Rural areas are home to nearly 80 percent of the population and ninety percent of the country’s poor. In Luong and Unger’s (1999) assessment, rural differentiation is much more accelerated in China than in Vietnam, particularly comparing China to Vietnam’s northern region. One key reason for this is the low level of rural industrialization in Vietnam. Another reason is government policy in China, particularly the policy requiring poor households to provide a requisition of cheap grain to the state, constituting a de facto regressive tax from which more prosperous households are exempt. Such a policy weighs down poor households, impeding them from qualifying for credit or from gaining sufficient surplus to afford chemical fertilizers that could double their grain output.
Interpreting results from the Vietnam Living Standards Survey, Dollar and Glewwe (1998) suggested that social inequality was greater within than between regions in Vietnam. Even so, a significant degree of inter-regional differentiation cannot be denied. Despite attempts to curb this phenomenon through a history of central planning policies that favoured less developed areas, there are significant regional disparities in Vietnam, as indicated in Map 3 and Table 20. As well as richer natural resource endowments in the land per capita ratios, a greater number of non-farm income-generation opportunities exist in southern Vietnam where people enjoy more diversified livelihoods (World Bank 1995). Adequate longitudinal data are not available to determine if the trend of exacerbation of inter-regional differentiation is also taking place in Vietnam, although its regions have long been differentiated in resource endowments and economic conditions. Comparing poverty indicators for the seven principal regions across Vietnam, 30 percent of the population of the northern uplands are found in the lowest income quintile in Vietnam in 1992-93 (see Table 21). The northern mountainous region was second only to the Central Coast, where 31 percent of the population were in the lowest income quintile. The best off region in this category was the Mekong Delta with only 13 percent of the population in this situation. The Mekong region similarly registered the highest average income among rural households, while the northern mountainous region ranked fourth among the seven regions. In non-farm wage income per household, the northern mountainous region ranked second-lowest, with the Central Coast again recording the lowest rank.
Map 3. Map of Gross Domestic Product Per Capita by Province, 1993

Gross Domestic Product per Capita 1993 in Oong Vietnam = 517.205

- above 700,000
- 520,000 - 700,000
- 410,000 - 520,000
- 300,000 - 410,000
- below 300,000

Provinces in Vietnam

1. Hanoi
2. HCMC
3. Hai Phong
4. Cao Bang
5. Ha Tuyen
6. Lang Son
7. Lai Chau
8. Hoang Lien Son
9. Bac Thai
10. Son La
11. Yen Phu
12. Ha Bac
13. Quang Nho
14. Ha Son Binh
15. Hai Hung
16. Thai Binh
17. Ha Nam Ninh
18. Thanh Hoa
19. Nghe Thanh
20. Quang Binh
21. Quang Tri
22. Thai Thanh-Hoa
23. Quang Nam - Da Nang
24. Quang Ngai
25. Binh Dinh
26. Phu Yen
27. Khanh Hoa
28. Thuan Hai
29. Gia Lai - Kon Tum
30. Dac Lac
31. Lam Dong
32. Song Be
33. Tay Ninh
34. Dong Nao
35. Long An
36. Dong Thep
37. An Giang
38. Tien Giang
39. Ban Trai
40. Cau Long
41. Hai Giang
42. Kien Giang
43. Minh Hai
44. Yung Tau - Con Dao

Table 20. Poverty Rate by Region in 1993 and 1998, and Gini Coefficient

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Gini Coefficient</th>
<th>Poverty rate (percent of households living in poverty)</th>
<th>1993</th>
<th>1993</th>
<th>1998</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Urban Rural Total Urban Rural Total Urban Rural Total Urban Rural</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>58.15</td>
<td>25.08</td>
<td>66.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N Mountains</td>
<td>25.2 24.5</td>
<td></td>
<td>78.60</td>
<td>46.28</td>
<td>84.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red River Delta</td>
<td>30.8 26.3</td>
<td></td>
<td>62.90</td>
<td>13.85</td>
<td>71.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N Central Coast</td>
<td>31.1 24.7</td>
<td></td>
<td>74.54</td>
<td>49.62</td>
<td>76.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S Central Coast</td>
<td>31.3 30.7</td>
<td></td>
<td>49.58</td>
<td>27.83</td>
<td>59.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Highlands</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>69.96</td>
<td></td>
<td>69.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southeast</td>
<td>33.1 36.7</td>
<td></td>
<td>32.73</td>
<td>16.25</td>
<td>45.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mekong Delta</td>
<td>40.8 29.9</td>
<td></td>
<td>47.10</td>
<td>25.03</td>
<td>51.92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Poverty rates are calculated for panel households interviewed in both 1993 and 1998.

Table 21. Poverty Characteristics by Region in Vietnam, 1992-93

(1000s of Vietnamese dong)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Poverty characteristics</th>
<th>Northern Uplands</th>
<th>Red River Delta</th>
<th>North-Central Coast</th>
<th>Central Coast</th>
<th>Central Highlands</th>
<th>Southeast</th>
<th>Mekong Delta</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% of population in lowest quintile</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural income per household</td>
<td>5520</td>
<td>5351</td>
<td>8212</td>
<td>3883</td>
<td>7217</td>
<td>4752</td>
<td>8208</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per capita food consumption</td>
<td>620</td>
<td>624</td>
<td>841</td>
<td>571</td>
<td>715</td>
<td>687</td>
<td>740</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Output per hectare</td>
<td>47392</td>
<td>64366</td>
<td>65347</td>
<td>44776</td>
<td>53696</td>
<td>39225</td>
<td>283205</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crop sales per household</td>
<td>525</td>
<td>550</td>
<td>2108</td>
<td>418</td>
<td>3466</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>2687</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Off-farm wage income per household</td>
<td>283</td>
<td>334</td>
<td>1699</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>766</td>
<td>777</td>
<td>1335</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Rural-urban disparities are also a significant axis of differentiation, and the differences are growing, as indicated in Table 22. The rural GDP per capita as a percent of the urban GDP per capita fell from 25 to 18 percent between 1990 and 1994. Over the same period, the figures
for northern Vietnam shifted from 20 to 14 percent and for southern Vietnam, from 31 to 23 percent (World Bank 1997: 30). To address regional and rural-urban disparities and improve the market system, the Vietnamese government has taken initiatives in relaxing controls and restrictions on inter-province transport. It also established policies for infrastructure improvement—although funding for implementation remains limited. Further government initiatives include the establishment of ‘centres of development’ in remote mountainous areas (where Kinh have not settled). There are plans to develop 500 such centres between 1996 and 2005. The implementation budget averages $500,000 per centre, with more than 50 percent allocated to infrastructure (Morrison and Dubois 1998: 19-20). Speaking about Bulgaria, Staddon (1999: 207) noted that “while the transition model of development contains a strong tendency towards peripheralization of localities outside the metropole, localities are finding innovative ways of forging useful links with other localities and of integrating themselves within new regional formations” (emphasis added). Further research could usefully be directed at interpreting the character of post-socialist rural governance in Vietnam and the position and bargaining power of localities and regions within it.

### Table 22. Widening Rural-Urban Income Gap in Vietnam: Rural GDP per capita as a Percent of Urban GDP per capita, 1990-94

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Vietnam</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Vietnam</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern Vietnam</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An important parallel to regional differentiation is differentiation based on ethnicity. Ethnic minorities\(^{36}\) (*dan toc thieu so*) in Vietnam are important demographically, territorially, economically, and politically. The fifty-three non-Kinh (non-Viet) ethnic groups comprise about 14 percent of the nation’s population. Besides the Chinese (particularly numerous in Ho Chi Minh City), the Khmer (in the Mekong Delta), and the Cham (in the south-central coastal areas), most ethnic minorities reside in the northern uplands and Central Highlands (*Tay Nguyen*). Hilly and mountainous terrain covers 75 percent of Vietnam’s territory and is home to 20 million people. The legal status of ethnic minorities in Vietnam is considered relatively high in

\(^{36}\) I acknowledge that using the term ‘ethnic minorities’ is somewhat problematic since it frames people in a minority-majority relation within a national context, even though the ethnic group may extend beyond national boundaries. For this reason, some analysts (e.g., Michaud 2000) prefer the term ‘montagnards,’ although for some, this term is even more contentious.
comparison with other countries in the region. Portrayals of ethnic minorities’ heroic collaboration in Anti-French struggles are given preeminence in museums, such as the exhibits in the Museum of the Revolution in Hanoi. Ethnic minorities have quotas to ensure access to higher education, and there are special (boarding) schools for selected ethnic minority children in some remote areas. The Council of Nationalities and the Committee for Ethnic Minorities and Mountainous Affairs facilitate their representation in the state administration. State policy to some extent ensures the right of ethnic minorities to use their languages, although it is questionable to what extent these policies are effectively implemented.

Plate 9. A War Invalid Leading a Literacy Campaign among Ethnic Minorities (painting from National Art Museum)

The upland areas of Vietnam, occupied overwhelmingly by ethnic minorities, were considered a zone for ‘frontier development’ and became the target of Kinh in-migration in recent decades. Khong Dien (1995) noted that the Kinh population in the nine northern upland provinces in 1960 was just 670,000, but by 1989 it had jumped five-fold to 3,215,000. This was particularly accelerated by the policy of designating New Economic Zones in what were considered ‘empty,’ marginal, or frontier territories in the 1960s and 1970s. When the potential for resource exploitation in the northern uplands appeared to be exhausted, the New Economic Zone policy shifted in the 1980s and 1990s to promote officially-sponsored migration to the
Central Highlands. Many others migrated spontaneously. The New Economic Zone program paralleled the establishment of state forest enterprises in many upland areas—often on lands that had formerly belonged to ethnic minority peoples. Thus, in-migration to Thai Nguyen brought about opportunities for sharing of knowledge across ethnic boundaries but also for disputes to emerge. Discourses of nation building and brotherhood between ‘national minorities’ obfuscated natural resource conflicts as the nation-state redistributed the dense Red River Delta population into the uplands and extended its control over territories known to be rich in timber, coal, and metals.

The discipline of ethnology, reinforced by state policy, reproduced attitudes of paternalism among the Kinh and dependency among ethnic minorities. Pelley (1995: 238) described how Vietnamese ethnologists exemplified a ‘reverse colonialism’: “If in the colonial period it was colonial scholars who had the power and authority to observe, examine, document, and describe the customs of the Vietnamese, in the postcolonial period it was the Vietnamese who were privileged with the imperial gaze.” Reallocations of population to hinterland regions in many countries—socialist and non-socialist alike—have served as vehicles for ‘civilizing missions.’ The local population was considered to benefit from exposure to more ‘civilized cultures’ and ‘advanced people’ (dan tien bo). Certain cultural, religious, and ‘superstitious’ practices are discouraged in the process.\(^{37}\) Such projects are associated with notions of technological and cultural progress (tien tien) in advancing over ‘conservative’ (co hu), ‘backward’ (lac hau), and ‘savage’ (moi) peoples and territories.

As in many countries, one can detect an implicit ethnic hierarchy in Vietnam, with the Kinh, followed by the most assimilated ethnic groups, positioned at the top. Literacy campaigns reinforce the spread of knowledge and culture of—and assimilation into—the dominant group. Naming and language issues play a role in reinforcing this, as people are given disrespectful and marginalizing labels of hill tribes, Tho (for Tay), Meo (for Hmong), and Man (for Dao). A further dimension of the politics of naming was described by Pelley (1998: 384-385). She outlined Vietnam’s official reclassification of ethnic groups in 1979, Decision 121, which established the existence of a fixed number of 54 ethnic groups in the country. In the process, some groups, such as the Dao, grew in size, as at least a dozen other groups were—somewhat arbitrarily—collapsed into this category. Pelley hypothesized that such a move granted them

---

\(^{37}\) In one instance, a San Chay traditional healer in Thai Nguyen was discouraged from practicing his trade during the period of collectivization and, having lost respect in the community, became an alcoholic.
greater prominence, rewarding their revolutionary credentials but could also obscure critical aspects of Dao identity.

Implicit in the movement of people, technology, and culture into ‘uncivilized’ territories is a notion of ‘high modernism.’ Such a mind-set lies behind many mega-development endeavors in socialist and capitalist countries alike. Critiques of the inappropriateness of development plans in modifying local crop composition and homogenizing land use are particularly cogent in upland regions, which often have highly variable cultural and ecological conditions. Scott (1998) cited some of the consequences of the mentality of high modernism as being the following: forest enclosure; the administration of planned communities (restricting customary forms of social organization) and planned agriculture (mono-cropping); and restricted autonomy through forced settlement, identification cards, cadastral surveys, and censuses to monitor and control movement.

Collectivization—a movement underwritten by high modernism—provoked dramatic landscape transformation and spatial reordering. In the Red River Delta most hedgerows dividing small plots were knocked down to make way for larger-scale collective production. In the 1970s, reflecting changing conceptions of space and resources, there was a great push to expand the agricultural frontier for rice production. This period is now remembered as a time of massive deforestation—sometimes with dire consequences. “In the past it wasn’t so hot. There was frost in winter and water would freeze. But there’s less water now because of deforestation,” explained an 82-year-old man in Nam Hoa commune, Thai Nguyen province. “In the past there were bears, tigers, deer, and other animals, but now only rats.”

A huge dam project near Nui Coc Lake providing electricity to much of the province was completed in Thai Nguyen in 1974. When asked about any negative environmental impacts of the project, such as deforestation provoking erosion or flooding (not to mention displacement of ethnic minorities), the guide in the provincial museum who was showing off a photo of the project looked surprised and then assured me there were none. In China, the famous Dazhai development model of the 1960s and 70s was associated with moving mountains, flattening hills, introducing tractors, and applying science and technology to the transformation of agriculture. Ironically, although it became well-known on the basis of its self-reliance, Dazhai’s promotion as a national model ended up limiting its local autonomy in the face of a massive influx of external funding to support its expansion (Pat Howard, pers. comm., 2001).

The uplands is an area of complex livelihoods. Yet, one component of state-orchestrated movements to progress technologically and culturally over other territories and peoples is often
the introduction of new food regimes. In Kinh culture, rice is strongly associated with higher civilization in comparison to various other grains that have a longer history—and ecological appropriateness—among some upland areas in Southeast Asia and China. Local officials in one highland district in Thai Nguyen exclaimed proudly that “15 or 20 years ago, what used to be grassland was converted to paddy... In 1978 we started growing new IR-8 rice varieties; now 100 percent of seeds used are new varieties.” State campaigns amongst upland peoples across Vietnam have often pushed different ethnic groups to adopt a rice-based diet and to simplify their complex home and forest garden systems to produce only one or two crops. Recently state programs have encouraged monoculture cultivation—often chemical-intensive—of selected commercial crops such as coffee, fruit trees, and rubber. Yet, the benefits often accrued more to Kinh intermediaries than to farmers. Rice yields in the uplands are very low, and there are problems of food shortage and lack of food security as local people in upland areas receive low prices for their produce and pay high prices for rice from the lowlands once they become accustomed to a rice-based diet.

Despite diverse rural conditions, national development programs have frequently been standardized, based on delta conditions and a rice-centric culture. In a number of ethnic minority areas, the state provides a limited amount of free ‘improved’ seed varieties. But some farmers reported that they are only appropriate for flatter lands, while the majority of the land in their commune was very steep. In some upland areas, agricultural extension programs promoting pig raising encountered problems given the high amounts of fuel required to cook the pig feed. The consequent competition between fuelwood demands and forest growth highlight the contradictions between state-promoted models and local farming systems. In other instances, government and foreign-sponsored tanks for drinking water were abandoned for locally-developed strategies. The paternalistic attitude of some Kinh officials is revealed in their complaints that “We give them seeds and televisions. We build Kinh-style houses for them, and the minorities use them for their cattle!” I was even told of a program that distributed fishing nets to a village that had no fishponds. These cases point to the need for consideration of local specificities in terms of both local livelihood systems and common property regimes.

Linked to changes in food regimes and livelihood systems, various ethnic minority groups that practice shifting cultivation have, in recent decades, been the subject of programs of sedentarization and fixed cultivation (điều canh dinh cu). Such programs, first initiated in 1968, constitute a further vehicle for attempts at assimilation to lowland Kinh culture. As those living at the highest altitudes and most remote locations, Hmong and Dao peoples were particularly
targeted. The attitude behind the policy is captured well in the heroic title of a 1968 article appearing in the journal *Vietnamese Studies*: “The Zao [Dao] are Coming Down to the Lowlands” (An Thu 1968). Yet, discrepancies exist in assessments of just how ‘fixed’ sedentarized ethnic populations have become. Interviews with ‘resettled’ Hmong in two districts of Thai Nguyen province revealed a variety of strategies of resistance. In some cases, Hmong families split their households between their highland and resettled valley homes and corresponding plots. Many would regularly return to their former lands, a day or two’s walk away, leaving some family members for several days at a time to farm on the upland slopes and collect forest products there.

**Plate 10. Site of a Resettled Hmong Village in Thai Nguyen Province**

Ethnic minority shifting cultivators continue to suffer a stigma, blamed as the main culprits of deforestation, diverting attention from logging companies. Instead, shifting cultivation (*du canh du cu*) is blamed, with Hmong being labeled as forest-cutting vandals (*ke pha rung*), considered to be outside the law (*ngoai luat*). One district Party official warned, “if left alone, they would cut all the trees.” In his view, the program to reforest and allocate forest land was largely designed to target this problem. Great efforts have been exerted by state officials to ‘map the minorities,’ and the sedentary cultivation program has recently been gaining impetus. In 1990, sedentary cultivation campaigns across Vietnam were launched in 1,883 communes of 193 districts. The program involved the participation of 2.8 million people from 482,500 households. Of these, 1,900,000 people from 324,500 households in 1,185
201

communes of 68 districts were “reported to have gained very good success.” These farmers received additional support from other resources intended for eradicating famine and alleviating poverty, checking illiteracy and developing rural credits (Nguyen Van Truong 1996: 32).

What policy makers often do not realize are the contradictions that exist in visions of land and property among different ethnic groups. Hmong people consider land that a family or kin group has cleared and cultivated once to be theirs to use indefinitely. For them, land is not a commodity to be bought and sold. It is understood as belonging to ancestral and land spirits (Corlin 1998). Upland areas not under cultivation in Kon Tum province in the Central Highlands were often still ‘owned’ by local families. A crop known as le was planted to mark boundaries of ownership of different families. Le or stones would mark their corn fields in fallow periods. Planting le also served to reduce the fallow duration. In Gia Lai province, Jarai people strictly respect village boundaries and those of other families. If someone were to transgress, he or she would be judged by village customary law (Nguyen Huu Thanh n.d.).

Hmong people who practiced swidden agriculture on ‘unused’ forest lands suddenly faced spatial encroachment as ‘their’ lands came to be allocated to other households, often from neighbouring villages. To the extent that the new lease holder did not make use of the land, the Hmong sometimes continued to farm on this slope land, with or without consent of the leaseholder. The changing notions of property associated with decollectivization can thus be a cause of land-use conflicts. Different concepts of ownership lead Kinh people to assume that some ethnic groups do not care about land, even if it has been allocated to them. Hmong are perceived to not want land allocation. As one district official in Thai Nguyen explained, “Hmong move from place to place so they can’t decide on any allocation. But when they decide, the commune will allocate the land to them.” Local officials in parts of the Central Highlands (in southern Vietnam) resisted allocating land to some ethnic minorities there due to a perceived risk that they would simply turn around and sell the land to Kinh in-migrants and then expect a new allocation. In some cases this had already occurred several times over. The practice of shifting cultivation—rotating fields and leaving land fallow—contradicts the land law, which stipulates that land must be under continual cultivation. In this way, people are tied to, or enclosed within, a restricted area of land. Moreover, as it was developed for a lowland (Kinh) system, land allocation does not allow for collective forms of tenure. Miscommunication and misunderstandings have often led to cessation of land allocation or issuance of certificates for Hmong people. Given these circumstances, some analysts have called for more flexible
approaches, such as group-based allocation, for ethnic groups with different traditions of management of agricultural or forest land, as discussed in the next chapter.

