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The role of education in post *doi moi* Vietnam

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In 1986, Vietnam implemented the *doi moi* - or renovation - policy to pursue economic growth and development. Since this time, Vietnam has experienced rapid economic growth. Much of this growth has been financed by the rural population through increased agricultural production, which in turn has been associated with changes in rural education. While the economic gains have been great, shifts in policy direction and reduced government spending could also result in social disparity within the rural economy. In short, Vietnam should maintain a focus on rural education to ensure long-term economic development.

Political background

In the years after the Second Indochina War¹, the Vietnamese Communist government pursued a policy of rapid heavy industrial development, fuelled by the collectivisation of agriculture. In theory, the socialist educated rural population would base themselves in Soviet style communes with production units based on commune numbers per area farmed. In practice there was little incentive for the rural population to produce, and traditional knowledge of agricultural methods was replaced with mismanaged communes. All factors of production (land, labour and capital) were controlled by a Soviet style central committee which determined the amount of inputs and outputs required, as well as the distribution of goods. Under this system production output fell dramatically: rice production fell to 220 kilograms per capita (Pingali and Xuan 1992:698) or 2.08 tonnes per hectare (Thao 1992:14) in 1980. There was a severe shortage of food, the economy was close to ruin and the government was forced to react.

By 1986 there was a shift in government policy. At the 6th Communist Party Congress there was support for reform in economic development policy, and it was agreed that there should be less emphasis on heavy industry and a focus on the expansion and reform of agriculture. Since more than half of the population was involved in some form of agriculture, appropriate economic management was necessary. This policy was called *doi moi*. The biggest change in the rural economy was the move from collectivisation to individual/household production units. Agriculture was considered at the forefront of developing the national economy, and a high priority was given to rural investment, materials, education and skilled labour (Tri 1990:187). The result was a slight decentralisation of the rural economy, and education played an important role. Rural development was thought to provide people with a better standard of living and a greater control over their lives. While formal and non formal forms of education would play traditional roles, informal education would return the practice of individual control over the factors of production. This

would come about by maximising resources - labour, capital and land - to obtain maximum output and income.

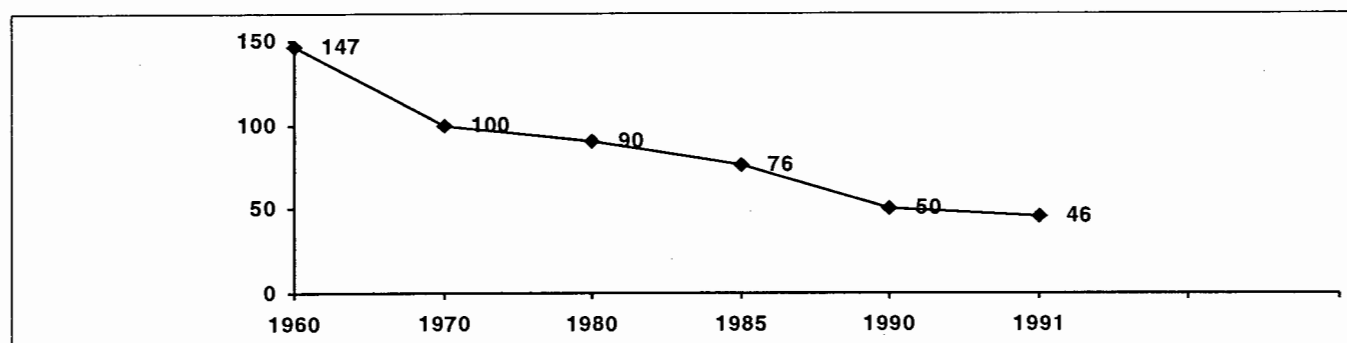
In the first stages of *doi moi*, the Vietnamese Government proposed that agricultural output increases would give the country the impetus for rapid economic growth. This growth would then stimulate other industry for national economic development. This method of economic stimuli has been successful in other parts of Asia, and is based on Rostow's theory of the Five Stages of Economic Growth (*see* Rostow 1960). Rostow claimed that there were four stages a society must pass through before achieving the age of mass consumption, or a developed society. The stage of interest here is the movement from a traditional society to the preconditions for economic takeoff, to the economic takeoff itself. One precondition for economic takeoff is a leading industry which, through increased and specialised production, will influence the rest of the economy. Through increased society savings, the economy will be able to expand to achieve takeoff, and eventually move to the next stage: the drive to technological maturity.

