

***From Policy Change to Livelihoods Strategies:  
Implications of the New Rural Development Model in Viet Nam***

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**Abstract**

Since the Doi Moi (Reform) era in 1986, rural development policies in Vietnam have followed a market-based development approach that focused on improving cumulative economic growth. However, the top-down bureaucratic structure in policy planning and implementation failed to engage the community and understand the realities of local contexts. As a result, farmers with low income and capital find it more difficult to support their livelihoods on agriculture. Rural areas continue to experience rising socio-economic inequalities, low human capital development, and lack of social infrastructures. At the same time, studies have shown that rural people have adopted response strategies to protect and maintain their livelihoods. Combining field work and a wide range of primary and secondary sources, I contend that while rural development policies are implemented in a top-down process, they could also be influenced by livelihood strategies from the bottom up. I illustrate this through the implementation of the new National Target Program on New Rural Development (NTP-NRD) in a rural commune located in southeastern Vietnam. Although rural development policies fail to deliver their promises, people in the commune manage to maintain their agricultural-based livelihoods by specializing in crops that are land and labor efficient. Their initiatives are picked up by the local government as a pillar of success for the NTP-NRD, which paved the way for new development outcomes such as technology transfer and infrastructure improvement.

Keywords: Rural Development, Agricultural Development, Policy Implementation Viet Nam

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## Introduction

After the Đổi Mới (Reform) era in 1986, Viet Nam transitioned from a centrally planned economy to a market-based economy through a series of structural reforms emphasizing export-led industrialization, foreign direct investment and privatization. The country achieved a high average GDP growth of 7.5 percent from 1991 to 2000, while poverty incidence also halved from 58.1 percent in 1992 to 28.9 in 2002 (Vo & Pham, 2004, p. 83; World Bank, n.d.). The agriculture sector in particular grew at an average GDP growth of 6.5 percent from 1989 to 1992, and Vietnam also became one of the world's top exporter for rice (Fforde & Sèneque, 1994). Viet Nam's wide strides in economic development during the 1990s became part of the "success stories" that international institutions such as the World Bank had championed and set as models for other developing nations (Rigg, 2016, p. 1).

However, the drive to achieve economic growth resulted in loss of young rural labor to urban non-farm sectors, slow progress in human development and well-being, as well as environmental deterioration. This came back to hurt economic expansion as the agricultural growth rate declined from 4.5 percent during 1996-2000 to 2.8 percent during 2011-2015 (Nguyen & Dao, 2018). The poverty rates stood disproportionately at 6 percent for urban areas and 35 percent for rural areas, which (the latter) were home to over 90 percent of the country's poor (Vo & Pham, 2004, p. 83). Inequality was also much higher within rural areas with those at the top 20th percentile earning six times as much as those in the bottom 20 percent (Vo & Pham, 2004, p. 84).

As a response to the negative side-effects and consequences of Đổi Mới, the government embarked on a different series of rural development reforms called the National Target Program on New Rural Development (NTP-NRD), or *Chương trình mục tiêu quốc gia về xây dựng nông thôn mới*. Signed into effect in 2009, the NTP-NRD is a wide-ranging program that aims to implement new rural models with modern infrastructure, sustainable production, improved living standards, and better management (Phạm, 2015; Decision No.491/QĐ-TTg: National Targets on New Rural Development, 2009). The program has been received with both appraisal and criticism after 10 years of implementation. Nevertheless, in the recent national meeting chaired by the Prime Minister in 2019, the NTP-NRD was reflected as successful, officially building grounds for nation-wide enforcement of the model in the upcoming 2021-2025 period (Thành Chung, 2019).

This paper aims to illuminate the consequences and limitations of the NTP-NRD in Viet Nam through a case study of a rural commune in a rapidly industrializing province in Viet Nam. Thạnh Hội, also known as the Turtle Island (Cù lao Rùa), is considered a "successful" model of the NRD initiative as the government and the media praised its high returns on agricultural income and new infrastructure development. Through this case study, the paper examines how government central economic planning in rural development translated into implementation at the local level in three parts. The first part provides a context of rural development policies and transformation in Viet Nam compared with regional and global trends. The second part introduces the background and contexts of agricultural and rural development in Bình Dương province and Thạnh Hội Island. The third part applies the livelihood approach and the concept of "everyday forms of peasant resistance" to understand the tension and nuances between policy enforcement and people's resistance as well as

adaptation. I conclude that in order to build better development trajectories, policymakers should take into account local social and economic realities and engage the people as well as their livelihood insights.