**Characterization of a Diverse Region: Thai Nguyen Province**

In order to bring to light the complexities of change and the structure of vulnerability of a particular locality, my analysis of vulnerability in rural Vietnam is concentrated in and around the northern midland province of Thai Nguyen. As can be seen in Map 4, the midlands region encompasses the provinces of Ha Tay, Hoa Binh, Vinh Phu, Phu Tho, Thai Nguyen, Bac Giang, and Yen Bai, which roughly surround the Red River Delta area. The multi-ethnic and agro-ecologically diverse setting of Thai Nguyen province introduces various elements to the analysis of decollectivization that would not be present in a more homogeneous population and terrain. Complexities of resource conflicts in socialist and post-socialist arenas alike are more sensitive when the ethnic landscape is diverse. As will be seen later, the settlement histories of various groups at different stages led to differing expectations of benefits during the process of land allocation. Territories such as Thai Nguyen have been historically ‘difficult to manage.’ This buffer zone lying above the Red River Delta has been subject to waves of unrest, contraband, pirating, and war with Vietnam’s powerful northern neighbour, China. Situated in a strategic geopolitical and topographical locale surrounded by four mountain ranges, Thai Nguyen was perhaps geographically destined to be a disputed territory. Thai Nguyen is now subject to a changing landscape of economic activities, organizational forms, and property rights relations, associated with changes in resource use and workload.
In the early 1960s, many provinces in Vietnam were consolidated. At this time Thai Nguyen and Bac Kan (and parts of Cao Bang) provinces were merged to form Bac Thai province. In January 1997 the two provinces were re-divided and Thai Nguyen was once again a separate province. (see Map 5). Further details of the chaotic administrative reshuffling of provincial, district, and commune boundaries are provided in the Appendix.
In order to set the province of Thai Nguyen in a broader regional context, some characteristics of the northern midlands (trung du) and mountainous (mien nui) region are highlighted first. As indicated earlier in Table 20, of all regions, in 1998 the northern mountainous region had the highest level of rural poverty, at 66 percent, compared to the national average of 44 percent. The topographical map in Map 6 shows Thai Nguyen’s position at the interface between the delta and mountainous zones. According to figures from the General Department of Land Administration (GDLA), the northern midlands and mountainous region—one of seven official regions in Vietnam—comprises 10.3 million hectares, or slightly more than 30 percent of the nation’s land area. Only 12 percent of this region’s surface was agricultural land. Forest land made up 20 percent, while 66 percent was classified as unused land.

In 1994, the northern midlands and mountainous region was home to 12.4 million people, comprising 17 percent of the national population. Of this population, 87 percent lived in rural areas. Population growth in 1993 was relatively high at 2.35 percent, placing increasing pressure on the region’s limited agricultural land base. Average agricultural land per capita was 0.1 hectares, while average rice land was just 0.03 hectares. In most parts of the region where rice cultivation was viable, only one crop of rice per year could be grown, due to limited irrigation. Rice productivity was low, averaging two tons per hectare.
In comparison with other provinces in the northern midlands and mountainous region, Thai Nguyen was relatively well-off, having a small to medium-sized city boasting a strong industrial base and educational institutions, as well as being located on a road network leading to several other provinces. These advantages were not a coincidence. As Pelley (1998: 386) explained:

Within a fifteen-year period, the DRV [Democratic Republic of Vietnam] had elaborated a comprehensive industrial network for Viet Bac [the northeastern autonomous zone]: steel plants, coal, tin and iron mines and a center for hydroelectric power. Furthermore, during this same period the old market town of Thai Nguyen, with its ‘straw huts and indistinguishable streets,’ was transformed into an industrial city and became the political, cultural and economic center of Viet Bac.

However, provinces such as Thai Nguyen, Quang Ninh and Vinh Phu, which were the locus of socialist industrialization efforts prior to doi moi, have recently encountered difficulties in adjusting (Revilla Diez 1999: 368). In comparing the regional distribution of industrial production, the share of national gross industrial output held by the northern mountain and midland region declined from 11.5 percent in 1986 to just 6.0 percent in 1993. By 1995, it had recuperated its position slightly, moving to 7.4 percent. Over the same period, from 1986 to 1995, the northeastern region of the south, surrounding Ho Chi Minh City, increased its share of gross industrial output from 34.1 to 51.8 percent, pointing to a greater regional concentration in this area (General Statistical Office, cited in Revilla Diez 1999: 367).

Covering an area of 3541 km², the population of Thai Nguyen province grew from 230,514 in 1955 to 1,060,316 in 1997, an average of 3.7 percent growth per annum. The growth in population through both natural increase and in-migration is further reflected at the district level in the increasing population density, as shown for selected years in Table 23. Vietnam’s overall population density grew from nearly 90 to more than 300 persons per square kilometer between 1960 and the late 1980s. This contrasts with an average density of just 118 persons per square kilometer for the Northern Midlands and Mountainous Region as a whole in the 1990s, with Lai Chau province having the lowest average of just 29. Vo Nhi was, and remains, the least densely populated district in the province. Aside from the urban areas of Thai Nguyen City and Song Cong Town, the most densely populated districts are Phu Binh and Pho Yen, both in the south, shown in map form in Map 7. Between 1960 and 1996, most districts increased their population density by a factor of three, but some—such as Dinh Hoa, Dai Tu, Vo Nhi and Phu Luong, which were relatively less dense in the early years—grew to four or nearly five times their 1960 population density.
Map 6. Topographical Map of the Area Surrounding Thai Nguyen Province
Table 23. Population Density, by District, Thai Nguyen province, 1955-present

(persons per square km)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>TN</th>
<th>Dinh</th>
<th>Phu</th>
<th>Dai</th>
<th>Vo</th>
<th>Dong</th>
<th>Pho</th>
<th>Phu</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>City</td>
<td>Hoa</td>
<td>Luong</td>
<td>Tu</td>
<td>Nhai</td>
<td>Hy</td>
<td>Yen</td>
<td>Binh</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TN:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c.1927</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>1823</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bac Thai:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>61</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>123</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>133</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>163</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>168</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>172</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>176</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>180</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>184</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TN:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>291</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>303</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Figures for Song Cong Town were included in yearbooks as of 1990. In this year, its density was 722. Two figures, from different sources, were given for 1996, so both are provided here.


Of the 194,000 rural households in Thai Nguyen in 1994, 90 percent were agricultural, with fewer than one percent working in forestry, aquaculture, small industry, or construction as their main occupation. One percent worked in each of commerce and services. It is unfortunate that these figures only report the primary occupation of the household (presumably that of the
household head) and as such do not account for mixed livelihood strategies that combine agriculture with other sideline occupations. Measuring this would likely have revealed a significant degree of diversification of economic strategies among rural households in recent years or at least the initiation of such a trend.

Several scholars (e.g., Beresford 1989; Tran Thi Van Anh 1999) note how the policy of land allocation stimulated an increase in nuclearization of households in order to maximize each household's allocation of residential and garden land (agricultural land, by contrast, was allocated on a per capita basis). This is reflected in the statistics for Thai Nguyen. The rate of increase in the number of agricultural households between 1986 and 1995 is higher for every year save 1994 than the rate of increase in the agricultural population as a whole. During the same period, the average number of persons per household declined from 5.5 to 4.9. This may be a product of both nuclearization as well as increasing family planning campaigns. The only available district-level data on agricultural household size are for 1995. In this year the largest household size was 5.4 persons, in Vo Nhai, and the smallest, 4.4 persons, in Thai Nguyen City.

The Making of a Frontier Territory: Histories of (Re)Settlement, Ethnicity and Land Relations

The midlands province of Thai Nguyen is home to a diverse ethnic population, as shown in Table 24. Of its 177 communes, 57 are lowland (including the majority of those in the southernmost part of the province); 106 are mountainous; and 14 are ‘high-remote’ (Ba Luan 1997). The largest ethnic group in the province is the lowland-dwelling Kinh (Viet). In 1989, the Kinh comprised 68 percent of the population of Bac Thai province, and 75 percent in what would later (again) become Thai Nguyen province. The greater proportion of non-Kinh in Bac Kan than in Thai Nguyen province is consistent with the rough trend of more remote northern mountainous areas (i.e., located further from the Red River Delta) being populated by a greater proportion of non-Kinh peoples. In Thai Nguyen province, the districts with the highest proportion of Kinh were Thai Nguyen City (91 percent), Song Cong Town (99 percent), and Phu Binh and Pho Yen districts (94 and 93 percent, respectively), all in the centre or south of the province. The remaining districts ranged between a high of 78 percent Kinh (in Dai Tu) and lows of 39 and 38 percent (in Vo Nhai and Dinh Hoa). Given the huge influxes of Kinh migrants into Thai Nguyen in the 1960s and 1970s, I find hardly credible the 1960 data on ethnic group composition as reported in provincial yearbooks, suggesting that the Kinh represented 75 percent of the population—the same proportion as in 1995.
### Table 24. Population and Ethnicity by District, Thai Nguyen province, 1989

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Pop.</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>% Kinh</th>
<th>% Tay</th>
<th>% Nung</th>
<th>% San Diu</th>
<th>% San Chay</th>
<th>% Dao</th>
<th>% Hmong</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thai Nguyen City</td>
<td>171815</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>91.0</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Song Cong Town</td>
<td>32225</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>98.5</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dinh Hoa</td>
<td>79137</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>37.9</td>
<td>46.6</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phu Luong*</td>
<td>107390</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>54.2</td>
<td>25.1</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dai Tu</td>
<td>137348</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>78.4</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vo Nhai</td>
<td>48211</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>39.1</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dong Hy</td>
<td>93271</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>63.7</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pho Yen</td>
<td>118650</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>93.0</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phu Binh</td>
<td>115533</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>94.0</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tot. Bac Thai</td>
<td>1029985</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>68.3</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tot. TN</td>
<td>903580</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>75.4</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Population data for this district pertain to the pre-1997 boundaries. In 1997, Phu Luong district was sub-divided into one district in Thai Nguyen province, retaining the same name, and part of another district in Bac Kan province.

The second largest ethnic group in Thai Nguyen is the Tay, comprising 16.8 percent of the population, followed by the Nung—5.7 percent, the San Diu—2.8, the San Chay—2.3, the Dao—3.2), and the Hmong and Hoa (Chinese)—0.3 percent each. Each group has its own distinct history of settlement and patterns of production in the area, which have shaped its particular land relations, as shall be seen later. Table 25, also displayed in map form in Map 8, shows the proportions within each district. These maps illustrate the significant variation by district in settlement patterns of different groups.
Table 25. Population of Ethnic Groups across Districts, Thai Nguyen province, 1989
(percent of each ethnic group’s total provincial population residing in the given district)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District:</th>
<th>Pop.</th>
<th>% Kinh</th>
<th>% Tay</th>
<th>% Nung</th>
<th>% San</th>
<th>% San</th>
<th>% Dao</th>
<th>% Hmong</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thai Nguyen City</td>
<td>171815</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Song Cong Town</td>
<td>32225</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dinh Hoa</td>
<td>79137</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>37.8</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>28.3</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phu Luong*</td>
<td>107390</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>36.2</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vo Nhai</td>
<td>48211</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>20.9</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>30.5</td>
<td>40.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dai Tu</td>
<td>137348</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>19.9</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dong Hy</td>
<td>93271</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>26.8</td>
<td>41.9</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>20.9</td>
<td>45.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pho Yen</td>
<td>118650</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phu Binh</td>
<td>115533</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tot. TN</td>
<td>903580</td>
<td>681169</td>
<td>97582</td>
<td>45806</td>
<td>28437</td>
<td>23901</td>
<td>19426</td>
<td>2264</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Population data for this district pertain to the pre-1997 boundaries. In 1997, Phu Luong district was sub-divided into one district in Thai Nguyen province, retaining the same name, and part of another district in Bac Kan province.

*Prior to 1997 division with Bac Kan province
Map 8. Distribution of Population by Ethnic Group, by district, Thai Nguyen province, 1989 (three classes equal interval)
The northwestern and northeastern portions of Thai Nguyen have long been settled by Tay and Nung peoples respectively, with further migrations of Nung from Lang Son province into Thai Nguyen early this century (see Abadie 1924). The Tay are the most numerous ethnic minority in Vietnam (see Khong Dien 1995). They belong to the Tai linguistic group and therefore share common historical and linguistic origins with several other minorities in the north, most notably the Nung and the Thai. The Nung, numbering approximately one million, is the third largest ethnic minority group in Vietnam after the Tay and Thai. For several centuries, parts of the east and southeast of Thai Nguyen province have been settled by San Diu (believed to be a Yao sub-group) and the northwest by some San Chay and a small number of Hoa. Although maintaining their own language, the Tay have been highly influenced by Vietnamese culture. The territory of the Tay to the north of the Red River Delta is of longstanding strategic importance, lying on the major transportation and communication route between Vietnam and China. For this reason the relationship between the Vietnamese and the Tay has been much closer than that of other ethnic minorities, whom the Vietnamese have more often left undisturbed (Bonifacy 1904).

The Tay have shifted allegiances over the centuries in order to maintain their autonomy, being wooed by the Vietnamese and Chinese alike (Hickey 1958: 416). But both Tay and Nung in Thai Nguyen offered vital alliances for the Viet Minh during the resistance to the French. Through the revolutionary war, the social and political integration of Tay and Nung into lowland Vietnamese culture accelerated (McAlister 1967: 796). In acknowledgement of their solidarity, when the turmoil was over, the Tay were granted rights to key positions in the regional administration, a factor influencing the recent reclaiming of ancestral lands in the area, discussed in Chapter Seven. In acknowledgement of the contributions of the Tay and Nung to the struggle for national liberation, the official Vietnamese historiography today remembers many of their leaders. Hoang Van Thu, a Tay, was one of the chief leaders of the Party in its early days. Revolutionary Le Quang Ba, a Tay native of Cao Bang, became commander-in-chief of the armed forces of Hanoi, was an architect of the victory at Dien Bien Phu, and later became Chairman of the Committee of Nationalities of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (Le Quang Ba 1968). Chu Van Tan, a Nung revolutionary, was subsequently Minister of Defence, Party Secretary, and then Commander of the armed forces of the Viet Bac Autonomous Zone, established on August 19, 1956 (Vu Can 1968: 105). This zone comprised the six northeastern provinces of Lang Son, Cao Bang, Ha Giang, Tuyen Quang, Bac Kan and Thai Nguyen, with Thai Nguyen City chosen as the administrative centre (see Fall 1960). While the formation of
the autonomous zone is an important symbolic gesture, analysts question its real significance, given that this and the other two autonomous zones were considered by Hanoi officials to be “in no way separate” from the rest of Vietnam (Pelley 1995: 238).

Internal migration to ‘sparsely populated territories’ such as Thai Nguyen became a significant State policy after the formation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1954, and more particularly in the 1960s and 1970s. Through the establishment of New Economic Zones (not to be confused with the autonomous zone) in the area, Thai Nguyen became a destination for in-migration by Kinh settlers from the densely populated Red River Delta. The Kinh newcomers sometimes settled in villages already established by ethnic minorities and other times founded new villages. In many districts, local Tay people let the Kinh live in their houses until they built their own, and some Kinh children learned to speak Tay. Some of the new settlers joined newly established state forest enterprises. While beneficial for provincial economic growth, these enterprises served to create inroads for the state and Kinh populations to encroach on lands that had formerly been used by ethnic minorities. When some of these forestry enterprises were disbanded in the 1990s, the workers—mainly originating from the Delta—were allocated nearby land to farm.

During the late 1960s and the 1970s, a number of Dao and some Hmong people were resettled in the lowland areas through state sedentarization campaigns targeting shifting cultivators. They were given residential land and integrated into collectives for rice paddy production in river valleys. For others, internal migration was more of a household response to dangers posed elsewhere, such as the 1979 border dispute with China, which provoked many upland inhabitants from the northern border area to move southwards to settle in Thai Nguyen. More recently still, facing declining soil fertility and increasing population pressure on the land, some agricultural households from Thai Nguyen and neighbouring provinces have moved to the rapidly expanding agricultural frontier of the Central Highlands (Tay Nguyen) in southern Vietnam in the hopes of a better life growing coffee and other cash crops.

The campaign of sedentarization of swidden cultivators picked up pace in the 1990s in Bac Thai. A representative from the Office of Resettlement reported to me that in the early years of the decade, 4500 to 5200 households (29,000 to 33,000 people) were targeted. Almost all were Dao and Hmong. The households were spread among 209 sites in 78 communes within Dinh Hoa, Phu Luong, Vo Nhai and Dong Hy districts. An official from the Department of Agriculture in Thai Nguyen explained that by 1998 there were just 47 ‘pockets’ of shifting
cultivation remaining, with five to 20 households in each, representing a total population of about 5000 people.

Land Relations and Collectivization of Agricultural Production

According to Henry’s (1932) accounts, the majority of Thai Nguyen’s land in the early 1930s was privately owned, while 24 percent of rice land was communal. Most of the latter was fallow, not cultivated. Private land ownership, including paddy land and forest gardens, is an age-old tradition among the Tay and Nung, as with the Kinh (Vuong Xuan Tinh 1998: 89). Data from Henry (1932: 100-101) indicate that in all of Thai Nguyen there was only one landlord who owned more than 36 hectares of land (in Dong Hy district), while another seven landlords owned between 18 and 36 hectares each (in Dong Hy and Dai Tu districts) (see Table 27). It is likely that the concentration of land accelerated subsequent to the publication of Henry’s book in 1932. One official I interviewed from Dong Hy district explained that in the colonial period, 0.7 percent of Dong Hy’s population owned 30 percent of the land. The landlords hired guards to protect them. Each landlord had up to 30 ha, planted with coffee and other crops, which extended to Tan Long and Minh Lap communes. Yet, land concentration in most of northern Thai Nguyen and Bac Kan in the pre-revolutionary period seems to have been more rare. Local people interviewed in this area estimated that the largest landholdings of paddy land among local residents were from one hectare in Tan Long commune, Dong Hy district, to five hectares in Cho Don district, Bac Kan province.

Six communes of Dai Tu district were the site of an experimental wave of land reforms between December 1953 and March 1954. This followed a campaign of rent reductions in 1953. Moise (1983: 190) noted that Dai Tu had quite a number of large landlords. He describes the events that transpired as follows:

One hundred forty-five cadres were sent into these sixXA [communes] to mobilize the masses. Where the rent reduction had classified an average of six households as landlords in each of theseXA, the land reform found an average of sixteen perXA; this would have been 3.4 – 4 percent of the households, and 4.5 – 5 percent of the population. This was not uniform, however; there was considerable variation betweenXA.
Table 26. Land Tenure in Thai Nguyen province, by District, c. 1930

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Number of landholders possessing:</th>
<th>no. land-owners farming directly</th>
<th>no. land-owners using hired labour</th>
<th>area of communal lands (mau)**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>hectares:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>fallow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>maus:</td>
<td>0-0.36</td>
<td>0.36-1.8</td>
<td>1.8-3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dinh Hoa</td>
<td>381</td>
<td>1306</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phu Luong</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>591</td>
<td>308</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dai Tu</td>
<td>712</td>
<td>634</td>
<td>407</td>
<td>270</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vo Nhai</td>
<td>342</td>
<td>526</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dong Hy*</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>615</td>
<td>369</td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pho Yen</td>
<td>911</td>
<td>911</td>
<td>282</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phu Binh</td>
<td>1283</td>
<td>1004</td>
<td>543</td>
<td>288</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3943</td>
<td>5587</td>
<td>2069</td>
<td>999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>28.3</td>
<td>47.2</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dinh Hoa</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td>74.8</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phu Luong</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>54.1</td>
<td>28.2</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dai Tu</td>
<td>35.1</td>
<td>31.2</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vo Nhai</td>
<td>34.9</td>
<td>53.7</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dong Hy*</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>43.7</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>15.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pho Yen</td>
<td>40.7</td>
<td>40.7</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phu Binh</td>
<td>41.1</td>
<td>32.2</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The former boundaries of Dong Hy include much of what is now under the administration of Thai Nguyen City.

** One mau is equivalent to 10 sao, or 3600m².

Source: Henry (1932: 100-101).

Then between May and September of 1954, 53 communes in Thai Nguyen and Thanh Hoa provinces underwent the first full wave of land reform, during which time the number of households classified as landlords rose from 38 to 98, eight of whom were executed. However, some years afterwards, during the campaign of 'rectification of errors,' there came an acknowledgement that too many people had been classified as landlords in earlier waves (Moise 1983: 190, 220).

The set of statistical yearbooks from Thai Nguyen reviewed for this chapter provided various quantitative indicators of the progress of collectivization over the years. Mutual aid
teams (to doi cong) were the first step, the founding teams being formed in 1955. Across five
districts, 2,807 teams were formed in this year, 41 of which were ‘regular teams.’ Four years
later there were 951 regular teams. The overall number of teams peaked in 1956, presumably
because after this date some of the teams joined low-level collectives. During the same period,
the number of households participating in mutual aid teams rose from 17,365 overall, with 190
regularly participating in 1955, to 8,259 regularly participating in 1959. The peak year for the
overall number of participating households was again 1956.