Vietnam's economic growth can be linked to the increased strength of its rural economy. Agricultural growth averaged 6.5 per cent between 1988 and 1992, accounting for 38.2 per cent of GDP. Vietnam achieved food self-sufficiency in 1989 and has maintained it since (Fforde and Seneque 1994). Surplus production has made Vietnam the third largest exporter of rice after Thailand and the US. This surplus production from the rural sector, driven by appropriate education and economic reform, has resulted in increased economic growth. In January 1994, the Inter-Party Conference declared that the modernisation of technology and industrialisation was the main goal for national development for the rest of the century. This would be further stimulated by growth in production (Fforde and Seneque 1994:2). The preconditions for economic takeoff had occurred, but it now appears that government resources are being directed away from the rural sector. Rural areas will therefore have to rely on education to develop their economy and raise standards of living.

Formal education

The formal education sector plays an important role in the rural development of Vietnam. It gives people the ability to read and write - skills not currently provided by non formal education structures in rural Vietnam. It ultimately gives people greater control over their lives and a greater ability to increase their standard of living. In 1945, as little as ten per cent of the Vietnamese population had some form of formal

Figure 1: Infant mortality rates per 1,000



Source: UNICEF (1994: 58)

education. Forty years later, with programmes and budgetary priorities, the government has increased the number of schools to 1.5 per commune (Que and Allen 1992:9). The literacy rate has risen to 88 per cent (UNICEF 1993:3).

Vietnam's present education system is a legacy of French colonial rule, and many of the benefits for the rural population occurred under Communist rule. It is a system which is very centralised, has a formal curriculum, is exam-based and increasingly oriented towards urban areas. The state plays a major role in deciding syllabi and methods of instruction, and its structure begins with preschool, five years of basic education (primary), three years of elementary education (lower secondary), four years of secondary general education (upper secondary) followed by college or university (DEET 1993:8).

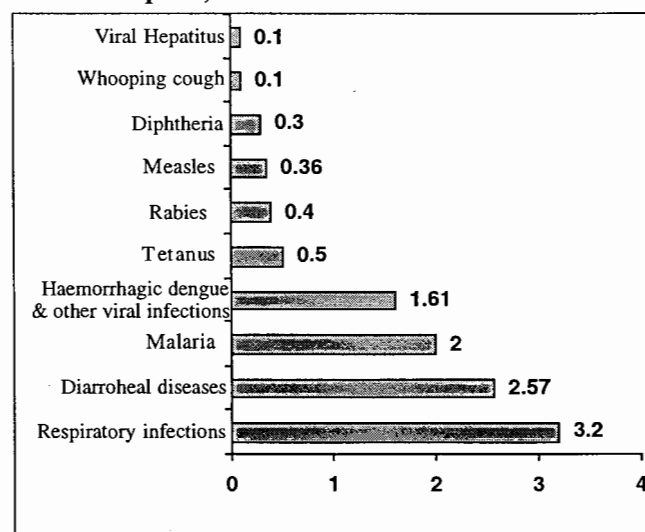
The preschool or creche childcare service has been the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and Training since 1987, and was brought about by the renovation policy. Its role has been defined as the 'health, nutritional care, physical-motor coordination and intellectual stimulation ... an articulated programme for children two to six years of age' (Fraser 1991:189). Through having a defined role, the system of creches aims to educate the child, combat malnutrition and provide health protection. Over the past 30 years there has been a drop in the infant mortality rate from 147/1,000 to 46/1,000 (Figure 1) and a reduction in the prevalence of common childhood diseases. The importance of this care and education service for the rural population has been underestimated, and the budgetary funds available have recently declined. The government increased funding to total education by 150 per cent in 1994, but much of this funding will have few flow-on effects to rural creches (UNICEF 1994:108). In real terms, after allowing for the devaluation of the Vietnamese Dong, much of the budgetary increase will be spent on salaries and government further education scholarships. The benefits for rural people at a district level are minimal.

