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Resettlement for development issues of displacement caused by hydroelectric projects in Vietnam's northern uplands

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Resettlement for Development Issues of displacement caused by hydroelectric projects in Vietnam's northern uplands

Hydroelectric projects are intended for national development. Less attention is paid to questions of local development, which may or may not arise out of such projects. The purpose of the present seminar is to consider how development on both national and local levels can be promoted by present and future hydroelectric power projects in the uplands of northwestern Vietnam.

There are three hydroelectric projects in northwestern Vietnam. The first, on the Da river in Hoa Binh province, was completed in the early 1990s. A second dam is planned for the same river, upstream in the province of Son La; construction work has not yet started; its completion is due in 2005. The third project, upstream further still, depends on the second. Large numbers of people have been and will be displaced into neighbouring areas by the flooding of affected valleys. I therefore examine the prospects for local development in terms of the resettlement of these people, who are mainly from ethnic minority groups (Thai, Yao, Hmong) of the North-West.

From a methodological point of view, I consider that it is impossible to understand the future impact of resettlement, without serious consideration of historical and ethnographic issues. I attempt such an understanding through an analysis of the following issues:

1. The perceptions and nature of resettlement
2. A perception of sustainability in the context of laws on development among the ethnic groups of the North-West
3. Dynamics of spatial occupation of new ethnic groups in the new situation
4. Influence on development and environment at the local level

In so doing, I explore some of the ways in which the resettlement of populations inhabiting reservoir areas can contribute not only to the development of the country as a whole, but to improvements in their living standards as well.

1. Perception and Nature of Resettlement

The rationale for resettlement and socio-economic development is to improve the living standards of people displaced by the floodwater. Industrialisation and modernisation at a national level is to be integrated with the transformation of the economic structure of the affected provinces. Up to now, resettlement has aimed at the stabilisation of people's livelihoods in the short term, and hoped that this stabilisation would give a knock-on impulse to subsequent development. But the organisation of resettlement has not yet taken into account the disorders which inevitably occur during a process of migration.

There are a number of reasons for these disorders:

- reactions based on the process of adaptation
- loss of equilibrium in the socio-cultural environment
- disagreements caused by the shortcomings of current administrative management, mainly by levels of administration with direct responsibility.

Resettlement for development aims at setting up a system of projects intended to minimise disorder and maximise socio-economic improvement, embracing the short and long term, according to the rationale outlined above. Planned resettlement, although in principle voluntary, does in fact respond to urgent requirements and must be carried out within a specific time frame. If we look at this in terms of ethnology - family and particularly kinships - people may have to undergo some adjustments. It thus remains an unknown quantity.

Resettlement to existing villages (*di d, n xen ghÈp*) is in fact a form of spontaneous migration. Relations of kinship are used as a form of security. But there are limits to that security. Current land holders have rights to land use and resource management, and although offer material help to the newcomers, the latter receive little more than the leftovers. Kinship may have advantages at first, but gives rise to many problems during a process of long-term settlement. This applies to people of the same ethnic group. But there are also cases of people incorporated into communities of a different ethnic group, living alongside one another within the spatial framework of a single commune. Despite the tendency to mix ethnic groups in our country, where this happens in the context of long-term settlement it does generate conflicts. This applies to

those ethnic groups who protect their own interests but is also inextricably linked to the question of environmental destruction.

Incremental migration up the valley side (*di vén*) is a form of spontaneous migration. It constitutes an experiment for ethnic groups moving out of the reservoir, an experiment for each individual household. As a result, whether people like it or not, this sort of resettlement undoubtedly occurs. When plans are made, it must be taken into account.

Naturally, migration to existing villages and migration up the valley side are phenomena of spontaneous migration. If we implement resettlement for development we cannot avoid making an appropriate amount of economic investment in this domain. Generally if migration is only for settlement purposes, its management has been passive. One might describe this sort of situation as one where someone has enough money to buy a buffalo but no money for a rope.

2. A perception of sustainability in the context of laws on development among the ethnic groups of the north-west.

Among the ethnic groups of ancient Vietnam, the Tay-Thai component has long been recognised. However, ancestors of the Thai people now living in the North-West only arrived there in the 12th and 13th centuries. Many researchers have linked this migration with the disintegration of the state of Nam Chieu. They migrated along rivers and occupied the lower parts of mountainous areas.