Small craft industries and trades also began to be collectivized at this time. By 1959
nearly 2000 crafts- and trades-persons were in ‘re-education’ programs, the majority of whom
also joined collective teams (to hop tac) or, subsequently, collectives (hop tac xa). Small-scale
trading (tieu thuong) was similarly collectivized, with more than 2,200 traders in re-education
and organized into groups to buy and sell collectively by 1959. As agriculture became subject to
larger economies of scale, irrigation was given increasing priority. In the 1955 to 1960 period,
eight reservoirs, two lakes, one pumping station, and one canal were constructed. The entire
project covered an area of 1,492 hectares. The irrigated area for summer and autumn crops
combined rose from 13,000 hectares in 1955 to 44,000 in 1964. After the war with the US had
receded, the dam at Nui Coc Lake was constructed in 1974. It provided irrigation canals for
paddy land in Pho Yen district and Song Cong town in the southwest of the province.

The first low-level (smaller-scale) collectives were established in Thai Nguyen province
in 1955. All three were in Dai Tu district, a vanguard of the collective movement, once visited
by President Ho Chi Minh (see Plate 11). By 1958 there were 28 collectives throughout the
province. The year 1959 saw the first high-level collectives founded, comprising 23 of the fast-
growing total of 577 collectives. Dong Hy district had the highest number of collectives of this
type (7 of the 23). The numbers of high-level collectives continued to grow, reaching 516 across
Bac Thai province in 1965, out of 1,595 collectives in total. By 1975, the number of high-level
collectives reached a peak at 759. In the same year, there were just 84 low-level collectives.
According to provincial statistical yearbooks, by 1980 there were no low-level collectives remaining. This year represents the climax in scale of collectivization. Collectives were fewest in number—547—but largest in scale, in terms of both the average number of households per collective—more than 150—and average land area—105 hectares. As shown in Table 28 and Table 29, between 1975 and 1980, the number of collectives of more than 400 households expanded from less than one percent to more than 11 percent. At the same time, the percent of collectives managing more than 200 hectares of land grew from 2.5 to 14 percent. These trends in ‘scaling up’ are roughly consistent with the situation in the northern mountainous region and in northern Vietnam as a whole, for which 1981 and 1979, respectively, registered the lowest number of collectives—indicative of the largest-scale types. Two years later, in 1982, there were eight low-level collectives that resurfaced in Bac Thai, suggesting some reorganization to improve the management of collectives. By the end of the 1980s, the average land area per collective was nearly half as much, while the total number of collectives had grown by at least half.
Table 27. Agricultural Collectives, by Number of Households, Bac Thai province, 1975-1980

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1975</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>1979</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>1980</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. collectives</td>
<td>680</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>746</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>547</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. households:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 30</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>26.4</td>
<td>481</td>
<td>64.5</td>
<td>287</td>
<td>52.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-50</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>495</td>
<td>89.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51-100</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>25.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>101-150</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>17.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>151-200</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>59</td>
<td>12.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>201-300</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>301-400</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>401-500</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>501-700</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 700</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 28. Agricultural Collectives, by Land Area, Bac Thai province, 1975-1980

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1975</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>1979</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>1980</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. collectives</td>
<td>680</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>746</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>547</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By land area:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 20 ha</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td>495</td>
<td>66.4</td>
<td>305</td>
<td>55.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-40 ha</td>
<td>189</td>
<td>27.8</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>13.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-60 ha</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61-80 ha</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>17.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>81-100 ha</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>101-150 ha</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>8.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>151-200 ha</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>201-300 ha</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>301-500 ha</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>501-700 ha</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 700 ha</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The degree of collectivization varied significantly between districts in Thai Nguyen (then Bac Thai) province (as shown in Table 29). This issue is taken up in more detail in the subsequent chapter. Even over the period of 1973-75, at the height of the collective era, there
were fluctuations within each district in the number of collectivized households. Collective production was apparently more successful in areas of irrigated rice lands, by virtue of the need for some form of co-ordination and collective action to ensure a harvest. Collectives were often much weaker in areas of upland cultivation and non-rice crops (De Hartingh 1996: 414-5).

Table 29. Number of Collectivized Households (*ho tap te*), Thai Nguyen province, 1955-present

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>TN City</th>
<th>Dinh Hoa</th>
<th>Phu Luong</th>
<th>Dai Tu Vo Nhi</th>
<th>Dong Hy</th>
<th>Pho Yen</th>
<th>Phu Binh</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1955</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>34</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1956</td>
<td>81</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>81</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1957</td>
<td>66</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1958</td>
<td>492</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1959</td>
<td>20145</td>
<td>3446</td>
<td>1542</td>
<td>2872</td>
<td>1328</td>
<td>3915</td>
<td>2835</td>
<td>4207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>36122</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>3828</td>
<td>2787</td>
<td>6070</td>
<td>2259</td>
<td>7286</td>
<td>5573</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bac Thai:</td>
<td></td>
<td>4618</td>
<td>9781</td>
<td>10005</td>
<td>1761</td>
<td>15986</td>
<td>11039</td>
<td>13161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>92794</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989*</td>
<td>29226</td>
<td>16301</td>
<td>459</td>
<td>1637</td>
<td>478</td>
<td>478</td>
<td>1249</td>
<td>1890</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The 1989 data set listed separately the figures for Song Cong town: 1900 collectivized households

The number of collectivized households in Thai Nguyen swelled from just 34 in 1955 to more than 36,000 in 1960, representing 87 percent of all agricultural households and 53 percent of all agricultural land. Compared to the northern mountainous region, Bac Thai maintained a slightly higher rate of collectivization of households throughout the whole period. According to figures extending to 1990 published by the national Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD), the number of collectivized households in Bac Thai continued to grow over the three decades. However, results of a provincial agricultural survey in 1989 pointed to a dramatic dropping off in the number of collectivized households in this year to just over 29,226, whereas the MARD figures report 129,000 for the same year, and even more in the following year. Measuring the degree of collectivization was indeed challenging in the years following the various policy reforms that restricted the functions of collectives and granted greater autonomy to households. This introduced problems regarding the classification of a collectivized household. The collective might have collapsed completely but still existed on paper, or might have continued to carry out a more limited scope of activities, such that former household
members, or at least local officials in charge of counting them, considered them(selves) to be largely independent farmers.

These measurement difficulties aside, MARD reported that in 1990, 95 percent of agricultural households in northern Vietnam were collectivized, as were 91 percent in Bac Thai, 80 percent in the northern mountainous region, and 67 percent across the whole of Vietnam. The only district-level figures available on the extent of household collectivization are for the late 1950s, when collectivization was just beginning, and for the early 1970s. These latter figures reveal significant variation between districts. While the provincial average was 78 to 80 percent, the district-level figures ranged from 99 percent in Thai Nguyen City and 97 percent in Dinh Hoa, to around 70 percent in Phu Luong, Dong Hy and Phu Binh, and only 6 percent in Vo Nhai. As for machinery, by 1964, 438 of a total of 506 buffalo carts in the province were collectivized. Collectives were primarily for agricultural production. In 1964, of all collectives in Thai Nguyen, 90.5 percent were for crops, 1.2 percent were for livestock, and 8.3 were for other occupations.

In 1990, there were 605 collectives/cooperatives in Thai Nguyen, the vast majority of which were for agricultural production. By 1996, this figure had fallen to 224. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) estimated the average income of members by cooperative as follows. As explained to the author in an interview in 1998, 20 percent of cooperatives in the province were better-off (their members having an average income of 20,000 dong per day); 66 percent were average (having an average income of 10,000-20,000); and the rest were weak (having an average income of less than 10,000). There are five or six cooperatives that had completely transformed their former collective structure, following the criteria detailed in Chapter Four. Different cooperatives in Thai Nguyen offer some of the following services to assist in the development of the household economy: access to irrigation, pesticides, fertilizers, new seeds, new machinery and techniques, and extension advice. Some cooperatives also facilitate the formation of mutual assistance credit groups.

Land Use, Land Allocation, and Rural Landholdings

Accounts differ as to the total land area in Thai Nguyen province, but it is in the range of 343,000 to 360,000 hectares. By accounts of the Land Administration Office, agriculture in 1996 comprised 83,000 hectares of land. The remainder of the province’s land area was residential (1300 hectares in urban and 7200 in rural areas), special use land (21,000 hectares for transportation, irrigation, construction, military and security purposes, mineral exploitation,
sourcing of construction materials, cemeteries, and historical relics), and unused land (41,000 hectares for water surfaces and 'other'). Estimates of the area of forest land are ambiguous and complex. This is not helped by the fact that there are four agencies in Vietnam responsible for calculations of land use, compounded by the variety of overlapping categories of forest land. Of these, one set of distinctions is between 'natural' forest (the degree of how 'natural' is unclear), planted forest, and bare land. Another is between production forest, protection forest (to control erosion, especially in watersheds), and special use forest land (in some instances referred to as biodiversity land). Within each category there have been different arrangements for assigning and allocating such lands to households for replanting and protection purposes. The total area of 'forest land,' if we are to include the areas of slope and rocky land, bare land, or land with forest 'potential' (not to be confused with the narrower category of forested land), is in the order of 174,000 to 184,000 hectares. Following data supplied by the Forest Protection Division, 52,000 hectares of this was natural forest as of 1996. However, according to figures from the Land Administration Office, this figure was 94,000. This Office appeared to calculate 'unused' slope lands and rocky mountainous areas separately. The area of planted forest, according to these same two sources, was reported as 35,000 and 42,000, respectively. Finally, bare land was estimated at 91,000 hectares by the Forest Protection Division and at 65,000 by the Land Administration Office. The latter figure included 38,800 for unused slope land and 26,400 for unused rocky and mountainous land in the calculation. Overall, then, the proportion of natural, planted, and bare lands of the total forest area are 29, 20, and 51 percent, respectively. The proportion of 'forest land' per district, together with breakdown into these three categories, are represented in Map 10.

I now turn to the issue of land allocation and certification to determine the property rights associated with the various types of land discussed above. Data from the Land Administration Office suggest that to the end of 1997, use-right certificates had been issued to 171,857 households for 42,500 hectares of allocated agricultural land and 18,800 hectares of allocated forest land. These figures include 2044 hectares of agricultural land and 98 hectares of forest land in urban areas. In all, 14 percent of households, including 46 percent in Thai Nguyen City, had not received land-use right certificates by the end of 1997. Five communes across the province had not yet gone through the land certification process.
The process of certification lagged behind land allocation. Certification began following the 1993 Land Law, while \textit{de jure} land allocation to households was initiated following Decision 10 in 1988. Table 30 presents a separate set of data from the Land Administration Office indicating land allocation to 1996 by land type and management agency. Certificates had been issued for only a part of this total. These figures show that 79,600 hectares of agricultural land and 79,800 hectares of forest land had been allocated to \textit{households} by 1996. Comparing these to the above figures, we can calculate that slightly more than half the agricultural land and a quarter of the forest land allocated to households had been certified in Thai Nguyen by 1996.
Moreover, only six percent (8480 of 14,842 hectares) of residential land allocations had been certified.

A further element of this table is the allocations of land to agencies other than households, namely 'economic organizations,' foreigners and joint ventures, People’s Committees, and other. Of the province’s total land area, 36 percent was not allocated to any agency. Of all agricultural land, 96 percent was allocated to households and three percent to economic organizations. State enterprises are probably the primary agency in this category. Of the 2,538 hectares allocated to economic organizations, 64 percent was for perennial crops (mainly tea plantations), 19 percent for aquaculture, and 17 percent for annual crops. Foreigners and joint ventures were allocated 26 hectares of perennial crop land. And finally, People’s Committees around the province managed 404 hectares of land allocated to them, most likely at the commune level. Of this, more than two-thirds was for aquaculture, and the remainder was land for annual crops.

Of the total area of forest land, 83 percent was allocated by 1996, including all of the planted forest plus three-quarters of the natural forest area. Of all the allocated forest lands, 71 percent was allocated to households, 15 percent to People’s Committees, and 14 percent to economic organizations (state enterprises). Households were allocated 67 percent of total allocated natural forest land, including 92 percent of the allocated natural forest land for production purposes and 27 percent of the allocated natural forest land for erosion control and watershed protection. Perhaps due to the differing categories of land types, there were significant discrepancies in data on forest land allocation between the Forest Protection Division and the Land Administration Office. The latter suggested that 16,416 households received allocations of forest lands between 1992 and 1997.

What impact has the allocation and quasi-privatization of landholdings had on land tenure? The interpretation of results from the 1994 Rural and Agricultural Survey is confusing due to the way that data on landholdings are presented. Rural households were shown to 'have' varying sizes of residential, agricultural and forestry land, but this is listed separately from holdings of agricultural and forestry land that have been ‘allocated’ to households. Presumably the former lands being used by households had already been informally allocated and would become formalized in the near future. Moreover, the data did not indicate how much of the allocated land certificates had been issued. This is presumably because the issuing of use-right certificates was only decreed through the 1993 Land Law and thus not implemented until some years after 1993.
Table 30. Area of Land and Allocated Land, by Land Type, Thai Nguyen Province, 1996 (hectares)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Land type</th>
<th>Total area</th>
<th>Sub-total</th>
<th>Individual households</th>
<th>Economic organizations</th>
<th>Foreigners and joint ventures</th>
<th>People’s Cmte</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Land not yet allocated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total area</td>
<td>354452</td>
<td>226217</td>
<td>169196</td>
<td>23488</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>28563</td>
<td>4939</td>
<td>128235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Agricultural land</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Annual crops</td>
<td>82671</td>
<td>82671</td>
<td>79581</td>
<td>2538</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>404</td>
<td>122</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Rice and food crops</td>
<td>52369</td>
<td>52369</td>
<td>51795</td>
<td>428</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>28</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Crops on burnt over land (dat nuong ray)</td>
<td>42352</td>
<td>42352</td>
<td>41960</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Other annual crops</td>
<td>536</td>
<td>536</td>
<td>536</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Forest land</td>
<td>135572</td>
<td>112169</td>
<td>79774</td>
<td>15369</td>
<td>16722</td>
<td>304</td>
<td>23403</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Natural forest</td>
<td>93600</td>
<td>70197</td>
<td>46796</td>
<td>5310</td>
<td>15041</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>23403</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Production forest</td>
<td>57715</td>
<td>43051</td>
<td>39438</td>
<td>3601</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14664</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Forest protected to control erosion, watersheds</td>
<td>35693</td>
<td>27142</td>
<td>7354</td>
<td>4709</td>
<td>15029</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>8551</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Planted forest</td>
<td>41822</td>
<td>41822</td>
<td>32945</td>
<td>6942</td>
<td>1681</td>
<td>254</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Production forest</td>
<td>27668</td>
<td>27668</td>
<td>21607</td>
<td>5912</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>104</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Forest protected to control erosion, watersheds</td>
<td>14099</td>
<td>14099</td>
<td>11338</td>
<td>975</td>
<td>1636</td>
<td>150</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Seedling area</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>55</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>55</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Special use land</td>
<td>21434</td>
<td>21434</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>5383</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11425</td>
<td>4513</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Land for construction</td>
<td>2488</td>
<td>2488</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>666</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>893</td>
<td>860</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Land for transportation</td>
<td>6288</td>
<td>6288</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>3282</td>
<td>2763</td>
<td>511</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Land for irrigation and special water surfaces</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>98</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>77</td>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Land of historical relics and cultural significance</td>
<td>1635</td>
<td>1635</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1634</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Land for military and security purposes</td>
<td>582</td>
<td>582</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Land for mineral exploitation</td>
<td>495</td>
<td>495</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Land for construction materials</td>
<td>518</td>
<td>518</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>518</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Land for salt processing</td>
<td>2742</td>
<td>2742</td>
<td>735</td>
<td></td>
<td>1878</td>
<td>129</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Cemetery land</td>
<td>8488</td>
<td>8488</td>
<td>8480</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. Residential land</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Urban</td>
<td>1307</td>
<td>1307</td>
<td>1299</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Rural</td>
<td>7181</td>
<td>7181</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. Land not yet used</td>
<td>106287</td>
<td>1455</td>
<td>1253</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>104832</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Flat land</td>
<td>2047</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>1975</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Slope land</td>
<td>38759</td>
<td>1373</td>
<td>1246</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>37386</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Water surfaces</td>
<td>1633</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1623</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Rivers, streams</td>
<td>15404</td>
<td>15404</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Rocky, bare or mountainous land</td>
<td>26411</td>
<td>26411</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Other</td>
<td>22033</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Land Administration Office, Thai Nguyen City, 98/05/07
Methodological confusions aside, the Survey results reveal that, based on an average size of 4.9 persons per rural household, the average household landholding in Bac Thai was 7213 m². This included 470 m² of residential land, 3538 m² of agricultural land, and 2445 m² of forestry land, plus 681 m² of officially allocated agricultural and forestry land. On average, rural households have 245 m² of 'garden land.' Land for home gardens is often considered separately from land for principal food and industrial crops. Comparative regional and national figures on landholdings per capita were as follows. As indicated earlier in Table 11 (from van de Walle 1998), the average landholding per capita across Vietnam in 1992-93 was 1223 m², ranging from 986 m² for the poor, and 1604 m² for the non-poor. Comparable data in these same categories for Thai Nguyen are not available. The only similar figure is of 1472 m² per capita, for members of agricultural households only rather than for rural areas overall. The average landholding per capita in rural areas of the northern uplands is 1314 m².

Land tenure and differentiation by landholdings among rural households in Thai Nguyen is demonstrated by Table 32. In 1994 there were 1163 landless households, representing 0.8 percent of all agricultural households. Nearly 50 percent of agricultural households held agricultural landholdings of 0.2 to slightly less than 0.5 hectares. The variations across districts were not great. Only five agricultural households in the province were recorded as having five to ten hectares of agricultural land, and 16 households held from three to five hectares of land. This attests to the generally egalitarian distribution of agricultural lands in Thai Nguyen, as elsewhere in northern Vietnam. Unlike in the Central Highlands and some other parts of the south, agricultural landholdings in northern Vietnam are quite small, and thus there is not much need to hire labour for agriculture. Some exceptions include larger orchards (e.g., privatized state agricultural enterprises) and agricultural land formally or informally 'owned' by people who work or live in urban areas. Given the small size of most landholdings, agricultural labour markets are still rather limited in Thai Nguyen. Where they do exist, they tend to be more developed among the Kinh. For many other agricultural and non-agricultural tasks that require labour en masse (e.g., house-building and roofing, transplanting rice), reciprocal social networks for labour exchange are frequently used. Temporary labour migration, including migration by women, in Thai Nguyen province is much less significant than in the densely populated Red River Delta. Similar to markets for labour, rural land markets in northern Vietnam have been slow to develop, despite their legalization, and it is difficult to determine the extent of unofficial land transfers. Some people from nearby towns, or from Hanoi, come to buy or invest in agricultural land, although this is not looked upon favourably by local authorities.
Table 31. Number of Agricultural Households by Size of Agricultural Landholdings, by District, Thai Nguyen province, 1994

(percentages given in parentheses)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Agricultural hhs</th>
<th>Landless</th>
<th>&lt;0.2 ha</th>
<th>0.2 - 0.5 ha</th>
<th>0.5 - 1 ha</th>
<th>1 - 3 ha</th>
<th>3 - 5 ha</th>
<th>5 - 10 ha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total: TN</td>
<td>152851</td>
<td>1163</td>
<td>39243</td>
<td>75309</td>
<td>32646</td>
<td>4469</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(100.0)</td>
<td>(0.8)</td>
<td>(25.7)</td>
<td>(49.3)</td>
<td>(21.4)</td>
<td>(2.9)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thai Nguyen City</td>
<td>12458</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>2781</td>
<td>5943</td>
<td>3320</td>
<td>381</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(100.0)</td>
<td>(0.3)</td>
<td>(22.3)</td>
<td>(47.7)</td>
<td>(26.6)</td>
<td>(3.1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Song Cong Town</td>
<td>3713</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>389</td>
<td>1280</td>
<td>1527</td>
<td>514</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(100.0)</td>
<td>(0.1)</td>
<td>(10.5)</td>
<td>(34.5)</td>
<td>(41.1)</td>
<td>(13.8)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dinh Hoa</td>
<td>16295</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>5231</td>
<td>7908</td>
<td>2660</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(100.0)</td>
<td>(0.5)</td>
<td>(32.1)</td>
<td>(48.5)</td>
<td>(16.3)</td>
<td>(2.5)</td>
<td>(0.02)</td>
<td>(0.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phu Luong</td>
<td>19480</td>
<td>264</td>
<td>4400</td>
<td>9157</td>
<td>4811</td>
<td>841</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(100.0)</td>
<td>(1.4)</td>
<td>(22.6)</td>
<td>(47.0)</td>
<td>(24.7)</td>
<td>(4.3)</td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dai Tu</td>
<td>28906</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>10014</td>
<td>14844</td>
<td>3660</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(100.0)</td>
<td>(0.6)</td>
<td>(34.6)</td>
<td>(51.4)</td>
<td>(12.7)</td>
<td>(0.7)</td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vo Nhai</td>
<td>9016</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2184</td>
<td>4322</td>
<td>2095</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(100.0)</td>
<td>(0.1)</td>
<td>(24.2)</td>
<td>(47.9)</td>
<td>(23.2)</td>
<td>(4.4)</td>
<td>(0.02)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dong Hy</td>
<td>14498</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>4052</td>
<td>6850</td>
<td>2981</td>
<td>423</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(100.0)</td>
<td>(1.3)</td>
<td>(27.9)</td>
<td>(47.2)</td>
<td>(20.6)</td>
<td>(2.9)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pho Yen</td>
<td>23645</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>4804</td>
<td>11556</td>
<td>6243</td>
<td>871</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(100.0)</td>
<td>(0.7)</td>
<td>(20.3)</td>
<td>(48.9)</td>
<td>(26.4)</td>
<td>(3.7)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phu Binh</td>
<td>24840</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>5388</td>
<td>13449</td>
<td>5349</td>
<td>436</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(100.0)</td>
<td>(0.9)</td>
<td>(21.7)</td>
<td>(54.1)</td>
<td>(21.5)</td>
<td>(1.8)</td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In 1994 there were only 630 households in Thai Nguyen province whose primary occupation was forestry. One limitation of these calculations is the exclusion of the many households classified as primarily agricultural in occupation that also hold use-rights to forest land. The reverse is also true. Again, this reflects the narrow classification of households into only one category, failing to acknowledge diversification of livelihood strategies. Of the forestry households, 84 percent had access to less than one hectare of forest land. A further nine percent managed from one to slightly less than three hectares. The remaining seven percent managed from three to 20 hectares, indicating somewhat greater differentiation among forest landholdings than was the case for agricultural land.