The creche/preschool system has allowed children to grow in a formal education environment, making the transition to formal primary education easier. Activities learnt in early preschool years (eg, motor development) will not develop, or will develop at a less rapid rate, if this stage of formal

learning is missed (UNICEF 1994:97). Without a creche/preschool system learning ability will be hampered and even discourage children from continuing formal education. It will also increase future dropout rates and therefore reduce the potential to increase standards of living.

Preschool or creche care also provides many services that a poor rural population may not normally have access to, such as growth monitoring, food supplements and postnatal health services. Furthermore, many of the diseases experienced by young children are easily treated at these centres (Figure 2). The ability to provide this resource reduces infant and child mortality and promotes a healthier rural population. The largest benefit of creche/preschool care has been to free-up female adult labour. Women comprise 52 per cent of the workforce with an overall participation rate of 70 per cent (UNICEF 1994:32). The availability of a rural preschool or creche system has allowed women to shift from household and minor agricultural duties to contribute to the main agricultural process. As well as providing basic education, this resource allows greater family income generation and therefore raises the standard of living for many rural people.

Figure 2: Child mortality rates by disease category per 1,000



Source: Fraser (1991: 183)

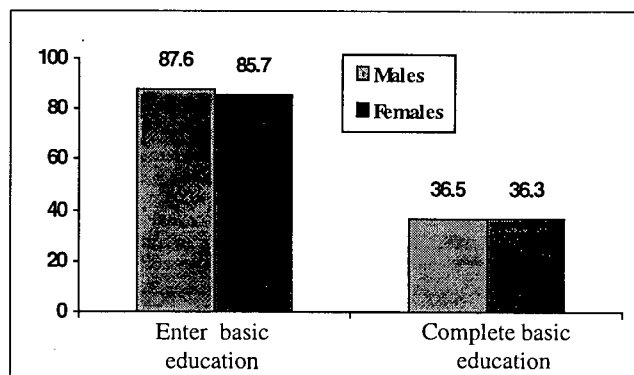
In the past few years there has been a drop in rural subsidies. This has been brought about by budgetary constraints, and contribution fees have been introduced in most rural areas. These range from 5,000 VND (US\$0.50) to ten kilograms of paddy rice per month (UNICEF 1994:95). Attracting preschool teachers has also become difficult since salaries have not kept up with the standard of living. This has meant dropping standards: less than ten per cent of rural preschool teachers have the correct qualifications, and approximately 30 per cent do not have any qualifications apart from basic school education (Fraser 1991:193). This combined with the effect of expensive fees has meant a decrease in the numbers attending preschool. Many families have reverted to traditional methods of preschool care and education, and children are left at home with a family member. While the economic cost to the rural economy cannot be judged as yet, the loss of labour will result in a reduction in family income and national economic development. Associated with this loss is the access to health facilities and the chance to establish formal learning patterns. The result will be a reduction in future economic development due to a lack of education.

The lack of budgetary expenditure has also had a big effect on other levels of rural education. In 1993 the Plenary Session of the Central Committee of Vietnam stated that 'education and training is the driving force and basic conditions for the realisation of socioeconomic objectives' and 'investment in education is considered as one of the principal directives of investment for development', but the reality in rural areas proves otherwise. Vietnam spends only two per cent of GDP on education compared to three per cent for the majority of Asia (UNICEF 1994:108).

Since *doi moi* and the opening up of the economy, some 80 per cent of teachers are now on the poverty line. Infrastructure such as roads, communications and electricity are so poor in rural areas that it is increasingly difficult to attract urban educated teachers (Fforde and Seneque 1994). There are currently 20,000 vacancies for teachers in rural areas, and to achieve the desired teacher student ratio of 1:15, 52,766 teachers are urgently needed (UNICEF 1994:102). Teaching qualifications have dropped, lesson times have been reduced, classrooms are overcrowded, there is an inappropriate rural syllabus and the government has introduced fees regardless of income (Fraser 1991; UNICEF 1993, 1994; Bannister 1993). In addition to fees, since 1990 there has also been an increase in the cost of relevant text books, materials and contributions to school funds (Que and Allen 1992). These factors, combined with a growing need for children to play a role in income generation on the family agriculture allotment, has meant high dropout rates in the lower levels of rural primary school (Figure 3).

Vietnam boasts a high literacy rate², yet in 1994, of the 9.4 million children enrolled in primary school, 1.4 million dropped out. A further million never enrolled despite compulsory basic education. The vast majority of these were in rural regions (UNICEF 1994:101). If this pattern continues, the long-term effects for rural development will be devastating.