## **Policy Context**

### **1. Legacy of Đổi Mới**

Starting in the late 1980s, the socio-economic and institutional reforms of Đổi Mới paved the way for an increasingly large volume of foreign direct investment, improved the efficiency of state-owned enterprises, and expanded the private sectors especially in urban areas (Vo & Pham, 2004). Through Directive 100 in 1981 and Resolution 10 in 1988, households became the primary unit of agricultural production and were granted land use rights that could be transferrable on the market (Dao, 2018; Fforde & Sèneque, 1994). The policies encouraged individual households to freely produce for the market, incentivized private business activities, and expanded non-farm income opportunities (Walder, 2011, p. 254). The government's emphasis on ensuring food security through designated paddy land use and irrigation infrastructures served as a stabilizing force for the agricultural sector (Fforde & Sèneque, 1994). The dramatic policy shift and integration with the world market have helped Vietnam become a major net food exporter, particularly in rice, while also raised rural incomes and household expenditures (Taylor, 2007, p. 8).

However, rapid development in the agriculture/rural sector failed to be sustained in the decades that followed. The agricultural growth rate overall dropped from 4.2 percent per annum during 1990-1999 to 3.7 percent during 2001-2007, and only 2.6 percent during 2008-2013 (World Bank, 2016). The marketization and liberalization of the rural economy under Đổi Mới have also made poor farmers' income more insecure. According to Philip Taylor (2007), poor farmers lost income from increasing production cost (e.g., fertilizers and pesticides) as well as fluctuating crop prices; in addition, they also did not have equal access to other types of capital-intensive sectors like aquaculture or livestock. Rice continued to dominate production and exports; but rice farmers did not benefit from the low-profit margins of rice and small farm sizes. Furthermore, their ability to switch to a more diverse range of crops with a higher benefit-to-cost ratio was limited by the government's designated paddy land use policies (World Bank, 2016). Farming households became reliant on market mechanisms; but they did not have fair access to accurate information about market demands because of the mediating distributive channels that distorted market prices from source distribution to consumers (Lâm, 2019).

There were also growing income equality and social differentiation demonstrated by a higher landlessness rate and the diversification of income into non-agricultural sectors in rural areas. Viet Nam's policy focus on modernization and mechanization created social class differentiation in favor of those who could invest, lend or sell input capital in farming (Taylor, 2007, p. 11). The rural poor became landless as they were not able to participate in the land markets and had even less access to formal credits or antipoverty programs (Ravallion & van de Walle, 2008, p. 179). As agriculture became an insecure source of income, people had taken up non-farm economic activities such as wage labor in urban areas. From 2002 to 2014, farm-related income dropped by over 10 percent while income from wages increased from 30.5 percent to

42.1 percent (Benjamin et al., 2017, p. 35). The shift in rural household incomes expanded the gaps in rural-urban inequality, with 90 percent of the country's poor concentrating in rural areas (S. Scott & Truong, 2004). In addition, rural areas still lagged behind in terms of infrastructure and access to market, clean water, electricity, education and health care (Q. N. Vu, 2004). The rural environment also suffered from the excessive use of fertilizers, pesticides and other chemicals (sometimes illegal), which led to several food safety scandals in Viet Nam (Ehlert & Faltmann, 2019; Wertheim-Heck et al., 2014).

## 2. Moving on from Đổi Mới: Agricultural Restructuring Policies and the New Rural Development

Recognizing the limitations and drawbacks of Đổi Mới reforms, the Vietnamese government has implemented new agricultural restructuring and rural development policies. Decision 899/QĐ-TTg on agricultural restructuring aims to develop market-oriented agricultural production, large-scale production with cooperatives and chain linkages, as well as science and technology (Nguyen & Dao, 2018). Tied with the agricultural restructuring project is the National Targeted Program in New Rural Development (NTP-NRD), which is a more wide-ranging program that aims to improve rural living standards, infrastructure and environment. The NTP-NRD consists of 19 targets under five main groups: planning; infrastructure; economy and production; culture-society-environment; and political system (Decision No.491/QĐ-TTg: National Targets on New Rural Development, 2009). At the time of writing, the NTP-NRD has been adopted nation-wide with 5177 communes reaching the national targets and granted the “New Rural Development” (NRD) status.

The NTP-NRD has been praised for improving farmers' livelihoods while integrating rural development with urban development and environmental sustainability (OECD, 2016). After implementing the program, Viet Nam has reached near-universal coverage for basic infrastructure such as water, electricity and sanitation for both urban and rural areas. The development of secondary and tertiary cities under the form of agglomerations has also generated more off-farm employment in the industrial and service sectors for the rural population while alleviating the pressures on Hồ Chí Minh City and Hà Nội. Furthermore, Viet Nam has also adopted technological innovations, with widespread mobile coverage, low-cost logistics, as well as new dam and irrigation systems (OECD, 2016, p. 142). Rural infrastructure and transportation projects play an important role in rising rural incomes, increasing primary school completion and developing the service sector (Do & Park, 2018; Mu & Walle, 2011).