Deforestation and Agro-forestry Programs

The 1970s witnessed a massive expansion of the agricultural frontier. Rice production, in particular, was pushed forward. New slope land was opened up for production as the
population increased. The problems with this environmentally exhaustive strategy slowly came to be realized. This realization might explain the decline in the area of reclaimed 'virgin soil' for agriculture in Bac Thai from 1,179 hectares in 1978 to just 87 hectares in 1982. In 1994, policies 90/CP and 256/CP banned the exploitation, transportation, and trafficking of timber. In Thai Nguyen, levels of harvested wood rose somewhat between 1995 and 1996 but then fell by nearly three-quarters to just 15,600 m$^3$ in 1998. Harvesting of firewood similarly increased between 1995 and 1996 and then dropped by nearly half to 380,000 m$^3$ in 1998. Prior to the policy of contracting and allocating forest land to households, the national Program Against Malnutrition for the Vietnamese uplands was initiated in 1985. Providing for the replanting of 46,700 hectares of forest in Thai Nguyen, this program contributed to producing 50,000,000 m$^3$ of timber and hundreds of fruit trees (Nguyen Anh Dao 1997a).

Through economic restructuring and new pressures for economic efficiency, state forest enterprises faced the contradiction of needing to be profitable despite being restricted in logging operations. Decision 90/TTG reorganized state forest enterprises: those that could be profitable in the market economy would survive, while others were subject to potential closure. Regulation 176 (from October 1989 to December 1991) offered employees the opportunity to leave with a lump-sum payment. Typical of forestry enterprises across Vietnam, the number of state sector forestry workers in Thai Nguyen plummeted from 4,500 to 1,800 between 1990 and 1995.

The reforms in forest enterprises converted local farmers into forestry workers and vice-versa. The restoration of forests was enhanced through integrating agriculture and forestry (Liljestrom 1998: 243). Linked to the move to ban the harvesting of natural forests and concurrent reforms in state forest enterprises, thousands of agricultural households were assigned forest lands to care for. A parallel measure was Decree 02/CP in 1994, which allowed state forest enterprises to enter into contracts with local farmers. Responsibility for management and protection of land under forest cover (often from state forest enterprises), could thus be contracted to households on a yearly renewable basis (Morrison and Dubois 1998: 21). The second mechanism for devolving and decentralizing responsibility for forest land management entails direct allocation, mainly of forest land without forest cover (bare land), with 50-year tenure and land-use right certificates issued. In these situations, farmers may decide how to develop the land (e.g., by planting fruit trees or fast-maturing trees for timber). At present, there

---

38 Kinh people, for instance, who settled in Yen Do commune to work for a forestry enterprise timber mill were left unemployed when the mill closed down in the mid-1990s in the face of depleted timber resources and the inability to compete in a market economy environment. With a further scarcity of wet rice land in the commune, some of
are no national taxes for forest land allocated to households, but some taxes are imposed through provincial and district level regulations (Morrison and Dubois 1998: 29).

Indicative of changing conceptions of space and resources, farmers and officials alike generally report that the environment is better protected and plants are better cared for in the current ‘household economy’ compared to the collective period. The UNDP has been promoting living fences on upland fields—usually constructed with a narrow row of Tephrosia trees (cot chi)—to prevent soil erosion and preserve soil fertility. It is debatable how well-managed forests are now, with systems of rotating fields (to the extent possible given population pressures on the land base), and allowing for regeneration of sometimes 20 to 40 years.

People are frequently indifferent to timber-harvesting prohibitions and may, out of necessity, cut trees on their own allocated land. In some cases, officials turn a blind eye out of sympathy. In others, if authorities come by to investigate, the guilty party may hand the police officer a pack of cigarettes with a 50,000 dong note inside. He may hand it back and wait until the owner puts in 100,000, and then go away. Fines and/or bribes (in the order of 300,000-500,000 dong) are paid to police for overloaded trucks carrying different types of bamboo poles (from Lang Son province) and mangletia poles (from Dinh Hoa and Cho Don districts and Bac Kan province) used for building construction. Taxes of 300,000 dong must also be paid at stations in each province. Sometimes building materials are transported by river (from Dinh Hoa and Dong Hy districts) to avoid tax and fuel costs (AREA 1997-98).

Illegal tax collection by local authorities appears to be a growing problem in Vietnam. Beresford and McFarlane (1995: 63) link this phenomenon to the intensified competition for resources between centre and localities. “One estimate given … was that illegal tax collection by local authorities was higher than the central government revenue in 1991.” A related problem is the intra- and inter-provincial ‘customs’ or tolls. Attempts in the 1980s to abolish such activities met with much resistance, since they represent an important channel for local authorities to lever funds independently “and correspondingly reducing the centre’s ability to influence regional economic developments” (Beresford and McFarlane 1995: 63). Such protectionist activities constitute an obstacle to national market integration.

The marketization of the economy is giving rise to an increasing number of intermediaries, as demonstrated in Figure 5. This emerging social group has been interpreted both positively and negatively. On the one hand, a large number of intermediaries in the forest
products distribution system reduces the share of the consumer price that accrues to the farmer, as well as reducing the flow of market information—regarding prices, buyers, volumes, end-uses, quality, etc.—to primary producers (Kiuru, Lehtonen, et al. 1997). Non-wood forest products have long distribution chains due to the scattered resources and producers plus remoteness and poor roads (Vietnam-Finland Forestry Sector Cooperation Programme 1996: 37). On the other hand, intermediaries offer important services including trading and money-lending. They frequently offer functions that were formerly the responsibility of the state or collectives, but with lower transaction costs (Dao The Tuan 1996: 21). And while mark-ups can be steep, due to poor infrastructure and other constraints intermediaries do not always operate with a wide profit margin.

Figure 5. Existing Distribution Structure: Channels of Non-Wood Forest Products from Cho Don District to Provincial and Hanoi Markets

![Diagram](image)

Note: Non-wood forest products include plants for nutrition, medicine, handicrafts, fuel, fodder and construction materials.
Source: Adapted from Kiuru, Lehtonen, Wikberg et al. (1997: 29).

This chapter argued that an ideology of high modernism lay behind the design and application of standardized development programs that were frequently applied to uplands regions, to the detriment of diverse local livelihoods and cultures. More recently, the allocation and certification of agricultural and forestry land has given rise to clashes with culturally-specific land uses and notions of property, a theme that will be taken up in more detail in the next chapter.

As the reforms take root across the country, some of the most significant shifts in the midlands and highlands region of northern Vietnam are evidenced in the expansion of new cash
crops, such as fruit and tea, as well as livestock. Specialization is encouraged through the development of the market economy, as the state distances itself from the former policy of regional self-sufficiency. However, these regions still face serious limitations: restrictions in credit, slow commodity market development, and the rising cost of education, health, and basic goods. These are some of the trends reviewed in the statistical narrative on Thai Nguyen province that are covered in the dissertation’s Appendix, a supplement to the regional characterization provided in this chapter.

Chapter Seven.
Reconstructing Ethnic Identities and Property Relations through Decollectivization

In conventional portraits of the ‘transition,’ the micro is determined or is an expression of structures, policies and ideologies of a macro character, with little theorization of the unintended consequences brought about locally by political and cultural contestation intertwined with economic struggles. (Burawoy and Verdery 1999: 1)

To understand the dynamics of livelihood change and vulnerability in this chapter, I examine how identity—being a native of a given village, for instance—can define one’s inclusion in, or exclusion from, networks of social capital and, thereby, access to resources. Ethnicity, kinship, and land are interlinked with territory—a cultural construction comprised of physical space having socio-political significance. The case study below provides evidence of how localities (be they villages or regions) are able to reclaim a space offered by the land reforms to exert influence on policy and claim what they perceive to be their territory. This process suggests a ‘reinventing’ of identities in ways that previous economic institutions and policies would not have permitted. In this way, land and livelihood contribute to identity formation, which in turn can shape vulnerability by opening or closing doors to a given group to claim productive resources.

In conjunction with new conceptions of property and territory, renewed cultural, ethnic, and territorial identities are being reconstructed. This reassertion of cultural and local identities is founded in connections to kinship, land, locality, place and memory. The phenomenon of reclaiming ancestral lands suggests conflicts over ownership and control, but also over meanings. In this way it signifies both real and symbolic territorial struggles. My interest in exploring the land claims issue, and the conceptions of property rights, ownership and boundaries in relation to land that are emerging in the context of decollectivization pushed me to inquire into the way in which land represents continuity, how it roots people to particular places. My observations of the dynamics in Thai Nguyen and elsewhere in Vietnam point to what Kaneff (1998) refers to as a reactivation of ethnicity and a concomitant reassertion of local identities.

---

39 Portions of this chapter were previously published in Scott (2000b).
These reassertions of identity interweave relations of kinship, land, and place. On many occasions, they can also lead to conflicts, based on differential benefits, and in turn shape new vulnerabilities—as in the phenomenon of ancestral land claims detailed in this chapter. Privatization of land in other post-socialist countries has been a principal catalyst for ethnic differentiation (e.g., Kaneff 1998), and ethnic conflict has surged in numerous former Soviet republics. Although overt conflict has largely been avoided, the Vietnamese version of land allocation, or quasi-privatization, appears to similarly constitute a basis for differentiation between ethnic groups. By analyzing decollectivization, state policy, and development through the lens of ethnicity, this chapter reveals the degree to which local outcomes in land allocation reflect an interplay of national policy and the local practices of diverse ethnic groups.

From Policies to Practices: Local Autonomy and Adaptations of National Policy

The characteristic autonomy of Vietnamese localities and regions, and of traditional rural organization in general, is well known. Several Vietnamese adages attest to this autonomy: ‘the king’s power stops at the bamboo gate of the village,’ or its variation: ‘the king’s rules yield to village custom’ (phep vua thua le lang). This mythic character of the Vietnamese countryside is likely exaggerated, but to the extent that it holds true, the historical system of rural administration has played some role in fostering the independence of localities. In particular, the historical division of rural districts (huyen) into units known as xa (communes or administrative villages) served to meet the “needs of both state (via taxes, corvee, and military labour) and peasantry (a collective social organization, providing protection in a risky climatic environment)” (Fforde 1989: 9). Fforde (1989: 10) notes that traditionally “the commune was an interface between local interests and higher authority” and thus, since the feudal period, constituted some form of protection against the state.

The nature of central-local relations is reflected in the unusual degree of flexibility and accommodation by central government officials vis-à-vis the de facto power of provinces and localities in Vietnam. Fforde and Luong (1996: 23) noted the importance of local autonomy and the significant weight that localities carry in the Party Central Committee as two historical characteristics of regional development in Vietnam. Earlier, research by Fforde and Paine (1987) and Beresford (1988) demonstrated how communist administrative control was not pervasive in the decentralized Vietnamese economic system, in part due to the demands imposed by fighting successive wars. Instead, these authors observed a lack of rigid discipline of central planning and extensive local adaptation in response to local interests. They identify
these factors as explaining the commercial and manufacturing activities that emerged outside the state system—elements less strong in the former USSR and Eastern European countries (Fforde and Luong 1996).

Fforde (1989: 6) cited estimates that close to 75 percent of cooperatives had only a nominal existence. The collective system, in his view, seemed to have far more weight in China. On the Party and central leadership's accommodation of local autonomy, Fforde (1989: xi-xii) noted, "the need to maintain popular support mitigated against more severe measures to enforce central directives on cooperative management [such that] ...cooperative types differ essentially in degree of compliance with norms."

The flexibility of laws in Vietnam has almost come to be seen as a national characteristic. People's capacity to negotiate or contest (bendable) rules explains the frequent gap between policy and practice evident in Vietnam as well as the challenges of policy implementation. People continually emphasize that government cannot force something onto people, or if they do, people will nevertheless do what they want, such as making their own negotiations with neighbours over land use, irrespective of official guidelines. Policy decisions tend to be somewhat ambiguous. Both the central ministries and local level authorities have the opportunity to interpret or adapt decisions and regulations in implementing them (Warfvinge 1997). The implication is that, "while central authorities determine the form of rural institutions, local practice may be free to determine their content" (Fforde 1989: 4). Some informants described the relation between local level authorities and those higher up as a game. There are contradictions between different parts of the system, between different levels, and within the same level, and disputes are rarely transparent. Contradictions within laws often reflect a lack of consensus among those drafting the laws. This in turn leads to different interpretations and outcomes when implemented, both regionally and over time.\(^40\) Laws are often vague, giving rise to space for interpretation. The independence of local authorities in decision-making supports \textit{de facto} 'reforms from below,' with the experiences of some provinces serving as experiments for subsequent policy changes (Fforde and Luong 1996). Luong and Unger (1999) noted that there were some attempts in the 1988 land policy reforms to promote agricultural productivity by offering contracts for the best land to the highest bidder (i.e., to those farmers with greater prospects to profitably exploit the land). However, these initiatives met with resistance at the

\(^{40}\) See Davin (1987) on the variations between the 1950s and 1980s in interpretations of the divorce law in China. She notes that "the inheritance law, like other laws of the People’s Republic of China, lays down general principles, but in many areas leaves matters extraordinarily vague. It is obvious that at times even some of the principles of
local level as people complained that this would enrich those who were already better off. As a consequence, a more egalitarian distribution was followed instead. This experience is suggestive of the strength of local communities to challenge and sway the direction of policies.

Morrison and Dubois (1998: 19) observed that local controls can often exacerbate country-wide constraints on marketing... Given the decentralized administration of Vietnam, in which provincial and local People’s Committees have administrative and enforcement responsibilities under most legislation, there is some flexibility and inconsistency in the application of the laws. The rural population is discouraged from marketing produce by the local permit requirements and locally-imposed charges...

Beresford and McFarlane (1995: 52) described the creation of ‘self-sufficient fiefdoms’ as a consequence of the decision in 1983 to grant local districts greater revenue raising authority. Earlier on, the 1970s attempts “to create self-sufficient integrated agro-industrial zones at the district level through Vietnam ...was at least partly in response to an inability by the central government to either stimulate production of or control an agricultural surplus.”

Local autonomy can be linked in part to village social organization, in part to regional differences. Recent studies on regionalism and Vietnamese culture have gone some distance in critiquing the notion of Vietnamese tradition as singular (Vasavakul 1995). Another key distinction pertinent to the case study later in this chapter is that of lowland versus upland contexts. Fforde’s (1989) study of cooperator resistance and state-peasant relations in the Red River Delta, for instance, needs to be complemented for this analysis, with an understanding of the historical complexities of relations between uplanders—often ethnic minorities—and lowlanders. The central government has generally had more authority in lowland areas, a factor that explains to some degree the phenomenon of ancestral land claims detailed in this chapter. A further factor is the history of politically friendly relations between the central government and its provincial counterpart in Thai Nguyen, as detailed in the regional context presented in Chapter Six.

Some studies (e.g., Sikor 1999) have begun to emphasize how differentiated local outcomes of decollectivization resulted from negotiations between farmers, local officials, and national policy. Implementation of central-level land policies is mediated at the local level to produce diverse processes and results. The case study I present below makes the argument that the degree of local autonomy to adapt national policy is linked in part to the reinforcing of local identities in the context of decollectivization.

---

this law are likely to conflict and that disputes could arise for which the law gives no guidance.”
What was Collectivization, de jure and de facto?

Continuing on the theme of diverse local outcomes, this section examines the ways in which experiences of collectivization in the Thai Nguyen region were incomplete, uneven and intermittent. In many villages, collective production may have lasted only a few years before giving rise to a de facto land allocation among households. For instance, in the predominantly Nung commune of Tan Long in Dong Hy district (at the time part of Vo Nhai district), from 1960 to 1974 collective production was very strong. It then encountered management difficulties and slackened from 1974 until 1984, giving rise to a de facto land allocation, during which time households farmed on the land of their ancestors. Then in 1984 the collective was partially resurrected to initiate contracting to households, with quotas being supplied to the cooperative. This lasted until the collective structure was abandoned entirely in 1986.

The degree of collectivization of agriculture varied among villages, and upland agriculture was never successfully collectivized. The fluctuation in attempts to collectivize and resistance against it were reflected in Henin's description of Thuy Hung commune in the province of Lang Son, to the north-east of Thai Nguyen:

The first attempt was initiated in 1960. It lasted only two years as farmers strongly objected to having to relinquish control of their private properties. In the 1960s and 1970s, further attempts to form cooperatives were motivated in part by ideology and, in part, by the need to pool efforts to produce food during the war against the United States. The cooperatives were re-established for the last time in 1980, for a period of two years, in the aftermath of the Chinese invasion. (Henin 1999: 153-54)

These challenges and sporadic collectivization efforts were typical in Thai Nguyen as well, as seen below. Henin's (1999: 119) description of Thuy Hung echoes the 'irregularities' in policy implementation observed in Tan Long above:

Agriculture was never fully collectivized in the 1970s in Lang Son as most ethnic minorities resisted attempts by the state to transfer their family lands to cooperatives. Although cooperatives were implemented in many communes and priority to rice cultivation was imposed on the farming population, households generally held on to their custom of inheriting land according to family lines and producing crops according to their own decisions. The contract systems designed by the country's reformers (Contract 100 and Contract 10) were thus never implemented in the province, and for most indigenous people, the 1993 Land Law did not represent a significant change in land tenure. This law, in practice, came to confirm the right of families to farm on plots which they had used for generations.

In conceptualizations of post-socialist transitions, it is common to demarcate the shift from collectivization to decollectivization, the former often considered to be 'prior to the introduction
of a market economy.’ Yet, on-the-ground experiences such as these suggest that a clear break between the two periods is not so obvious.

Noting that “the need to maintain popular support mitigated against more severe measures to enforce central directives on cooperative management,” Fforde (1989: xi) emphasized that “people spent most of their time avoiding attempts of government to make them do things they didn’t want to do.” He concluded that cooperative types differ essentially in their degree of non-compliance with norms. Fforde (1989: 206-207) points to an irony in the Vietnamese reforms of the early 1980s, arguing that in some ways the early reforms may have strengthened rather than weakened cooperatives, particular the ‘nominal’ ones that formerly existed more in name than in practice. He explains that in cases where households previously operated extensive and illegal private plots, the Directive 100 policy implied a *loss* of economic freedom since under this legislation the cooperative was mandated to allot production contracts of specific crops and to provide inputs to households. The cooperative would thus, unlike previously, determine what a household produced, and would reduce a household’s control over disposal of the output. Paradoxically, this arrangement constitutes more of a *re*-collectivization than a *de*-collectivization for some cooperatives.