Figure 3: Percentages entering and completing basic education



Source: Bannister (1993:50)

The lack of education will result in a rural class that will increasingly play no role in, or benefit from, future economic growth. Their role will revert back to the traditional supplier of food and payer of agricultural taxes, with little increase in standards of living. Ultimately this will reduce the Vietnamese economy's ability to reach further stages of economic growth.

Non formal education

There has been some growth in non formal education in rural Vietnam post *doi moi*, and the benefits to economic growth are long-term. Non formal education provides awareness and solutions to many problems faced in rural areas, and has a positive effect on rural standards of living. The non formal education methods that have continued during the economic transition have grown and proven valuable.

The most popular form of non formal education has been a system of 'complementary education' aimed at the 15 to 50 year old age bracket (DEET 1993:13). These work-and-study courses were originally aimed at 'national development', but are now geared to meet the needs of rural workers. Classes are often held in the evening so that rural workers can attend. Some classes are aimed specifically at rural youth or at peasants who wish to continue learning in specific areas. This method of education has many benefits, including the opportunity to teach alternate agricultural methods which improve productivity. Many different topics are covered and the willingness of rural workers to attend is growing.

The government also provides 'development programmes' and 'education development services' aimed at specific rural populations. These programmes and services increase the understanding of the complexities of rural business, and programmes have been designed in areas such as marketing, supplying produce, aquaculture, legal protection for producers and utilising available resources (Bich 1990:127). Farmer's organisations also play a part in educating the rural population by teaching people about processes now outside the state system such as agricultural credit, joint production, marketing and transport (Fforde and Seneque 1994:28). These

organisations also spread information about suitable alternate crop production, planting techniques and new agricultural technology (eg, feeding machines and pumps) (UNESCO 1989:41).

Unions play an important role in providing non formal education in rural Vietnam, and have proven popular due to the ties formed prior to *doi moi*. The Peasant Union, for example, is providing education on HIV/AIDS and ways to prevent it (UNICEF 1994). The message is taught at grassroots level and the benefits for long-term development are obvious. The Women's Union is increasingly teaching childrearing and nutrition (UNICEF 1994:23). This is particularly important since more families are returning to traditions where elderly family members look after children. These family members are unaware of dietary needs and basic healthcare (Fraser 1991:189). Though difficult to coordinate, this information is often spread in the form of a visiting troupe performing songs or theatre (Tuyet 1994:24). In rural areas where families have been devastated by war and preschool is no longer a financial option, these classes or visiting troupes provide a chance to improve family health standards. Such groups are increasingly funded by overseas aid agencies, and these direct and appropriate forms of education increase the social and economic development of families.

Informal education

Since *doi moi*, informal education (non institutional methods of passing knowledge) has had the greatest impact on rural development. This can be accounted for by the shift from government controlled, commune style agriculture to household-based production, and has resulted in the transfer of agricultural technology between family members using the best methods of agricultural production suited to a particular area. The best example of this is the return to traditional grains of rice, as opposed to the 'miracle rice' strains introduced by the central committees (Liem 1989:7). The central committees believed that the miracle rice would be better suited to Vietnam, but production prior to 1986 proved otherwise. The result has been an intensification of traditional forms of agriculture with production up to 3.21 tonnes per hectare in 1990 (Thao 1992:14). Rural acceptance of this change has stimulated rapid economic development through increased production, allowing the country to progress according to Rostow's theory.

Doi moi has meant an increase in rural production and income, but other changes are also occurring: there seems to be an increasing shift back to pre-communist traditional gender and class roles, for example. Tradition often lies in Confucianism, where men are often more dominant with set class boundaries.³ The movement to Confucian values has been reinforced with the reduction of social services in rural areas, and women are increasingly burdened with traditional roles in household chores, childcare and older forms of income generation. A Confucian principle - 'men are to be respected, women despised' - is based on the sexual division of labour, where women do all the domestic chores and involve themselves in

all processes of agricultural production (UNESCO 1989:2). Furthermore, their social position and leadership roles are also undermined by rural traditionalists. When combined with the need for income, this has resulted in the resurgence of traditional cottage industries such as handicrafts, vegetable raising and animal husbandry using methods passed on by elderly female family members (Allen 1993). This revival of traditional knowledge and education is often critical for economic survival in poor rural families. It has also meant an increase in the diversity of items found in local markets, thus increasing the number of consumer goods and the standard of living for those who can buy or barter.