Yao and Hmong came to Vietnam about 300 years ago. The Yao moved in an east-west direction and occupied the middle parts of mountainous areas. Hmong people, on the other hand, moved from north to south, occupying the highest parts.

During the evolution of their co-existence with the Thai people, ethnic groups in the North-West came to recognise a law stating that the sustainability of an agricultural civilisation was rooted in the procedures of wet-rice farming. For example, Kho Mu people used to be famous for living off slash-and-burn farming, but during their co-existence with Thai people, they shifted to wet-rice. This also happened to other ethnic groups who now have to move out of the reservoir area, such as Khang, La ha, San chi, etc.

In the past, there was a policy to promote movement downwards, off the higher mountain slopes. However the results of this, as everyone knows, did not justify the work and money invested. In recent years, although we invested in mountainous areas for *in-situ* local development, ethnic groups moved down spontaneously. For a number of reasons, the state was forced to accept this, as a *fait accompli*. In spite of a general awareness of the impending need to move out of the reservoir area, people are still moving in. They put considerable pressure on the environment as well as on policy makers.

Moving out of the reservoir, seen in the context of laws of historical development, is a reversal, ie. upwards. It means moving people who have already moved down and settled in lowland areas back to higher areas. Hydro-electricity and dams also create reverse procedures, going against the natural laws of development. The migration of people originally from higher areas, who moved down, back up to the higher areas is also a reverse procedure. It inevitably requires incorporation into formally recognised categories of development. But nowadays, resettlement has only short-term aims.

When people move to higher areas, the law of sustainability of this agricultural civilisation - based as we saw above on procedures of wet-rice farming - is no longer effective. The application of this law in the higher regions may result in serious negative consequences, causing continued destruction of the forest which is turned into new wet-rice paddy fields. Moreover, the cost and investment are huge, but efficiency is negligible.

For development purposes it is necessary to have a clear perception of the limits of wet-rice farming. Investment must target non-rice agriculture and non-agriculture such as forest plantation, development of small businesses and service activities. It is necessary to effect a shift in attitudes towards changes in farming practices in order to create a new sustainability.

3. Dynamics of spatial occupation of North-West ethnic groups in the new situation

a) Dealing with spatial habitation and development

Resettlement causes three regions - higher, middle, lower - which are quite distinct from an ecological point of view, to converge on a single region: the higher parts of the mountainous areas. A process of integration inevitably occurs. To avoid negative consequences, it is necessary to ethnological issues into account.

Thai people have developed a concept of “Thai land”. It is therefore necessary for them to reconstruct their rights of ownership in management over the area they inhabit not for social stability, but for the promotion of environmental protection. The concept of “Thai land” here can be rooted at commune or district levels.

Yao people have one essential advantage in that they know how to protect the environment around their habitation area. However, they usually degrade the environment in other places where forestry service management is loose and careless. The creation of areas under direct management by Yao people has a positive effect on environmental protection, and offers a basis for sustainable development. The optimal solution for Yao people is to strengthen their rights of management and ownership over land use in areas neighbouring their place of residence. It has long been observed that Yao people’s illegal farming is carried out at quite a distance from where they live.

Hmong people are dynamic and active, which is why other local people use terms like “parachute jump” or “landing” to refer to their instant occupation of land and rapid appropriation of use rights. This is partly because Hmong people know how to mobilise, in an efficient and integrated way, the force of their kinship. Providing them with the use rights over a specific spatial area, where they can settle, will give them an opportunity to love and protect areas where they can live. They will, as a result, no longer need to carry out “parachute jumps”.

With regard to resettlement of other ethnic groups, the effects of new patterns of population distribution and the formation of areas of land with new owners have to be considered. The purpose is to promote investment for development in new land areas, focussing on the needs of each ethnic group. The new land will in the future become the home of many ethnic groups, each ethnic group with its own home. This will help them have a basis for material life, an awareness of their ethnicity, and will protect the cultural identity of their ethnic group.

The original occupation of the land by the different ethnic minorities basically took place according to their traditions brought in from elsewhere. Once there, a process of adaptation between the ethnic groups got under way. So if we want to speak of resettlement for development, we must pay attention not only to the Thai people’s concept of “Thai land”, but also the elaboration of this concept by other ethnic groups. Besides the general plans already drawn up, we need to form detailed and specifically focussed projects. Of the nearly ten thousand inhabitants to be moved, Thai people constitute more than three quarters. If this point is overlooked, Thai people, by the force of their numbers, could overwhelm other ethnic groups as the occupation of the new living space is worked out.