In this section, I argue that historical periods are not mutually exclusive but are blurred over time as social dynamics and relationships developed in one period pass over into another, even in mutated form. In this way, I draw attention to the problems of periodization of institutional shifts by pointing to the degree of symbiosis or at least co-existence of the private, household economy within the former collective ‘system.’ Significant evidence can be presented to highlight the gap between *de jure* policies and their *de facto* implementation. What Abrahams (1996) noted in Eastern Europe is equally true for Vietnam: the symbiosis of small- (private plot) and large-scale (collective) organization of production in the socialist period is evidence of the complex reality of a superficially monolithic system.

As discussed in Chapter Four, the ‘family economy’ persisted in various forms in northern Vietnam during the period of collectivization, particularly through the ‘five percent land’ plots. This reflects what Kerkvliet (1995) referred to as the persistence of family farming within the ‘primary’ mode of collective agriculture. Despite the phenomenon of ‘five percent land,’ it is not often recognized that migrants who settled in a village once a collective had already been established—such as Red River Delta residents arriving in Thai Nguyen—were often ineligible for such land. Still other communes, particularly in the midlands region, had no ‘five percent land’ at all, but since only rice land was collectivized in some such areas, each
household was at liberty to continue using their garden and upland plots (if they had any) to grow food crops and tea. Pinning down the changes in property rights to land in Vietnam is a complex task. They fluctuate depending not only on the historical period but also on the land type. In much of the midlands region, it was principally rice land that was collectivized. Thus, there was a range of other types of land and crops (e.g., tea, dry rice, cassava, etc. on slope lands) managed by the household and others (e.g., communal grazing land) by the commune. Moreover, only large livestock usually belonged to the collective, while poultry and small livestock were under household control.

These examples are illustrative of the mix of land management forms in different regions and livelihood systems. A parallel account from Bulgaria describes how grazing takes place under at least three different sorts of land tenure: public, private, and traditional common lands. Staddon (1999: 205-206) suggests that under new land policies, “there is a sense in which environmental management based on use values is being enacted in the locality, while management based on exchange values is practiced by the state.” This is suggestive of the sometimes false assumption that privatizing land rights will be automatically internalized in the behaviour and practices of local people, a point perhaps reflected in the limited development of the agricultural land market to date in northern Vietnam.

Divergent experiences of collectivization and decollectivization in Thai Nguyen are shaped not only by its diversity agro-ecologically but also ethnically and by type of livelihood or farming system, as with collectives being less strong in non-paddy areas since irrigation coordination was not required. These examples are indicative of the unevenness of the household economy in the region, suggesting rather non-uniform and non-unidirectional processes of change. Temporal and spatial variation in expressions of collective agriculture can be found at various scales: between and within regions and villages, and at a micro level by land, crop and livestock type. This is in turn reflected in the heterogeneous outcomes of the processes of decollectivization that followed.

**Allocation and Ancestral Land Claims: A Case Study**

The national policy of land allocation and certification on paper has differed from its actual implementation in Thai Nguyen and surrounding regions. In exploring the multiple ways
in which the implementation of land allocation is coloured by local factors—socio-cultural, historic-economic and agro-ecological alike—one intriguing phenomenon in much of the midlands and uplands areas of northern Vietnam is the *de facto* allocation of land following *ancestral land rights*. I focus here on the interfaces of the national land allocation policy with the phenomenon of reclaiming ancestral lands. In areas where collectivization barely took hold, Decree 100 (1981), Resolution 10 (1988), and decollectivization more generally have had little significance for the local population. Yet, in parts of the north-eastern midlands and highlands of Vietnam where collectives were established, in some of the areas inhabited by Tay, Nung, and some San Diu and San Chay groups, there has been a significant trend of re-claiming lands belonging to villagers’ ancestors in pre-collective times (prior to the 1960s). Such land is commonly referred to as *dot ong cha*, which literally means ‘grandfather’s land.’ Little detailed research has been done on this phenomenon, and people are often reluctant to discuss the related disputes openly, particularly as they are still smouldering.

Before discussing the situation in Thai Nguyen, I present an echo of the same phenomenon documented in neighbouring Lang Son, a predominantly Nung area:

In 1982, when Contract [Directive] 100 came into effect in most of North Vietnam, land in Thuy Hung [Cao Loc district, Lang Son province] was redistributed to families according to boundaries established during the French colonial rule. This contrasts with the situation in most other northern provinces... where village land was reallocated to households in equal shares. In addition, families were allowed to keep the hill plots which they had reclaimed for farming during the collective era... Another distinguishing feature of the region is that *no contract system was implemented* between farmers and village cooperatives, which were effectively dismantled... In Thuy Hung, *farmers are proud to say that all government attempts to regulate agricultural production have been ‘meaningless.’* They were thus relatively unaffected by Contract 100... First, they had held on tenaciously to their family properties even during the heyday of socialist fervour in North Vietnam. Second, markets were already operating in the 1970s, well before pro-market reforms were implemented in the region” (Henin 1999: 154, emphasis added).

The Land Law... has had only a limited influence on the people’s decisions to plant trees. Many had already planted fruit trees in the late 1980s, well before receiving an official title to land. One local farmer commented that the reason for doing so is that the land had always belonged to his family. He pointed out that his decision to plant fruit trees reflected market conditions rather than state policy. Like many other farmers, he felt that *land policy was ’meaningless’ in this region.* (Henin 1999: 184-85, emphasis added)

The extent of the phenomenon of reclaiming ancestral lands is difficult to determine since within one commune there can be variations from hamlet to hamlet, depending on local leaders; relations with the commune, district and provincial officials; and local ethnic and
settlement history dynamics. In Hoa Trung commune, Dong Hy district, in Thai Nguyen province, three hamlets of 90 to 95 per cent San Diu population opted out of collectivization and disbanded their collectives as early as 1975. Several San Chay villages in Phu Luuong district did likewise. Since that time, they have been farming their ancestral land, with some households having more land than others. Kinh who live in these hamlets have either married in or bought land.

In Yen Do and Yen Ninh communes in Phu Luong district, Kinh households are often located along the main road. Having migrated to the area in the 1970s, those that are traders are relatively better-off, while Kinh farmers tend to be poorer than most other people in the communes. In Cho Don district, Bac Kan province, and Dinh Hoa district, Thai Nguyen province (both formerly part of Bac Thai province), many Dao and Kinh farmers now face a similar fate. Having been resettled in Tay villages to farm in collectives in the 1970s, they were deprived of access to paddy land following the disbanding of the collective in the late 1980s, when the local Tay and San Chay claimed their ancestral land back. Many such Kinh and Dao—migrants from quite different origins but now sharing a common fate—have thus been left without paddy land. These migrants end up farming only some upland plots, a plight for which the Kinh are ill-prepared.

Many communes have followed the national guidelines for implementation of land allocation based on household size, with every household receiving some plots of land of varying qualities to ensure egalitarian distribution. A lottery system was even used to randomly determine allocations. In other cases, however, as outlined above, local people have taken the allocation procedure into their own hands. In between these two extremes are cases where, through village meetings, a ‘consensus’ was reached on how to allocate lands, considering the size of each household and the location of one’s house in relation to the land to be allocated. After reaching a consensus, the district authorities were notified of the villagers’ decisions and the former would issue the Red Books (land-use right certificates) accordingly. In such cases, ancestral land rights often played some part in land allocation, although families with ancestral claims to areas larger than their legal right according to their family size were unable to claim all of this land. Such circumstances were reported in several districts of Thai Nguyen, attesting to the variety of practices of land allocation.

As outlined above, the potential for serious disputes through locally devised arrangements for land allocation along ancestral lines are greater in circumstances of migrants who are left landless. In contrast, in several hamlets of Quang Son commune, Dong Hy district
in which there had been almost no in-migration since collectivization except through marriage, land allocation along ancestral lines was fairly straightforward. Elsewhere, conflicts were also largely avoided in instances where Kinh and Dao migrants had cleared their own land for production upon arrival in the region or had settled in newly founded hamlets and farmed land that had no previous owner or traditional users prior to collectivization.

In the Red River Delta the collectivization ‘frenzy’ saw hedgerows and terraces knocked down and small paddy fields consolidated in the name of collective production. By contrast, in the uplands the landscape was not as radically reformed, and people could thus more easily recall the location of their ancestral lands. Even so, the parallels in allocation between ancestral land rights and current allocations are often not exact. Those who had rights to claim ancestral lands sometimes negotiated with neighbours for another plot closer to their house if they had moved from the residential plot of their grandparents. When asked if ancestral (i.e., grandparents’) land held special symbolic significance for local people, a farmer in Kim Son commune, Dinh Hoa district, replied that it holds some significance because “Our ancestors came here to clear the land and invested a lot of labour into it.” But is he sad not to be farming his ancestral land now, having exchanged it with a neighbour for a plot closer to his new house? He replied, “somewhat, but less and less as time goes on, especially if the yields on the new land are high,” implying that a pragmatic attitude holds more sway than a nostalgic one.

As for establishing boundaries, some have testaments on paper of land contributed by their grandparents to the collective (e.g., Kim Son commune, Dinh Hoa district), but in other cases historical memory is sufficient. Ancestral land claims have also extended beyond paddy land to include forest land and forest gardens. Being ancient and visibly delimited, the boundaries of ancestral land for paddy tend to be more exact, whereas for forest lands, fences or hedgerows were not used. People spoke simply of ‘this or that hill slope’ having been tended by one’s grandparents. Boundaries were sometimes marked by the planting of palm trees or bamboo around the forest garden on hill slopes. While it is less clear to establish than in the case of paddy land, interviews in several districts revealed cases of forest land allocation following historical boundaries of households’ forest gardens (see also Vuong Xuan Tinh 1998: 95-96; Donovan et al. 1997; and Liljestrom et al. 1998). A further explanation for the phenomenon of ancestral land claims occurring in the uplands is that people in the Red River Delta do not feel a strong connection to particular plots of land. This is because their family probably did not own the land for very long—possibly for only a few years before collectivization and following the
land reform, which redistributed lands from landlords or under traditional communal management.

The Tay have been persistent in reclaiming ancestral lands. Even the smallest, remotest paddy fields in areas settled by Dao and some Kinh in Yen Ninh and Yen Do are claimed to belong to Tay people. When the certification of slope lands began in 1993 in Cho Don district, Bac Kan province, lands which the Tay had formerly left to people of other ethnic groups suddenly became of interest to them again as they began to consider their potential future value. Thus, they even displaced Dao from some of these marginal lands. In one Kinh village in Cho Don, the Kinh could only farm slope land, as the former Tay owners had either moved back to claim their land, or else return periodically to farm it. Overall, Tay in Cho Don had an average of half a hectare of slope land, and Dao, from five to ten hectares to compensate for their lack of paddy land for growing food crops. One agronomist working with a foreign NGO in the area estimated that one household needed about six hectares for 15 years of cultivation. By this calculation, discounting population growth, some families may have enough land to survive for 15 years, but the next generation will have to find alternative livelihoods. Such land pressures may constrain population growth in the coming years.

Degrees of negotiation and concession have varied. Following official guidelines, allocation in Kim Son commune, Dinh Hoa district should have been based on household size: two *sao* per capita. However, in practice, it varied from one to four *sao*, depending on one’s ancestral rights. Migrants often received one *sao*, versus two *sao* for the Tay. Households with little land, and especially those with many labourers, have bought land unofficially. In one hamlet of Quang Son commune, Dong Hy district, in which Kinh had settled in the 1960s and 1970s, in a predominantly Nung area, families having ancestral lands of 10 *sao* were able to keep perhaps six *sao*, often the better quality plots, with the remainder being conceded to Kinh settlers. In this hamlet, paddy land distribution varied from three to ten *sao* per household.

Every commune has been instructed to keep some land for grazing, to be shared between one or two villages. This is officially managed by the commune, but at the sub-commune (i.e., hamlet) level there was sometimes a *de facto* allocation since, as one informant explained, “they’re all brothers anyway!” One or two lineages tend to dominate a valley, the influential lineages being those that first arrived to clear and farm the land. Ancestral practices have proven to be resilient and rather than declining in importance during the collective period, lineage-based power relationships have remained strong in determining village leadership throughout twists and turns in historical eras (Mellac 1998).
Indicative of the sometimes dramatic resource conflicts—in this case not only over land, but over water—that can be provoked by ancestral land claims, Henin (1999) describes what happened in the Nung village of Na Ho (in Thuy Hung commune, Lang Son province). A water reservoir was built during the collective era on formerly private land, that had been seized by the cooperative:

This reservoir supplied local farms with a reliable flow of water throughout the year. In 1985, the former owners of the estate destroyed the reservoir in order to re-farm the land. Since then, water supplies to individual families have drastically worsened, and many paddy fields are too dry in the winter season for growing a crop of spring rice. Local authorities, however, have so far been unable to convince other families to give up a portion of their land to build another reservoir. Drinking water is also in short supply. Few streams are easily accessible from the village, and public wells produce little water during the dry season. (Henin 1999: 160)

Local Responses

How have immigrants from the 1960s and 1970s, now losing control over the land in the decollectivization process, responded to such circumstances? Protests to officials at various levels of administration were often futile. Government officials attempted to intervene, with varying degrees of success, to insist that the ‘newcomers’ be granted some paddy land. For three years, from 1990 to 1993, land was under dispute in Dinh Hoa district and in Bac Kan and Cao Bang provinces to the north. When the Dao resolutely refused to cede their land to the Tay, who claimed it as their own, a team of experts and officials from Hanoi and Thai Nguyen University, including the vice-director of the Crop Science Department, was eventually asked to intervene to help resolve the dispute. In 1990-91 in some areas, local people refused to plant crops for fear that their land would be allocated to someone else. Similar ambiguities over land restitution processes in Bulgaria, and consequent lack of incentives to invest in soil fertility, were reported by Staddon (1999: 205): “The often unclear nature of legal tenure over these restituted plots has meant that current users are overly reliant upon ambient levels of soil fertility, as they are understandably reluctant to make investments in specific parcels that may not in the long term belong to them.”

This escalation of tension combined with poor weather led to a drastic decline in crop yields in 1991, causing the state to have to provide emergency compensation and food supplies to prevent widespread hunger (see Bal et al. 1997). In Kim Son commune, Dinh Hoa district and Nam Hoa commune, Dong Hy district, among other places, agreements were reached such that those with ancestral lands conceded to share some parcels of land with more recent settlers. Yet,
the overall result has been that those whose ancestors had lived in the area often ended up with more land than migrants who settled three or four decades ago. In some cases, immigrants may have less paddy land but more slope land, the latter being formerly unoccupied.

In response to being left out in the process of land allocation, some Kinh, Dao, and others have bought or rented land. Yet, few Tay want to sell, and even then they may only concede to give up land in secondary valleys with poor sunlight and soil, or near rivers on stony, sandy and flood-prone lands. Some Kinh practice sharecropping by giving half their harvest to Tay in exchange for use of the land. Many have been forced to resume clearing land on hill slopes for shifting cultivation. Others have moved into other occupations. Kinh have diversified into making furniture and other activities to save money to buy land. They practice gardening intensively and grow corn to raise pigs. Cultivating fruit trees is also an important means to compensate for not having rice land. Some Kinh tried shifting agriculture but were not as successful as the traditional upland dwellers such as the Dao. Many Kinh tend to get involved in trade, especially with other relatives in the area, thus resuscitating practices from their ‘former life.’ Kinh in Cho Don are also butchers and shopkeepers. Of all ethnic groups, they tend to be the best prepared for the economic transition, having well-developed strategies for the market economy.

As for the Dao, they often continued to reside in the valley villages, but resorted to their former practices of cultivating the slopes. However, due to demographic pressure, cultivation was extended onto steeper and shadier slopes, even if only cultivable for one year. Facing spatial restrictions, forest protection areas and grazing areas began to be exploited for farming food crops despite pronouncements that no further clearing of land would be permitted. In remote areas, enforcement of restrictions on cutting and clearing was weaker and swidden cultivation became a question of survival and of social peace. Some began to build terraces, even though it takes four to five years to produce a reasonable yield. Some Dao cut timber, an important element of their economy, to sell to Tay people. Dao are also good at trapping animals. Some joined the growing numbers of migrants to ‘Song Be’—the name of one province, but used locally to refer more generally to the Central Highlands region in southern Vietnam. Interviews with natives of Cao Bang province, to the north of Bac Kan, indicated that the majority of migrants to the Central Highlands came from households that either had recently settled in Cao Bang and thus did receive land allocations, or else they had large families with insufficient land for all sons.
Other instances of contestation of national policy and negotiation of local outcomes were evidenced by the Hmong people's experiences of land policy. Since 1968, sedentary cultivation programs have targeted, in particular, at Hmong and Dao populations engaged in swidden cultivation. Hmong have practised a variety of strategies of resistance to avoid sedentarization by returning from resettled areas or by maintaining residences in two villages, sometimes across commune, district, and provincial boundaries. Some Hmong people have pooled household resources, splitting their families geographically between two places, with part of the family returning to their former lands and part remaining in the area of resettlement, a few hours' walk away (e.g., from Dong Dat to Quang Chu communes, Phu Luong district). Others gave up their land when they were forcibly resettled, so even though they would prefer to return—stating that they suffered less hunger there than in the resettled site—they are unable to do so. In other areas, Hmong farm land outside of that allocated to them, although they have increasingly suffered encroachment since forest lands have been allocated to households. In Quang Son commune, Dong Hy district, a group of Hmong have been resettled from a hamlet in the highest
peaks of the commune to a lowland area. In both these cases documented in Thai Nguyen province, the Hmong families had been resettled onto land formerly belonging to state enterprises (for production of tea and other industrial crops). It is not suitable for growing rice. In addition to farming some non-rice food and cash crops on the poor quality land they were resettled onto, most of the population regularly returned to their former hamlet to cultivate corn. Some also collected medicinal plants or wild birds in the surrounding forest for sale at the market.

In almost no cases have Hmong people been issued certificates for land-use rights, despite having been allocated land, indicative of the variations in experiences of decollectivization by ethnic group. In resettled Hmong hamlets in both Dong Dat commune, Phu Luong district and Quang Son commune, Dong Hy district, the population had no land certificates, while Kinh and Nung in neighbouring hamlets of the same communes had already received certificates for their better-quality land. Most government officials consider that the Hmong do not want land allocation. Such comments are indicative of a clash in understanding regarding concepts of land ownership and farming systems.42

In the international literature and among some agencies in Vietnam, there have been calls for an enhanced appreciation of indigenous knowledge and flexible and culturally sensitive property rights arrangements (e.g., Corlin 1998; Vuong Duy Quang 1998; Jamieson et al. 1998). Some analysts suggest that in Vietnam, “where possible, the management of forest areas by the actual forest users at group or community level should be favoured over a general individualized control, preferably building upon existing village institutions” (Christ and Kloss 1998, cited in Morrison and Dubois 1998: 41-42, emphasis added). Moreover,

Current land use classification …fails to recognize present land use and particularly traditional land use systems (such as upland agricultural systems, shifting cultivation, agro-forestry), and classifies large parts of the uplands as forest land—hence potential conflict is created through failure to consider the claims and interests of all stakeholders. The process needs to be flexible enough to adapt to the diversity of local conditions and land uses. (Morrison and Dubois 1998: 27)

Often mistakenly confused with open access, common property is characterized by the exclusion of non-owners and hence can be thought of as corporate group property:

---

42 A foreigner working for an NGO project in Bac Kan province told me of another instance denoting the lack of accommodation to the circumstances of Hmong people. Officially 60 (but in fact 200) Hmong households were resettled in Cho Don district, Bac Kan province in 1990 through the sedentarized cultivation program. But after the Bac Kan-Tuyen Quang border was changed in 1997, a part of one commune in Bac Kan came under Tuyen Quang’s authority. Officials in Tuyen Quang declared that they would accept the land but not the population, so 100 households were forced to move.
Common property is in essence ‘private’ property for the group and in that sense it is a group decision regarding who shall be excluded. But when options for gainful and promising exclusion of excess population have been destroyed by surrounding political, cultural, or economic events, then those engaged in the joint use of a resource are left with no option but to eat into their capital. However, to blame this situation on their failure to create private property is absurd. Common property is not the free-for-all of open access resources (Bromley 1991: 29, emphasis in original).

What needs to be recognized in promoting common property solutions in a given locale is that such a regime can only work if power is devolved to district or village levels: “it is inhibited by centralised state authority, and common property does not lend itself to regulation according to inflexible administrative rules devised outside its local social context” (Ellis 2000: 135).