The growing practice of traditional learning in rural areas has also renewed respect for the environment. While this cannot be measured in terms of economic growth, Confucianism and traditional farming methods were often the basis of permaculture in this region. The transfer of this knowledge will bring an alternative to the 'slash and burn' method popular with collective leaders.

The shift to traditional lifestyles has, however, also meant an increase in dropout rates of female children in the formal education sector. Confucianism holds that sons are more important than daughters, and investments in educating daughters is seen as wasteful since married daughters join another family. As Vietnam directs more government funds away from rural education, the costs of sending children to school increases as does the need for family labour. Families will therefore be less inclined to send their daughters to school. The gender imbalance found in rural primary schools has already reached 107 males to 100 females - a substantial change considering that under communism the ratio was even.

Female children in rural areas receive informal training, but this is primarily in traditional roles.⁴ As the cost of sending rural children to school increases, their use is rapidly becoming an economic one. Female child labour is often used for non agricultural purposes such as cooking and childcare. This knowledge is passed on from generation to generation, taking over the role played by the state. With this knowledge they contribute to the development of the family by allowing adult labour to take part in the main forms of income generation. Therefore, while women also contribute to rural economic development, it cannot currently be measured due to limited economic data. By returning to traditional social values the benefits of rural development will not be equally shared, even within the family structure. This inequality could possibly hamper Vietnam's goals to achieve a fully developed economy.

Conclusion

Vietnam is experiencing economic growth fuelled by the rural sector of the economy, and education is playing a major role in rural development. The policy of *doi moi* has allowed families to become the agricultural units of production, and this has meant appropriate methods of production are being passed on and implemented. The result has been increased

agricultural output, an increase in rural income and Vietnam is developing through production-based economic growth.

As the role of the state is replaced by the family, there has been growth in non formal and informal sectors of education. This has allowed more appropriate education sharing at a local level, and economic and social development at the grassroots. Traditional agricultural methods have quickly found their way back into rural society, and this will have development benefits by increasing income. Resuming traditional methods of information sharing also has economic and social results, including increased production output and a rise in the variety of goods available in the marketplace.

Education through appropriate information sharing is playing a vital role in Vietnam's development. The revival of traditional methods of agriculture has meant a rapid rise in the standard of living for many rural people. Yet the social traditions re-emerging could also hinder equal development. *Doi moi* has brought economic rationalism to the rural areas through a decrease in the standards of social services; schools

and health services, for example, are increasingly out of reach for rural families. Formal education is linked to the ability to improve standards of living, and decreased access to such education will lead to inequalities in economic growth. When reinforced with the revival of traditional values, female children are increasingly denied an opportunity for formal education due to economic costs.

As in other developing countries, if the cost of education increases then most rural parents will not be able to send all their children to school. Instead they become an increasing part of the agricultural process. There are short-term economic benefits of this to families. The real problem is that if Vietnam wants to sustain long-term economic development to achieve technological maturity and an age of mass consumption, then its population - including its rural population - will need to be suitably and formally educated.

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Endnotes and references

1. Commonly known as the Vietnam War, where the North Vietnamese Communist Government fought for unification against the South Vietnamese Government. This ended with defeat of the South Vietnamese Government and Vietnam's political unification in 1975.
2. The literacy rate in rural areas based on the 1989 census was 87 per cent (Bannister 1993:47). Yet one must question the definition of literate for the purpose of the census: 'A person who knew how to read and write, and understood simple sentences in his/her national or foreign language'. While this definition is vague, there were no tests applied at the time of census to determine the result (CCSC in Fraser 1991:201-2).
3. Confucian saying: 'The populace and women are ignorant, filled with bad instincts and hard to educate' (UNESCO 1989:2).
4. Authors Note - from a western view these roles are demeaning, unsatisfying, unchallenging and not allowing a person's potential to be fully realised. In rural Vietnam, it is viewed as a necessary fact of life due to economic and social conditions post *doi moi*. While I do not agree with the traditional roles given to women, I do understand the position of the rural families and the changes needed to reverse the trend.

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