As far as land quality is concerned, people moving out from the reservoir area are not occupying a new land. Traditionally these are areas which have been abandoned and forgotten. Perception of this implies perception of the urgency of resettlement for development.

b) Change in means of spatial occupation

The creation of the reservoir offers inhabitants of the surrounding area a new type of space to occupy: the water space. Although Thai people have a long tradition of relations with rivers and water, this is still a new space for them, implying new ways of working, a new challenge. This also is the case for other ethnic groups. This implies that people of the North-West are preparing to occupy water space for the purposes of transportation, growing and exploiting aqua products. It also suggests that they are drawing lessons from the experience of water space occupation at the Hoa Binh reservoir.

New ways of working implies preparation. Preparation involves long and short term training, initial working budgets, aid and investment, and bank credit. It involves infrastructural development: bridges, ferries, piers, storage yards... It is necessary to step up education for local people, particularly those subject to resettlement. All these require a policy from the government with specific and serious instructions on the use of skilled labour, not only in the occupation of water space, but in also other domains as well:

road workers, forestry workers in lake-defence plantations, quarry workers, and those involved in simple services. This policy should ensure that local people and especially those subject to resettlement should be employed. But despite the fact that these are relatively simple forms of labour, people still need training and education to obtain the necessary. Job creation funds should have a more active role than that of an ordinary aid fund.

Changes in ways of working and in the occupation of space responds to the requirements of resettlement for development, providing people at every level with opportunities for immediate acquaintance with more advanced technologies. A policy requiring the employment of on-the-spot labour is urgent. In the near future, this policy, strictly implemented, would require higher levels of investment. But in the long term, only resettlement for development can provide for the necessary changes in ways of working. In case of “resettlement for resettlement”, sooner or later reservoir inhabitants will return to their traditional ways of work and continue destroying the environment.

c) Migration to newly established roads

New construction of nearly 300 kilometres of roads will draw people to settle along the roads. This phenomenon has long been a feature of Viet and Thai migratory practice. It is an inevitable dynamic of spatial occupation, and it needs early and detailed planning. Since this change relates to a transformation of the economic structure, if managed badly it would be one of the factors resulting in disorder, as mentioned above.

4. Influence on development and environment at the local level

People moved out of the reservoir area should be relocated within their current provincial boundary. This requirement, combined with the implementation of a policy requiring the employment of local labour will assist in the promotion of integrated development at the local level.

As the two sides of the reservoir belong to two different provinces, the two provinces will certainly follow the same approved environmental law. They will, however, have their own system of management and policy implementation. This is a current reality in Vietnam which is unlikely to be resolved in the near future. In addition, as the water space belongs to both provinces, the issue of water resource exploitation has become urgent and complicated. Similarly difficult are issues relating to security, defense and tourism.

The relationship of the people to their environment used to be organised according to a united and comprehensive system. It is now split between different and subjective local authorities, investment is dispersed and administrative decisions inevitably follow local practice. Provinces split and merge, creating an unstable administrative environment. This situation is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future.

Formation of economic centres has in our country usually been closely linked with the development of politico-administrative centres. The planning of Muong La and Lai Chau towns was carried out before making feasible large scale plans about related domains. Comprehensive planning is necessary for other town and urban centres. Preparation of planning maps is necessary for resettlement centres. Only then will these centres be able to fulfil the purpose of resettlement for development - the creation of employment for people resettled, in order to ensure they receive higher levels of income. Investment with a focus on infrastructure will help these centres to involve spontaneous migration in planned resettlement, on a voluntary and non-agricultural basis. Policy-making for ethnic groups requires patience and persuasion. But plans must also be accompanied by necessary preparations.

Concluding remark

Resettlement for development in the North-West is different from other regions because it does not involve an exchange of one piece of land for another, requiring instead a shift to new forms of work. Investment in infrastructural improvement alone is capable of attracting people of all ethnic groups to volunteer for participation in planned development. The poverty-reduction program needs to be implemented on a large scale, but development should be focussed and its effects should be visible. Only if they see that resettlement really is for development will be people want to get involved.