Related disputes over *de facto* land allocations that did not accord with national guidelines have arisen elsewhere in the northern uplands region. In Nam Ty commune (in Hoang Su Phi district, Ha Giang province), settled by Hmong and Dao people, an informal allocation endorsed by local authorities took place following Decree 100 in 1981, in which agricultural land was distributed according to villagers’ historical memory of ancestral tenure (Vuong Xuan Tinh and Hjemdahl 1996). This allocation was the subject of subsequent on-going disputes when pressures emerged from within and outside to establish a more egalitarian reallocation of the land. Moreover, swidden lands that had been allocated on the basis of claims by current users became the subject of even greater dispute, given that their borders were considerably more ambiguous than those for wet-rice land.

Similar disputes have been reported in Lao Cai province over which household has legitimate claim to swidden lands—the one that originally cleared it, the one that took it over after it was abandoned by the first, or the one that rented the land from its original cultivator (Oxfam 1996: 24). An Oxfam (1996: 32) report speculated that in some villages in Lao Cai, there may be significant communal pressure to not claim land for allocation as it would be too explosive for the village to determine specific allocations between each household in a context of rotation between fields every few years. This allows the land to continue to be used communally. In such instances, it might make more sense to have a flexible allocation procedure sensitive to variations in the land tenure system, something Corlin (1998) calls for. In the case above, the local Department of Cadastral Survey was hostile to such an approach, but in other areas, such as Hoa Binh province, pilot programmes have experimented with land allocation to groups of Hmong extended families rather than individual households.

Resistance to land claims have taken different forms, and appeared at different levels. In addition to inter-ethnic conflict often developing along ancient fractures—such as Dao allowing
their buffalo to roam onto the cornfields and graze on the crops of Tay people—there have been many intra-ethnic, even intra-lineage disputes over land allocation with adverse consequences, such as the poisoning of a relative’s buffaloes years after land allocation had taken place. Conflicts have also arisen between generations since those who grew up during collectivization received no inheritance while now, the subsequent generation is claiming their grandparents’ land.

The phenomenon of reclaiming ancestral lands is testament to the ‘power of the local’ to contest or, at the very least, ‘interpret’ laws. It is indicative of the ways in which, in Vietnam today, centre-local relations and policy implementation require negotiation rather than imposition. A key factor in this process, for the historical and cultural reasons indicated earlier, is that officials at various levels in Thai Nguyen and Bac Kan provinces are often of Tay ethnicity themselves. This is further evidence of the degree of control over the local administration by this ethnic group. Tay people talked nonchalantly about not following the law. Given that this area was the heart of anti-French resistance, the central government seems willing to let things be dealt with locally instead of attempting to interfere.

Implications and Interpretations

Allocation of land to households is central to the reorganisation of agricultural production and the shift from the collective to the household as principal production unit. This case study of local-level outcomes of decollectivization and land allocation outlined some key trends in land relations for Thai Nguyen province and for the northeast region of the northern uplands more generally. These trends are indicative of how decollectivization brought about influential *de facto* land claims often rooted in local autonomy, ethnicity and settlement history. Localities are able to exert influence on how policy is implemented through their responses at the levels of the household, lineage, ethnic group, village, and region. This chapter further identified some key elements shaping the divergences in and localised responses to processes of decollectivization. The analysis linked ethnicity, livelihood, and local history to explain the differentiated outcomes of both collectivization and decollectivization. Decollectivization poses both opportunities and constraints for rural livelihoods, as recent migrants to some areas of the northeastern region have been left landless in the face of longer-term residents reclaiming lands of their ancestors while disregarding land allocation policy guidelines. Other examples of strategies of resettled ethnic minorities to respond to land
certification include making use of farmland in two locales by having some family members return periodically to their original plots, sometime a day’s walk from the village where they were resettled.

These experiences are evidence of the unevenness of policy implementation, and offer some insights concerning the relationship between policy, implementation and outcomes in rural development. This kind of analysis of local practices reveals the complex relations between transformations in resources use and socio-cultural institutions governing the organisation of production. These situations underline a point raised in the previous chapter, that the potential for resource conflict is greater in contexts of diverse ethnic groups. This calls for flexible policies that are sensitive to local institutions and aspirations.

43 See also Smith (1995) for experiences in other provinces.
This study was conceived in the spirit of Kathryn Verdery’s (1995) ‘ethnography of a (post-socialist) transforming state.’ In her book *What Was Socialism and What Comes Next?* she examined elements in common as well as the historical and sociological particularities (and path dependency) that contribute to divergent paths of post-socialism. Such an ethnography moves away from the more traditional focus of many ethnographic studies on single communities. One element of this ethnography involves clarifying why and how a post-socialist state is reconstituted. Verdery examined ways in which central control is at once destroyed and recomposed. She urged that this type of ethnography should illustrate the mechanisms, the arenas, and the specific social processes within and through which the changes are occurring. How, and where, and by whom, in what contexts, is the state of socialism being challenged and undermined and a new one arising? (Verdery 1995: 229)

In attempting to make sense of the experiences of Vietnamese land policy reforms at a local level, the crisp image of the (fictional) ‘general case’ scenario rapidly broke down. I realized that, more frequently than not, the exception was the rule. My analysis thus paid special attention to the interface between the *de jure* and *de facto* implementation of national policies at the village level and the interplay of national reform policy with local socio-cultural—including gender—dynamics. This approach responds to proposals from Long and Villareal (1993) and Watts (1995) for more research on these issues. In documenting instances of local responses to or contestation of state policy, this study further responds to Long’s (1989a: 2) suggestion of the need to move beyond conceptualizations of policy, implementation, and outcomes as a linear or deterministic relationship. Localities are able to exert substantial influence on how policy is being implemented through their responses at the levels of the household, lineage, ethnic group, village, and region. Changing property rights in Vietnam—even if now tied to market relations—do not cease to be based on social relations: “‘privatization’—like ‘democracy,’ ‘markets,’ and other elements of the transition from socialism—is both a symbol and a set of processes through which that symbol is acquiring new and multiple content” (Verdery 1995: 230). It is this sensitivity, through attention to process, that my analysis sought to highlight, for

---

44 This chapter title was borrowed from the title of Verdery’s (1996) book, *What Was Socialism and What Comes Next?*
instance, in looking beyond legally endorsed land-use rights to consider customary rights and the processes of their activation in specific contexts.

Pointing out the lack of attention to scale relations and sub-national studies of transition experiences, Staddon (1999: 200) noted that

first wave treatments of post-community transition were perhaps necessarily preoccupied with events at the geographical scale of the nation-state.... Though the national scale fixation remains entrenched in some disciplinary traditions, other disciplines—notably human geography and social anthropology—have more recently highlighted the complex sub-national, regional and local scales of the transition.

Building on both Verdery and Staddon’s approaches, my research sought to present a local-level ethnographic account of experiences of decollectivization, while also bridging other scales of analysis. Staddon (1999: 201) further observed that “key to this new development model is a renegotiation of the relations between different geographical scales, and between localities and their natural environments...” Some of these relations are highlighted through my institutional analysis of transition and vulnerability. This dissertation assessed the ‘new rules of the game’ for rural livelihoods and entitlements to land in Vietnam. The analysis was situated in the context of decollectivization, new orientations for development and social protection, and consequent shifts in roles of state, market, and rural households.

There are six broad conclusions that can be drawn from the empirical and conceptual analysis in this study:

- First, responding to the first objective of the dissertation, interpreting decollectivization as institutional restructuring highlights the multiple and interrelated dimensions of changes underway: in property rights, the organization of production, scales of decision making, discourses of development, new stakeholders, and many forms of informal institutions and social relations.

- Second, responding to the second objective of the dissertation, the characterizing of collectivization and decollectivization in broad terms is made difficult due to the significant variations in their implementation across time and space. The analysis pointed to frequent gaps between national policy and on-the-ground practice and the need to take adequate account of complexity.

- Third, in reestablishing the household as principal production unit, decollectivization and property rights restructuring in Vietnam have affected marriage and inheritance trends and, in turn, household and kinship relations.
Fourth, responding to the third objective of the dissertation, the processes of institutional change analyzed in this study can be linked to new patterns of livelihood vulnerability. The operational definition of vulnerability for this study combined elements of income, social institutions and social networks, gender relations, and property rights which collectively shape livelihood vulnerability. The study demonstrated that new forms of land use and access to land and other resources and services are emerging, constituting differential opportunities and constraints to ensuring livelihood security.

Fifth, following from the fourth conclusion, these patterns of vulnerability are mediated in part by formal institutions such as legal and market structures and the loss of some support services provided to farmers by agricultural collectives. The latter has produced a series of institutional gaps in some locales. Some of these gaps have been addressed by the establishment of new service cooperatives or less formal farmers groups, but overall this kind of institutional strengthening is lacking.

Sixth, informal social institutions are a further factor mediating new patterns of livelihood vulnerability. Non-material assets such as social capital are becoming increasingly important in the new market economy in Vietnam. Yet social capital is an unevenly shared asset. Social networks operate differentially, often based on kinship and ethnic ties, and can thereby shape parallel patterns of exclusion.

Each of these six conclusions is described in more detail below. First, this dissertation viewed the doi moi reforms, in general, and decollectivization, in particular, as reflecting a broad rethinking of institutions. Institutions constitute the social rules and conventions structuring or sanctioning social interaction and limiting choices over use and exchange of scarce resources (Evans 1993). The range of institutions in flux during the processes of restructuring in rural Vietnam suggests the need to speak not just of a transition process but of multiple transitions. Vietnam’s land policy reforms have brought about modifications in the organization of production, new forms and scales of management and decision-making, and new rights and responsibilities. Property rights reforms have produced a shift from collectivized landholdings—oriented to large-scale production and also to preventing inequalities and ensuring access by the poor—to individual quasi-privatized allocations. This study interpreted the new discourses and institutional forms of the current doi moi period in relation to shifts in approaches to (a) land management and organization of agricultural production; (b) resource management and environmental protection, and (c) welfare provisioning, poverty reduction.
strategies, and the family-household as safety net. This rethinking of institutions is reflected in new discourses to articulate the newfound orientations, new forms of governing rural spaces, and renegotiation of roles for new and old actors in rural development. The new configuration of stakeholders entails not only the state, reformed cooperatives, and state agricultural and forestry enterprises, but a range of other organizations and agencies: credit and extension service providers, universities, NGOs, international aid agencies, mass organizations and local production groups with different degrees of official endorsement.

Within production systems alone, new institutional constellations have brought about changes in crop composition and land use, and production management. Agricultural production has been intensified, from one to two, or sometimes two to three crops per year, and many households have developed or expanded a VAC system in addition to taking on new non-agricultural tasks. In rural areas, while many households have labour, land is in short supply, and land alone is not enough to sustain livelihoods. Capital for productive investment is also lacking. Alternative income-generating opportunities, while scarce and poorly remunerated, include construction work, food processing, petty commerce, handicrafts (e.g., ornamental trees), and exploitation of forest products.

Second, the study revealed a series of problems in characterizing the experiences of collectivization and decollectivization in Vietnam, given the significant variations over time and through space. Typifying the nature of the institutional shifts between collectivization and decollectivization is challenged by the uneven and intermittent experiences of collective agriculture, and the significant symbiosis, or co-existence of the private/household economy within the former collective system. In this sense, a contribution of this dissertation is its attention to the local specificity in emerging trajectories of post-socialist economies. The analysis traced, on the one hand, the uneven spread and disbanding of collective agriculture, and the degree of persistence—rather than the disappearance—of the household economy. On the other hand, it also documented the continuation of various forms of collectives or cooperatives into the current period, despite 'decollectivization.' The melange of property rights regimes was even more complex when examined at a micro scale. This is particularly true in the midlands and highlands where agro-ecologies and livelihood systems are extremely diverse. Shifts in land tenure and management of agricultural production varied tremendously for different land and crop types and livestock activities—rice paddy, other crops, home gardens, forest gardens, orchards, grazing land, swidden land, livestock raising, and fishponds—over different historical
periods, from prior to, during, and following collectivization, and by village, ethnic group, and region.

Moving away from the general case to highlight differences, discontinuities, and spaces of exception, this study accounts for variations at different scales and in different spheres within and across social groups. This study interpreted collectivization and decollectivization 'at the margins,' illustrating the distance between official discourses reflecting *de jure* national land policies and *de facto* local experiences. This gap between national policy and its local articulation reflects the extent of local interpretation of policies through the practices of implementation. The study traced the uneven experiences of decollectivization and implementation of land allocation in terms of gender, kinship, ethnicity, and locality. The case study in Chapter Seven highlighted spatial and regional variations in processes of decollectivization, underlining the diversity of outcomes and exceptions to the rule at different scales of analysis. The analysis emphasized the influence of local conditions shaping variations in policy implementation, particularly with reference to allocation of land based on ancestral land rights in midland and highland ethnic minority areas. In this way, this study emphasized the interrelatedness of changes at various scales and the need for situating 'the local' within the analysis. It offered a locality-specific understanding of these processes through a place-based study of experiences of transformations towards a 'market economy with socialist orientation.' The methodological approach complemented this through the integration of multiple scales, methods, data sources, and disciplines.

Third, household and kinship relations (through marriage and inheritance trends) have been influenced by changes in land and property relations. A key feature of the new approach to land management and organization of agricultural production is the reworking of the household as a principal unit of production. The household is thus responsible for tasks such as income generation, division of labour, and coordination of production, all with ambiguous outcomes for gender relations. Decisions over crop composition, labour allocation, inputs, sale of produce, and inheritance of land are now to be negotiated at the intra-household level. As an institutional mechanism mediating asset ownership, patrilineal inheritance reproduces gender inequality over time. The division of labour and decision making are two further aspects of intra-household relations touched by the reforms. Women are often responsible for aspects of paddy maintenance, for tending the VAC, as well as for selling produce and handicrafts in markets. The expansion of market relations contributed to more frequent and longer visits to markets by women.
Further themes examined in Chapter Five were the reworking of the family-household as an informal social safety net in the face of declines in social income, and the uneven workload among household members. Work patterns have become intensified with the growth of the household economy, as both agricultural and non-farm income generating activities have increased. These shifts can be interpreted in terms of changing uses of space and time, in the form of increases in marketing, travel time, fuelwood collection and cooking pig-feed. These examples reflect some of the spatial and temporal impacts of decollectivization. The case study in Chapter Five made three further contributions. First, it demonstrated that aggregating data on female-headed households as a single group is unhelpful; the category is simply too diverse. Second, it pointed out the diversity of circumstances and causes of female headship in rural areas and addressed the lack of clarity in aggregated national census data that fails to capture the significant differences in types of female-headed households. Third, challenging the widely-held assumption that female-headed households are more vulnerable than male-headed ones, my analysis qualifies this statement, demonstrating the different types of female-headed households and trends in vulnerability linked more closely to kinship and residence patterns.

Fourth, use of, access to, and control over resources are affected by the reorganization of property rights and agro-forestry production, in turn shaping patterns of vulnerability. The study emphasized ethnicity, gender, and household headship among other factors affecting resource access. Ellis (1998: 27) defined a livelihood as “the assets, the activities, and the access that determine the living gained by the individual or household.” Drawing on Ellis’ conceptualization of livelihood components, this study interpreted the various institutions, social relations and organizations mediating access to assets, particularly land. Social institutions and social networks, gender relations, and property rights all combine to form the macro- and micro-level constraints to and opportunities for improving livelihood prospects. The study also demonstrated the uneven access to land, information, markets, credit, income-generating opportunities, and other resources.

Land is a core productive asset shaping livelihood vulnerability and well-being. While agricultural land is relatively evenly distributed (except in parts of southern Vietnam and the northern highlands), this is less so for forest land, which was allocated to households deemed to have greater investment and labour capacity. Yet, the effective exploitation of land to reduce vulnerability depends not only on the quantity and quality of landholdings, but on supplementary assets including labour, household relations, and social capital. Assets of financial and human capital are also unevenly shared. Demand for credit is high for farming
households of all income levels and far outstrips the supply offered by the Bank for Agriculture, Bank for the Poor, Women’s Union and other state and international agency-sponsored credit programs. Differential availability of labour, referred to above, is a further asset shaping livelihood vulnerability. Male and female-headed households with young children can be disadvantaged in having high dependency ratios. This calls for attention to issues of life cycle in the analysis of vulnerability. Labour can be an important form of non-monetary (inter-generational, extra-household) family support, in both production and child-care.

The fifth general conclusion is that patterns of vulnerability are brought about through institutional gaps resulting from the loss of agricultural collectives as coordinating mechanisms for various key tasks required for production. With the stigmas on private marketing largely lifted, households are now responsible for marketing their own produce. Crop diversification and sideline production for individual enrichment are encouraged. As is true for China (cf. Croll 1994), a major repercussion of the reforms in Vietnam was the generation of a new set of demands on peasant households, demands previously the responsibility of the collective. These include the procurement of raw materials, production inputs, technical knowledge, capital, transport, storage, and markets. While market institutions are celebrated in new discourses, many challenges remain for constructing effective institutions. Decollectivization has seen a rolling back of ‘agricultural production collectives,’ in some cases being reincarnated as new ‘service cooperatives’ but no longer controlling labour allocation. Through the reorientation of cooperatives and the establishment of credit systems and a national agricultural extension system, the range of services available to market-oriented farmers is growing. Mass organizations have adapted to the new economic context by also diversifying into provision of credit and agricultural extension services. The Women’s Union in particular has been overwhelmed with demands to collaborate with international and state agencies for program implementation.

The benefits of recent economic growth in Vietnam are leading the population out of the ‘shared poverty’ that characterized the period of subsidies (thoi bao cap), collectivization (thoi hop tac), and war (chien tranh). But market integration can have both alleviating as well as aggravating effects on vulnerability. As one example, following China’s lead, small and medium-sized enterprises could be better promoted and facilitated to absorb labour and generate income. Service-providing intermediary institutions are lacking, and institutional strengthening is far from complete. The many gaps that remain given the loss of collectives as a coordinating mechanism serve to challenge the evolutionary theory of land rights—most particularly, the
assumption that enhanced security of land rights for households will automatically lead to
greater productivity. Some of these gaps are highlighted in Table 32.

Table 32. Greater Freedom or Responsibility? Consequences of Economic and Property
Rights Restructuring

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discursive and institutional shifts</th>
<th>Consequences for rural livelihoods</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>From collective to household as basic production unit</td>
<td>Household assumes responsibility for former collective tasks and functions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household autonomy in production decisions; freedom to manage own time and labour</td>
<td>New patterns of decision-making and intra-household bargaining over production decisions (crop composition, marketing), allocation of labour, and inheritance; access to land is mediated at level of household rather than collective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intensification of production for household-based economy. Leads to new intra-household workload patterns and the potential for increased workloads for all members: women, men, elderly, youth/children. Potential increase in school drop-outs to meet labour demands of household economy (especially if one parent performs migrant labour)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater incentives to produce, use labour more effectively, and reap the rewards of one’s own labour</td>
<td>Differential benefits based on uneven asset base: differential endowments of financial and human capital (knowledge, skills, and labour)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household is ‘free’ to make investment in production</td>
<td>Demand for credit for agricultural inputs and processing equipment, but limited credit schemes contribute to lack of investment at household level, and thus limited access to new technologies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household is ‘free’ to determine crop composition, and has opportunities to develop sideline production</td>
<td>Demand for information: opportunities, technical knowledge and entrepreneurial skills for income-generating activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Weak extension and advisory services for information on viable cash crops with market demand: extension programs may be designed with inadequate understanding of local farming systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of clarity over policy procedures and legal rights; low legal literacy and poor dissemination of information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household is ‘free’ to market its agricultural produce</td>
<td>Increased market integration, but lack of storage facilities and coordinating mechanism for transporting and marketing goods in larger quantities to negotiate a higher price</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household is ‘free’ to apply for forest allocation</td>
<td>Forest land is allocated to households with greater investment and labour capacity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Interviews by author.

This table illustrates how, as policy makers struggle to create an institutional environment for a market economy to thrive, the new freedoms enjoyed by farmers and the hoped-for efficiency gains in resource use have met with a series of hurdles. These stumbling blocks—from unequal access to land and decision-making power for all family members to differential endowments of financial and human capital, to uneven access to technology,
information, and markets—are experienced differently by members of communities and households. Not all members have the same capacity to respond and adapt. Echoing Woolcock’s (2000) argument for enhancing bridging and linking social capitals, this study underlines the need for augmented decision-making capacity on natural resource management and property rights institutions to be permitted at the local level. Moreover, through cooperatives or other associational forms, links between government and local groups need to be strengthened, and farmers need to be put in touch with greater financial and technical resources and market channels.

Sixth, both formal and customary institutions can be linked to differential entitlements and vulnerability. Ellis (1998: 11) wrote that “social institutions through which livelihoods are mediated may act to suppress opportunities for some members of a community (for example, landless, women, low caste) while enhancing those of other members.” This points to the social embeddedness of individual or household actions. Households are socially differentiated in terms of uneven bases of material and non-material assets. As the functions of the state and production collectives as service providers are withdrawn, farmers have scrambled to respond to institutional gaps as best they can, often by drawing on informal social networks. Customary institutions—overlooked in many analyses—are key elements behind new patterns of vulnerability, as reflected in exclusionary networks of what I termed vertical social capital.

Social capital is often described as an inherently positive community asset. Enacted through activities such as labour exchange or rotating credit groups, social capital is claimed to reduce vulnerability. Yet, in my analysis it becomes clear that this community resource is frequently unevenly shared. Social capital based on strong ties of kinship, ethnicity or patronage relations can often be more exclusionary than mutually beneficial.

Internationally, indigenous peoples’ struggles over enclosure and privatization of common access land are often associated with different conceptions of ownership and property. Linked to this, we saw that more marginalized ethnic groups, such as the Hmong and Dao, in many cases have yet to receive any certifications of their land-use rights. Land and resource conflicts of various sorts emerged in the process of transformations in land relations and property rights in Vietnam. This was observed at the inter-ethnic and inter-household level over ancestral lands and at the intra-family level over inheritance. Policy around property rights in Vietnam needs to be formulated carefully, with sufficient flexibility to respect customary tenure and allow for common property regimes to operate where there is local support for this. This
study further underlined the importance of an analysis at sub-national scales, with attention to regions and specific social groups.

Vulnerability related to social capital can vary by region, social status, ethnic group, village solidarity, and kinship relations. Gender-mediated vulnerability can come about through household headship status, residence patterns, and inheritance. In the shift from support-led to growth-led welfare, one can observe an increased reliance on informal social safety nets. This reinforces identities and social ties of various forms: extended family, neighbours, friends, and ethnic group. These different informal support networks, it might be argued, are reinforced in the face of declines in some formal institutions. This was seen in instances of loss of support services from former production collectives and in the case study in Chapter Five through inheritance and kinship relations and Chapter Seven through ancestral claims based on ethnic relations, settlement history, and local identity. In this way, the emerging approaches and orientations to development are shown to be shaped by and in turn shaping new identities. These identities—linked to region, culture, ethnicity, territory, family, and gender—highlight how reforms in property rights and the *de facto* privatization of land, alongside other material changes, are bringing about new conceptions of property and new identities.

In the opening chapter of this dissertation, I took issue with the 'seamless' dissertation by drawing attention to the processes of research and construction of the dissertation and by my emphasis throughout the dissertation on the diverse and sometimes contradictory experiences of institutional change and across time and space. Rural change and patterns of livelihood vulnerability are presented in this dissertation as occurring within a complex set of social and institutional relations. The post-socialist market-oriented reforms in Vietnamese agriculture and the departure from collective management of production parallel the 'end of the agrarian reform' in developing countries around the world. This study identified a series of the trade-offs within decollectivization and property rights reform in Vietnam and traced the contours of emerging vulnerable groups and regions. With these considerations in mind, it is hoped that a path can be forged to ensure secure livelihoods for all.
References

a. Statistical Data on Thai Nguyen Province

(ordered chronologically; unless otherwise indicated, sources were published by the Statistics Bureau of Thai Nguyen (or Bac Thai) province, in Thai Nguyen City)


Chi Cuc Thong Ke Bac Thai. c. 1965. 6 Nam Xay Dung va Phat Trien Kinh Te Van Hoa, Tinh Bac Thai, 1960-65.


“Thong Ke Dien Tich Dat Dai Nam 1996” (Statistics on Land Area, 1996). (Provided by Land Administration Office, Thai Nguyen City, 98/05/07.)

“Forest Land and Forest Land Allocation Statistics 1997.” (Provided by Forest Protection Division, Thai Nguyen Province, 98/05/07.)


“Land Use Record, 1985” and “Land Use Record, 1990” (Handwritten figures supplied by the Dong Hy District Statistics Office, 98/08/14.)

“Forest Land, Dong Hy District” (Handwritten figures supplied by the Dong Hy District Land Allocation Office, 98/08.)

b. Statistical Data on Vietnam


c. Newspaper, Magazine, and Journal Articles Published in Vietnam


d. Reports and Books by Vietnamese Agencies or Researchers Published in Vietnam


e. Reports by International Agencies Published in Vietnam


Association for Research and Environmental Aid (AREA). 1997-98. Notes from Market Surveys. Phu Luong District, Thai Nguyen Province. [Australian NGO]


**f. Films**


**g. Other Sources**


Bonifacy, A L-M. 1904. ‘Les groupes ethniques de la Rivière Claire,’ Revue Indochinoise, 30 June.


Appendix:
Statistical Narrative on Thai Nguyen Province

As a supplement to Chapter Six, this appendix begins with a summary of the evolution of administrative divisions of Thai Nguyen province. It then provides an overview of population dynamics, demonstrating changes in sex ratio, urbanization, immigration, and ethnicity. Recent production figures attesting to the growth and diversification of the household economy are presented next. This is followed by an overview of indicators of economic and social development and rural-urban disparities. Evidence of improvement in literacy rates and levels of education since the 1950s is demonstrated, with a subsequent review of GDP figures and a summary of changes over time in employment by sector.

Rewriting the Map: Administrative Shuffling

Thai Nguyen province in particular and Vietnam as a whole have been subject to continual re-shaping of the administrative map, posing challenges to anyone attempting longitudinal trend analyses. Administrative change via the consolidation and division of provinces has a long history in Vietnam. Significant changes have been made over the last decade and a half alone, with the number of provinces growing from 40 in 1986-87, to 44 in 1989, to 52 in 1992, to 63 by 1997. Beresford and McFarlane (1995: 71, n.62) refer to this phenomenon but point to insufficient information to explain the rationale. Writing in 1995, they cited cases of 12 provinces that had been split into smaller units, “usually reverting to pre-1975 boundaries, and in at least one case it may have been due to the development of economic and political independence of factions within the old province.”

From the 1960s until 1997 Thai Nguyen and the more northerly Bac Kan (and parts of Cao Bang) province were united as Bac Thai province. In January 1997 the two provinces were re-divided and Thai Nguyen was once again a separate province. Bach Thong, Cho Don, Cho Ra, Na Ri, and Ngan Son districts formerly belonged to Bac Thai province but are now part of Bac Kan and Cao Bang provinces and have thus been excluded from the statistical tables presented in this Appendix and in the regional context section in Chapter Six. Following an administrative split in 1979 or 1980, Cho Ra and Ngan Son came to be part of Cao Bang, reducing the territory of Bac Thai from 8366 to 6494 km². But during the 1997 division of Bac Thai province, at least part of this area was returned to Bac Kan. With the provincial split in
1997, Phu Luong district was divided as well such that its territory within Thai Nguyen province, still carrying the same district name, was reduced from 657 km² (comprising 23 communes) to 346 km² (16 communes). The remaining area became part of another district within Bac Kan.

This re-mapping of territories over the years did not stop at the provincial level. Not atypical is the case of Quang Son commune. In the colonial period the commune belonged to Dong Hy district. Then, after the 1945 Revolution, it became part of Vo Nhai district and finally, in 1985, re-joined Dong Hy once more. Over time commune borders themselves were adjusted. Table 33 demonstrates the fluctuations in number of communes in total and by district for selected years as further evidence of the aforementioned shuffling. Thai Nguyen province had 149 communes in 1960. By 1965, after the formation of Bac Thai, the province comprised 264 communes. By 1979, after ceding some to Cao Bang, there were only 235. The number of communes continued to fall, reaching 226 in 1982 and 221 in 1990, due in part to some communes being reclassified as towns (thi xa) or urban wards (phuong): in 1982, Thai Nguyen City had 10 wards and Song Cong Town had 3. Following the re-division of Bac Thai into Bac Can and Thai Nguyen provinces in 1997, Thai Nguyen had 177 communes, 28 more than it had in 1960, prior to its consolidation with Bac Thai.

Table 33. Number of Communes per District, Thai Nguyen province, 1955-present

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>TN City</th>
<th>Dinh Hoa</th>
<th>Phu Luong</th>
<th>Dai Tu</th>
<th>Vo Nhai</th>
<th>Dong Hy</th>
<th>Pho Yen</th>
<th>Phu Binh</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bac Thai: 1965</td>
<td>264</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>235</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TN: 1997</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Figures for Song Cong Town were included in yearbooks as of 1990. In this year it included 3 communes. In 1997 it included 6.

The area of Thai Nguyen City has continuously expanded from 43 km² in 1972 to 61 km² in 1979 to 153 km² in 1990 and to 177 km² in 1997. District boundaries of Vo Nhai, Dong Hy, and Pho Yen districts, and Thai Nguyen City were juggled in 1985. Other variations in size
reflected in Table 34 may be indicative of further administrative shuffling of which I am not aware or may simply be due to inaccuracies in measurement. In none of the statistical yearbooks did a map appear to clarify any of these analysts' nightmares. Data on changes in population must be interpreted with great caution given these frequent administrative redistributions. When asked if I could see any old maps to visualize this administrative stew, the chairperson of the district People's Committee avoided the question and instead attempted to describe the complex geo-administrative changes: "Before 1962, Khe Mo commune was larger; later it was subdivided into Khe Mo and Song Cau town... Before 1962, Dong Hy district was larger – it did not include four communes from Vo Nhai district, but included some communes from Thai Nguyen City and Pho Yen district..."^{45}

Table 34. Area of Districts, Thai Nguyen province, 1955-present

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>TN City</th>
<th>Dinh Hoa</th>
<th>Phu Luong</th>
<th>Dai Tu</th>
<th>Vo Nhai</th>
<th>Dong Hy</th>
<th>Pho Yen</th>
<th>Phu Binh</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>3298.4</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>579.9</td>
<td>343.2</td>
<td>619.1</td>
<td>958.9</td>
<td>500.6</td>
<td>287.5</td>
<td>253.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>8407.0</td>
<td>43.0</td>
<td>507.0</td>
<td>639.0</td>
<td>595.5</td>
<td>945.3</td>
<td>512.0</td>
<td>250.0</td>
<td>248.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>8366.0</td>
<td>61.3</td>
<td>499.9</td>
<td>656.9</td>
<td>595.5</td>
<td>945.3</td>
<td>514.6</td>
<td>246.4</td>
<td>239.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>6494.5</td>
<td>153.3</td>
<td>499.9</td>
<td>656.9</td>
<td>595.5</td>
<td>820.1</td>
<td>449.1</td>
<td>301.0</td>
<td>239.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>6502.8</td>
<td>151.7</td>
<td>500.0</td>
<td>657.0</td>
<td>567.7</td>
<td>809.8</td>
<td>508.2</td>
<td>289.1</td>
<td>239.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>3434.6</td>
<td>151.8</td>
<td>500.6</td>
<td>346.0</td>
<td>567.8</td>
<td>801.6</td>
<td>508.2</td>
<td>252.9</td>
<td>251.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>3566.6</td>
<td>177.1</td>
<td>499.9</td>
<td>352.8</td>
<td>584.4</td>
<td>843.5</td>
<td>511.2</td>
<td>289.0</td>
<td>252.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figures for 1960 were derived by dividing the population figures by the population density figures. However, their accuracy is doubtful, since it is known that the area of Dong Hy in the early 1960s was much larger than was true after the consolidation of Bac Thai province, yet this is not reflected here. Note: Figures for Song Cong Town were included in yearbooks as of 1990. In this year its area was 45.6 km². In 1996 it was 53.9, and in 1997 it was 55.6 km².

**Demographics, Sex Ratios, Urbanization, and Ethnicity**

The population of Thai Nguyen province grew from 230,514 in 1955 to 1,060,316 in 1997, an average of 3.7 percent growth per annum. The years 1958-59, 1961, 1963-1976, and 1989 marked population growth spurts, reflecting large influxes of migrants. The end of the

---

^{45} The sensitivity of access to maps by foreigners in Vietnam was discussed in Chapter One.
wars against the US (in 1975) and Cambodia (in 1989) saw large numbers of soldiers returning home. The earlier years reflect periods of establishment of industry and of agricultural collectives, for which populations from the densely populated Red River Delta were drawn upon to fill the needs for economic and territorial expansion in Thai Nguyen. This occurred in part through the New Economic Zones program described in the Chapter Six.

From 1955 to 1997, the rural population grew from 214,000 to 854,000, nearly four times the original figure. Over the same period, the urban population climbed from 16,000 to 206,000 [or to 282,000, by another account], a 13-fold increase. These figures reflect an expansion from 7 to 27 percent in the proportion of the population residing in urban areas. The years of greatest increase in the urban population were the late 1950s and early 1960s and 1974 to 1977.\(^4\) Data from 1966-72 were not available, so an assessment of this period is not possible, although the percent of population living in urban areas grew from 18.6 to 20.2 percent from 1965 to 1973. Turning to the district-level data, by 1990 Phu Binh and Vo Nhai districts still had no recorded urban population. Dinh Hoa, Dai Tu and Phu Luong had only three to four percent urbanization, while Pho Yen and Dong Hy had 8 and 16 percent, respectively. The administrative area of Thai Nguyen City itself was 73 percent urbanized, having several rural communes at its outskirts.

As for the rural population, significant influxes are recorded for 1958-1959, 1963-1965, and 1974-1976. The population growth rate overall was somewhat lower in the 1980s and 1990s compared to the late 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. The government-instigated population movements through the establishment of New Economic Zones had largely ended by the late 1970s, and by the 1980s some of the population of Bac Thai was moving south to the Central Highlands.

Data on the sex ratio over time reflect in-migration dynamics in the province. The sex ratio imbalance among young adults by 1960 was striking. In the age bracket 18-25 years, 63.4 percent of the population was male, and in the 26-30 age bracket, 60.2 percent was male, reflecting the influx of young males for industrial production in the late 1950s. As shown in Table 36, in 1960 in urban areas, fully 70 percent of the population was male—26,000 males versus 11,000 females. In the overall population, the sex ratio was 53.2 percent male—a gap of nearly 20,000 fewer females than males. If in Thai Nguyen City the disparity was 61 percent males, the gap must have been even greater in other urban areas, such as Song Cong Town and

\(^4\) There may have been a change in how urban and rural were defined, explaining the rather dramatic shifts in proportion of the population residing in urban areas from 1976 to 1977, from 1988 to 1989, and between the early and late 1990s.
industrial complex. Although the yearly figures fluctuated significantly, in 1978, data showed urban areas having a surplus of 23,000 males, while rural areas had 40,000 extra females. By 1989 in Bac Thai province the sex ratio was 48.9 percent males, this time with over 23,000 more females than males (data disaggregated by urban and rural areas were not available). By 1999, for Thai Nguyen province, this gap had closed to only 4000 more females than males. The only age brackets in which males were more numerous than females in 1989 was in the under 15 age group, perhaps reflecting the preference for having at least one male child in a period of smaller family sizes.\textsuperscript{47} The child dependency ratio of the population remained high through the 1990s. In 1960, in Thai Nguyen province, 45 percent of the population was below age 17. Similarly, in 1989, in Bac Thai province, more than 50 percent of the population was under 20 years of age.

Table 35. Population of Females and Males in Urban and Rural Areas, Selected Years

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Urban males</th>
<th>Urban %</th>
<th>Urban females</th>
<th>Rural %</th>
<th>Rural males</th>
<th>Rural %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TN:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>26324</td>
<td>70.72</td>
<td>10897</td>
<td>29.28</td>
<td>128074</td>
<td>50.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bac Thai:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>77648</td>
<td>56.2</td>
<td>60568</td>
<td>43.8</td>
<td>314078</td>
<td>47.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>117735</td>
<td>58.3</td>
<td>84197</td>
<td>41.7</td>
<td>291993</td>
<td>47.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>114244</td>
<td>55.7</td>
<td>90870</td>
<td>44.3</td>
<td>296132</td>
<td>46.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>95889</td>
<td>53.0</td>
<td>84901</td>
<td>47.0</td>
<td>331020</td>
<td>49.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If the data are accurate, they mark a surge in female population between 1962 and 1963. Over this two-year period, the male population grew by 10,000, while the female population grew by more than 23,000. This may be indicative of the foundation of state forest enterprises, for which female labour was often sought. Between 1963 and 1964 the population grew by almost equal numbers of males and females. One explanation could be that programs targeting migrants to settle in Bac Thai during this year sought married couples rather than only men or only women. Between 1974 and 1978, the number of males rose by 7500 more than the number of females, perhaps reflecting the return of soldiers from the war. If the figures are accurate, between 1978 and 1981, the number of males grew by 3000 at the same time that the number of females grew by 12,000. This could reflect the drafting of soldiers to fight in Cambodia.

\textsuperscript{47} However, even in societies with no son preference, the sex ratio among young children may still be as high as 107 males per 100 females.
The ceding of territory from Bac Thai to Cao Bang province in 1979, combined with the reshuffling of district-level boundaries, complicates attempts to document mortalities due to the border war with China in the same year. War mortalities from conflicts against Americans prior to 1975, as well as later in Cambodia in the 1980s, were evident in the 1989 figures on sex ratio in the age brackets of 20-24, 35-39 and 40-44 years, in which the percent of males was 44.9, 46.1 and 46.3 percent, respectively.

**Collectivized Agricultural Production and State Agricultural Enterprises**

A number of state agricultural enterprises emerged parallel to the establishment of agricultural collectives in Thai Nguyen. The first was founded in 1957, the second in 1958, and the third, sometime before 1973 (data from 1961-72 did include these enterprises). By 1975 the number of labourers in state agricultural enterprises was 2,369. Of the 724 hectares covered by the enterprises, 662 are used for tea plantations and only 62 for food crops—mainly corn. In 1975, the three enterprises also raised a small number of livestock: close to 400 buffalo, a few cattle, and nearly 3,500 pigs. By the early 1980s, the number of pigs raised in state enterprises had dropped to less than one quarter of this figure. At no time between 1976 and 1982 (data are not available for other years) did state enterprises manage more than a tiny fraction of all livestock production. Collectives and households managed equal numbers of buffalo, with a slight decline in the portion managed collectively over this six-year period. Households raised about two-thirds of the province’s cattle and more than 95 percent of its pigs. This proportion of porcine management grew to 98.9 percent in 1982, indicative of the household economy’s take off and the retreat of collective and state-sector agricultural production.

State procurements of goods from agricultural collectives took place through a number of channels. Taxes exceeded half of the procurements, while the rest were for *ad hoc* levies or ‘obligations’ (*nghia vu*) for various community funds and ‘agreements’ (*thoa thuoan*). The total tonnage of procurements continued to increase between 1976 and 1982, although the proportion for taxes fell slightly, and obligations dropped off dramatically as agreements picked up massively. Agricultural products supplied to the state in Bac Thai included rice, meat (mainly pork), fresh fruit and vegetables, soybeans, peanuts, fresh fish, and tobacco leaves. Within agricultural collectives, the proportions of total income handed over to the state, collective administration, and members was a bone of contention driving the push to de-collectivize. Provincial figures suggest that the proportion of income from agricultural collectives that was surrendered to the state rose from 10 to 18 percent between 1978 and 1982. The percent retained
by the collective rose only slightly from 12 to 13 percent, while the proportion divided among members fell from 78 to 69 percent.

Despite some initial disintegration of collectives in the early 1980s, the number of technicians recruited to agricultural collectives continued to grow from 291 in 1979 to 546 in 1982. The majority of these were educated at technical school, with 16 having graduated from university and 41 classified as 'technical workers.' Certified technicians within the collective sector represented only four percent of all technicians. The vast majority worked in the state sector. Of the total of nearly 15,000 'technicians' in Bac Thai in 1982 period, 58 percent were female, but in the collective sector females comprised only 34 percent of the total. The proportion of Kinh was greater in the state sector—81 percent of the total—versus 71 percent in the collective sector. Tay, having the highest education levels of all ethnic minorities in the province, made up the majority of the remainder of technicians. By 1960, the Farmers Association had a staff of 70 officers working at the provincial level and 3,218 within communes. Of the provincial staff, 20 percent were women and more than 40 percent were ethnic minorities. At the commune level, the figures were 13 and 38 percent, respectively.

**Agricultural Production Trends and Use of Forest Products**

A notable trend in rural Thai Nguyen in the 1990s was the appearance of local produce markets, which have become much more frequent and localized, reaching communes that previously had no regular market day. Associated with this, and more generally with the reforms in property rights and the devolution of decision-making to households, has been a conversion of much agricultural land from subsistence to cash crops, such as tea and fruit trees, plus an increase in livestock. The Gardening Association, VACVINA, has been active in promoting the VAC model of integrated production and nutrient recycling between the *vuon* (vegetable garden), *ao* (fishpond) and *chuong* (pig sty) (Duong Quang Dieu 1994; Pham Xuan Nam. n.d.). This ancient 'system,' common to northern Vietnam and China, was underdeveloped in the collective period given the disincentives for household production and restrictions and low prices for selling goods on the market. Now, however, malnutrition rates are falling, and fruit, vegetable, fish and livestock production is taking off. The downside to production booms, though, is the periodic market gluts, as in the case of plums in the midlands and highlands in 1997-98.
In the late 1990s, the 83,000 hectares of agricultural land in Thai Nguyen were divided among the following uses: 42,000 hectares for annual crops (the principal crop being rice), 11,000 hectares for perennial crops (such as tea and fruit trees), 16,000 hectares for mixed gardens, and 3,200 and 400 hectares, respectively, for aquaculture and livestock. Whereas in the early 1930s only one crop of rice was grown, totaling close to 18,000 hectares of paddy area across the province, by the late 1990s the areas planted with single, double, and occasionally
triple crops of paddy reached a combined total of 65,000 hectares, nearly four times as much as 65 years earlier. The area planted with rice within Bac Thai province from 1955 to 1990 expanded by nearly one third, from 58,000 to 76,000 hectares. The greatest expansion in area of paddy production seems to have taken place between the 1930s and early 1950s. By 1982 a plateau had been reached, after which point there was minimal expansion of paddy area. In the earlier years, from 1955 to 1965, Bac Thai expanded the area planted with paddy by nearly 30 percent, while in all the northern mountainous region the paddy area grew by 41 percent, and in northern Vietnam as a whole by 16 percent.

Average yields multiplied from 10 to 34 quintals (1.0 to 3.4 tons) per hectare from the 1930s to the late 1990s. Although subject to fluctuation, overall yields have risen as a consequence of institutional incentives and greater intensity of production (higher inputs) since the decline of collectivization. Dinh Hoa district reported that in the past 10 years, average rice yields for the district rose from 1.8 to 3.5 tons per hectare. In another calculation, in Hoa Trung commune, Dong Hy district, yields are three times higher now compared to the collective period: in 1985, the average paddy yield was 60-70 kg per sao (1.7-1.9 tons per hectare), but by the 1990s had risen to 150-200 kg per sao (4.1 to 5.5 tons per hectare).

Besides rice, gains in area planted as well as productivity can be seen in a number of other crops, particularly in the 1990s (except for a bad year across northern Vietnam in 1991). Tea is one of these, seeing an increase in area planted from 5700 to 11,200 hectares between 1990 and 1998 alone. Yields also rose, from 2.8 to 3.9 quintals (0.28 to 0.39 tons) per hectare. Tea yielded an estimated value of 30 million dong (US$ 2150) per hectare. Some of the province’s tea is exported to Japan, Taiwan and Iraq. Maize saw a doubling of yields in the same period, while the area planted rose from 4300 to 10,700 hectares. The area planted with soybeans rose from 1900 to 3200 hectares through the 1990s. Peanuts expanded from 5000 to 11,200 hectares. Production of some crops such as sweet potato, cassava, sugar cane, and various bean varieties seems to have stagnated somewhat, as they have been displaced by higher value crops. Other cash crops include cinnamon (suffering market problems), lychees, plums, apricots, oranges, persimmons and olives. The area of apricot trees nearly tripled between 1994 and 1995 alone, from 1299 to 3137 hectares, whereas before 1992 the area had been only 374 hectares (Research Institute for Fruits and Vegetables, cited in Vietnam-Finland Forestry Sector Cooperation Programme 1996: 35). A final change in agricultural land use involves burials. People in Thai Nguyen used to be buried in paddy fields, but now it is more common to bury them on hill slopes, given the scarcity of paddy land for food production.
Agricultural machinery might be taken as an indicator of this sector’s development of scale economies. Longitudinal data are not available, but for 1994, for every 1000 households, there were just over two large and two small tractors, 17 irrigation pumps and 17 rice husker/polishers. Yet, for processing of tea, many farmers in Thai Nguyen in the last couple of years have started using round bin tea dryers. The cost is about 700,000 dong (US$ 50). These are much more efficient in fuel use, process the tea more evenly, and dry the tea fast, without destroying or breaking the leaves as raking does.

The expansion of irrigated land has contributed to rising productivity and cropping intensities. Since 1980, irrigation expanded in Dong Hy district due to investment at three scales: government investment (in large irrigation projects); government investment shared with farmer contributions (in medium projects); and investment by farmers themselves (in small-scale projects). Electrical pump stations have been established to draw water from rivers, lakes and temporary dikes. Whereas in 1985 Dong Hy had only 800 hectares of farmland with sufficient water, by 1998 this figure had risen to 1300 hectares. Many areas have also increased
the cropping intensity where new irrigation facilities permit, planting two seasons of rice instead of one. In Tan Long commune, Dong Hy district, farmers began growing double crops of rice in 1986 and also started growing maize and beans. Another dimension of changing use of land and natural resources through the reforms is the increased use of pesticides and fertilizers throughout Vietnam. Paralleling this, farmers talk of a decline in soil fertility. The FAO and other organizations have been active in promoting integrated pest management programs, but the degree of impact on rates of pesticide use varies.

Livestock production has increased significantly over the years. The number of buffalo and cattle grew by half in the latter half of the 1950s. The number of pigs nearly tripled in the same period. The ceding of part of Bac Thai to Cao Bang province in the late 1970s may have accounted for some of the decline in livestock at that time. But a more important factor was likely the border dispute with China in 1979, which led to bombings in Bac Thai and other northern mountainous provinces. The stocks of pigs and buffalo appear to have fallen by 9 and 19 percent, respectively, between 1976 and 1980. The 1990s saw a surge in stocks of cattle and pigs between 1991 and 1998, from 13,000 to 21,000 cattle and 256,000 to 356,000 pigs. The number of buffalo, poultry and goats rose only slightly over this same period. Although not considered as livestock elsewhere, dogs constitute a popular source of meat in northern Vietnam. In 1994 the Rural and Agricultural Survey revealed that there were 194,390 dogs in Bac Thai, excluding 'ornamental' dogs (cho canh), i.e., pets.

Raising livestock of various kinds, including canine, is a common sideline activity of households. In 1994, of all households in Bac Thai, urban and rural alike, 84 percent raised pigs. Of these, 98 percent raised five pigs or fewer, indicating the small scale of such operations. Phu Binh and Phu Luong districts had the greatest number of larger-scale pig raising households. Fifty percent of all households owned buffalo, of which nearly 60 percent owned just one, while under three percent had six or more. Only six percent of households raised cattle, although their numbers appear to be growing. Of the 12,000 households with cattle, 60 percent had just one cow (or bull), while just under five percent had six or more. Phu Binh and Phu Luong districts had the greatest number of cattle-raising households. Aquaculture is another household economy sideline, part of the VAC system mentioned earlier. From 1995 to 1998 its production remained steady at about 1400 tons harvested. The corresponding figures for tons of fish harvested from rice paddies, lakes, and ponds for 1955 and 1960 were 129 and 767 tons respectively.
Forests serve as a source for a wide range of goods for both home use and for sale on the market. Small-scale trading of goods provides sources of income generation, particularly for women, the predominant sellers in markets. Market survey information reveals the multiple sources of income generated from forest products; the division of labour in collecting, processing and marketing the products (including children’s labour); and the extent of intra- and inter-provincial trade networks. Forest products collected in Thai Nguyen and Bac Kan include fuelwood, building wood, supplementary food, medicinal plants, supplies for handicrafts, bamboo shoots and bamboo, and hunted or trapped birds and other animals. In Phu Luong and neighbouring districts, many logs are piled up on the side of the road for sale, as are palm leaves for roofing and small bunches of firewood. At Du market in Phu Luong district (documented in AREA, 1997-98), palm fans made from young leaves of co bau were bought by a woman trader from a commune on the outskirts of Thai Nguyen City, who then took them to neighbouring Lang Son province to sell wholesale. She had done this for the past eight years. Another woman trader took palm fans to Cao Bang province to sell to people who retail them in China. Other products sold at Du market included:

- Tea (sometimes bought in commune markets and taken for resale in district markets to buyers from Thai Nguyen City)
- Bamboo shoots (collected by women from their household’s allocated forest land; bought in Du market by traders from Thai Nguyen who re-sell them wholesale or retail in Thai Nguyen city)
- Fruits (sim fruit, collected ‘from the hills,’ sold by girls)
- Medicinal plants (grown in gardens and collected in forests)
- Rattan (collected from family forest)
- Bamboo poles
- Brooms (sometimes sold by girls)
- Fuelwood (800-1,200 dong per small bundle, sold especially by children)
- Palm mats (made in household workshops near Thai Nguyen city with 2 hired girls; raw palm stems are brought from Cho Don and Dinh Hoa)

Children collected some plants and forest fruit from their forest garden and wood products while grazing buffaloes (AREA 1997-98). Of all products sold in the market in Yen Do and Yen Ninh communes in northern Phu Luong district, only a few products were sold by men: snakes (blood, fat, skin, meat), pet birds, hardware, and trees (fruit and forest, grafted). Girls sold small animals (frogs, crabs, etc.), pet birds, handicrafts (baskets, fish traps, mats, etc.), haberdashery, and firewood. Boys sold small animals and firewood only; women sold almost everything except firewood and the items mentioned above sold only by men.
Development Indicators and Rural-Urban and Regional Disparities

A Rural and Agricultural Survey conducted in 1994 by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) of Thai Nguyen province revealed a number of gaps in infrastructure and social development, particularly in rural areas. In 1994, 61 percent of all communes, particularly communes in Dinh Hoa and Vo Nhai, still lacked electricity. Five communes in Vo Nhai and one in Dinh Hoa lacked a road reaching the commune centre. Five more in Vo Nhai, Dinh Hoa and Dai Tu lacked a health clinic. Seventy-four percent of communes in the province lacked a daycare, 28 percent lacked a kindergarten, and 45 percent had no commune market. While all communes had primary schools, middle schools had yet to be established in seven of the 144 communes. In addition, in 1997, 53 of the 157 communes and urban wards were without telephone service. However, in the first six months of 1997, 1340 telephone lines were installed. Mobile phone coverage was also extended to Thai Nguyen City and Pho Yen District (Chu Duy Thiet 1997).

Compared to Ho Chi Minh City or Hanoi, urban-rural gaps in standards of living in Thai Nguyen were not as pronounced but appeared to be growing. Urban-rural income disparities were evidenced by the calculation that in 1994, 30 percent of urban households earned more than 200,000 dong (nearly US$ 15) per month, which can be contrasted with only five percent of rural households. Only six percent of urban households earned less than 80,000 dong monthly compared to 28 percent of rural households. Urban households on average had about US$ 3,470 in property and assets, while rural households had US$ 1,920. The value of assets of state sector households was 3,620, while that of households in the collective sector was only US$ 2,140. Table 37 shows the percent of households in rural and urban areas of Thai Nguyen owning a variety of household goods. A colour TV could be found in 30 percent of urban households but only seven percent of rural households. Eighty-one percent of urban households had electric fans versus only 41 percent in the countryside. In 1994, only 24 percent of urban households and 16 percent of rural ones had motorcycles, although this figure undoubtedly rose significantly in the latter part of the decade. Fewer than one percent of urban households had telephones, while the figure for rural areas was negligible. The old and dependable bicycle could be found in 88 percent of urban households and 77 percent of rural ones. VCR and refrigerators/freezers were owned by only one percent of rural households. The figure was six to seven times higher in urban areas.
Table 36. Assets of Rural and Urban Households Compared, Thai Nguyen province, 1995

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(percent)</th>
<th>Overall</th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>Rural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wardrobe cabinet</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cupboard cabinet</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table and chairs</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plank bed</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VCR</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colour TV</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B&amp;W TV</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio-cassette player</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fridge, freezer</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electric fan</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motorcycle</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bicycle</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sewing machine</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generator</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telephone</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Education, Health, and Recreation**

Literacy was a priority for the revolutionary government, evidenced in the expansion of education figures on all fronts. In 1960, of the ‘literate’ population, nearly half had fewer than 3 years of education and only two percent over seven years. Continuing education classes were established for labourers in the late 1950s and early 1960s, educating from 5,000 to 12,000 adults per year in the early 1960s, well over 10 percent of whom were at the middle-school level. Data on education since the 1960s reveal the growth in numbers of pupils, which was particularly dramatic in the middle and upper grades. In 1939-40, there were only 2,020 pupils, all in primary school. By 1955-56, 85 percent of the 14,517 students were in primary school, while 14 percent studied at middle school, and one percent at high school.

In 1989, 10 percent of Kinh over five years had never attended school. For Tay people, the figure was 11 percent, 12 for Hoa, 14 for Nung, 17 for San Diu, 20 for San Chay, 30 for Dao, and 69 for Hmong. In the same year, seven percent of all Kinh had completed high school,
while five percent of Tay and Hoa had done so, four percent of Nung, two percent of San Diu and San Chay, and fewer than one percent of Dao and Hmong.

The proportion of the student population that is female grew from about one third in the mid-1950s to exceed 40 percent in the early 1960s to 50 percent in the early 1980s. It has remained at this rate since then. Although, in the late 1950s, fewer than 15 percent of high school students were female, this figure was balanced out by the late 1970s. The dip in school attendance in the late 1980s that is mentioned above does not seem to have affected female pupils, suggesting it was only the labour of sons that was in demand on family farms. For 1989 to 1991, the proportion of female pupils rose to 56 percent in high school. Figures are not available on the sex ratio of pupils after this date to determine if this trend continued.

Parallel to the growth in students and teachers was a rise in the number of schools, from only 51 in 1939-40 to 350 in 1998, 21 of which were high schools. The number of daycares expanded from 209 in 1960 to 8,177 in 1995 in Bac Thai and 6,549 in 1997 in Thai Nguyen. Figures from the 1970s and 1980s are not available to document the extent of daycare closures linked to decollectivization and the curbing of the role of collectives in social life.

The ratio of teachers to pupils was extremely low in the 1960s, in the order of one to 200. The situation improved dramatically by the 1970s, when the figure was about one to 28, slightly less for high school than for primary school. The latest estimates, for 1998, set the figure at one teacher per 24 pupils. Remote areas across Vietnam were reported to be short of 19,500 school teachers despite preferential salaries and benefits, and the drop-out rate in such areas remains at more than 20 percent. The shortage of technical workers is another concern, as 92 percent of the workforce has no technical training (Viet Nam News 2000/01/19: 2).

Thai Nguyen is the only city in the northern uplands boasting a university. The recently consolidated Thai Nguyen University comprises four colleges—agro-forestry, medical, industrial, and teacher-training. The city is also home to 10 professional and training colleges. While primary education is not obviously suffering from what can be read into the figures above, within higher education there does appear to be a stagnation in recruitments of new instructors, at the same time that student enrollment rates are enlarging. The number of students in universities and colleges swelled from 5,718 to 11,249 over just four years from 1995 to 1998. Another estimate, however, put the total number of students for all types of higher education—that is, including the professional and training colleges and institutes—at 40,000 (Ha Duc Toan 1997: 22). The quantifiable figures cited above on student-instructor ratios for grade school and higher education mask the variation in quality of instruction in terms of the
surge in after-school classes for those who can afford it—a new phenomenon in Vietnam that emerged with *doi moi*.

Health figures also show some reasons for concern, as the number of medical staff in absolute terms declined slightly between 1991 and 1996, indicating a fall in the number of medical staff per 1000 people from 2.4 to 2.1. As for recreation facilities, there were 270 badminton courts in Thai Nguyen in 1996, compared to just 2 basketball courts, 130 volleyball courts, and 15 soccer fields—evidence of a new craze! Of course, courtyards, sidewalks and empty streets also serve when a court is not available.

**GDP, Economic Growth, and Employment by Sector**

In Vietnam as a whole, the proportion of GDP deriving from agriculture fell from 40.5 percent in 1989 to 34.4 percent in 1994. The GDP per capita in Thai Nguyen for 1997 was 2.1 million dong (about US$ 150). The proportions of agriculture, industry-construction, and services in the province’s GDP were 59.5, 26.5 and 14.0 percent in 1991. By 1998, the corresponding figures were estimated to be 37, 32 and 31 percent. The growth rates in agriculture, industry and services in 1997 were 4.9, 7.7, and 8.6 percent, respectively, with an overall economic growth rate of 6.9 percent. Between 1995 and 1998, the value of foreign investment (joint ventures) in the province grew slightly from 60 to 70 billion dong. One joint venture with China, begun in 1994, is for building steel frameworks. China previously helped Vietnam and Thai Nguyen build its cast-iron steel factory and has emphasized this history of partnership in reestablishing economic relations for joint ventures. The value of exports—principal products being tin, peanuts, garments, paper, and mulberry silk—grew substantially between 1990 and 1996 from just US$ 3.5 to 31.8 million.

Thai Nguyen City is the arterial centre for the northern uplands, particularly the northeastern portion. In 1963 it was upgraded from town to provincial city status. The City has long been known for its industrial sector, which attracted many migrants to the province in the 1950s and 1960s. Iron and coal were discovered and exploited during the French colonial period. Thai Nguyen’s steel and pulp and paper factories are prominent features of the local economy. A recent masterplan aims to establish Song Cong Town as a concentrated industrial zone (Xuan Vinh 1997). Other industries include mineral exploitation, metallurgy, mechanics, construction material production (cement, brick, stone, sand and gravel) and light industrial processing (tea, beer, garments, ampoule, medicines, and television assembly). Thai Nguyen’s mineral resources include coal, iron ore, lime, tin, gold, lead, zinc, silver, among others, derived
from more than 200 mines and mining areas (Doan Ngoc 1997a and 1997b; Nguyen Thi Phuong Thao 1997). Thai Nguyen’s large reserves of limestone provide supplies for one million tons per year of cement production.

Tourism in Thai Nguyen is as yet underdeveloped. The most well-known tourist site in the province is an attractive resort area at Nui Coc Lake, Dai Tu district. On the other side of the province, Vo Nhai district is home to the Phuong Hoang Grotto, which contains a particular oddity—“stragglemites”—as reported in *Vietnam Business* (Minh Hang 1997: 42). In all, the provincial Department of Culture recognizes 400 historical and cultural artifacts and sites in the province of archaeological, revolutionary, and other significance (Ba Luan 1997).

The composition of the labour force by sector in Thai Nguyen has changed over the years. Between 1965 and 1995 the proportion of the population working in agriculture has increased from 75 to 87 percent of the workforce. The number of industrial workers surged from 6832 in 1960 to 17,925 just five years later, representing a change from four to nearly eight percent of the labour force. In 1995 the proportion was just 2.3 percent, with fewer than 12,000 workers in total. Construction workers comprised 12 percent of the working population in 1960—more than 20,000—but just 0.6 percent, or 3000 people, in 1996, indicative of the demands of a fast-growing industrial city 40 years ago. Commercial sector employment grew from 3,600 to 12,600 persons between 1960 and 1995. A notable increase was recorded between 1990 and 1995, with the sector growing by more than 3,000 persons and increasing slightly as a proportion of the total workforce. The hotel and restaurant sector also registered marked increases in the early 1990s, from 2,800 to 5,200 persons. Over the same period, figures fell for those employed in health and social services.

Thai Nguyen province is home to 141 state enterprises, 57 of which are under provincial management (Nguyen Thi Phuong Thao 1997). In 1965, 1990 and 1995, the state sector comprised seven, ten and six percent of the entire workforce, respectively, indicative of the growth of the private sector in the 1990s, and the concurrent cut-backs in the state sector. The number of industrial workers was similar in the mid-1960s and early 1990s. From 1990 to 1995, it then dropped from 4100 to 2900. The number employed in mining within the state sector also fell by more than half in the first half of the 1990s, while the number of forestry workers similarly plummeted from 4500 to 1800. State employees in commerce and food processing were cut back from 4600 to 2750 between 1990 to 1995, while workers in state-managed hotels and restaurants were reduced from 747 to 437. Parallel to these drops, the non-state sector has taken up much of the slack, with the number employed growing by 35 percent in the first five
years of the 1990s. At the same time, the number of miners rose from 7700 to 10,850, hotel and restaurant workers experienced an increase of 2100 to 4800 jobs, and figures for agricultural and forestry labourers (including self-employed) swelled from 331,000 to 439,000.