At the same time, the NTP-NRD is also criticized for its top-down approach and target-based models. The OECD stresses that the criteria are centrally developed without consultation with relevant stakeholders, accountable use of monitoring and evaluation systems or adjustment to local contexts in implementation (OECD, 2016, p. 199). Critics also point out that the program mostly focuses on developing infrastructure (due to its partnership with construction companies) instead of socio-economic measures to improve living standards such as creating employment and improving agricultural production methods (Báo Đất Việt, n.d.). The low level of community engagement is a major shortcoming as the people do not have any sense of ownership of the program mechanisms despite the program's slogan emphasis on



people's ownership. At the local level, the lack of transparency and promotion has prevented the program from achieving optimal outcomes. There are also several instances where the local government takes away social welfare payments from citizens, especially from social support funds for poor people or the disabled, without their consent to contribute to rural infrastructure projects (Dân Trí News, 2017; Đồi Sống Pháp Luật, 2014).

In late 2019, the government convened a national meeting for the NTP-NRD to be implemented on the national scale while rolling out a new flagship initiative called "One Commune One Product" (OCOP) under the NRD framework. The program encourages each commune to develop a specialty niche product but mostly supports small-to-medium enterprises as well as cooperatives. There is still no mention of smallholders, who still make up the majority of the rural economy and who already diversify household incomes through migration or land lease. This reiterates the patterns of top-down policy enforcement that do not really address the needs and situations of local people.

## **Case Study**

### **1. Thanh Hội, Bình Dương**

While conflicting criticisms continue to stand as the NTP-NRD expands, there have been few academic studies that delve on how the program is executed on the ground. To understand how government policies are implemented in specific local contexts, the paper looks at a case study of a rural commune named Thanh Hội in the southeastern province of Bình Dương. Formerly an agricultural-based region, the economy of Bình Dương expanded rapidly after Đổi Mới as the government relaxed investment policies to attract foreign direct investment (FDI). With a massive flow of FDI worth more than 20.2 billion USD, Bình Dương has developed 29 main industrial zones spanning 12,798 ha and 12 industrial clusters spanning 815 ha by 2017 (Bình Dương Statistical Office, 2018). The concentration of industrial clusters in Bình Dương has attracted a high number of migrants from other regions to find employment and other economic opportunities (Le et al., 2012).

As the economy of Bình Dương transformed, the agricultural sector has also changed to support the development of the industrial and service sectors. Agricultural modernization and mechanization make agriculture less labor-intensive, therefore reducing farm labor from 40 percent in 1997 to just 12 percent in 2010 (D. D. Vu, 2011). Young and healthy people have switched to work in the industrial and service sectors, which usually offer higher income than the agricultural sector (D. D. Vu, 2011). As a result, the majority of people involved in agriculture are aged 40 and above (D. D. Vu, 2011). Nevertheless, the agricultural net worth for the whole province continues to increase every year, from 12,877 million VND in 2001 to 15,355 million VND in 2010 (Bình Dương Statistical Office, 2017). The local government strives to improve agricultural performance by establishing three high-technology agricultural zones during 2007-2010 (D. D. Vu, 2011). Overall, the strategy is in line with the central government's official initiative in agricultural structuring and the NRD model.

Thanh Hội island-commune is one of the few areas in Bình Dương province that thrives on agriculture. It started to be recognized by the government and local media in the late 1990s as a fertile area suitable to grow vegetable crops. Back then, farmers mostly grew green onions, which became the main source of income for most households on the island (Báo Sông Bé, 1993; Mỹ Dung, 1996). The specialization of the cash crop was considered a “new economic thinking” (nếp suy nghĩ mới) in line with Đổi Mới reforms (Báo Sông Bé, 1996). Around 2010, however, farmers suffered from major harvest loss from green onions and started to switch from producing green onions to taro ear (*dọc mùng* or *bạc hà* in Vietnamese), a type of vegetable with edible leaf stalk (Báo Bình Dương, 2011). Taro ear is not labor or capital intensive, not vulnerable to diseases, and most importantly highly suitable to the soil and climate of the island (Báo Bình Dương, 2013). Nowadays it is estimated that Thanh Hội produces about 5-7 tons of taro ears, allowing each farming household to earn almost 50-60 million dong per year (Báo Bình Dương, 2013). The taro ear has become the new hero in place of green onions and has supposedly improved livelihoods of people on the island.

## 2. Implementation of NTP-NRD on Thanh Hội

Thanks to its agricultural success, Thanh Hội was selected to be a pilot site for the NTP-NRD for 2011-2015 (Báo Bình Dương, 2014). The local media often praises the local government’s pursuit of NRD for helping to transform the face of Thanh Hội. Since 2014, the commune has reached 19/19 NRD goals and 39/39 NRD targets (Báo Bình Dương, 2018b). In its effort to improve farmers’ income, the government aims to utilize the island’s strength in agriculture and focus on technology transfer to enhance productivity (Báo Bình Dương, 2014). Another strategy is to develop tourism, as the island is recognized as a National Archaeological Site thanks to its pre-historic burial remnants site, along with other folk religious temple (Báo Bình Dương, 2010).

In order to understand the reality of life on the island, I conducted field visits to Thanh Hội during the period from December 2018 to January 2019. Similar to elsewhere in the country, improving roads and infrastructure is the most important initiative. The Thanh Hội bridge, which was put into use in 2010, is a major infrastructure flagship that local media and the government claim to help facilitate mobility and trade. Upon crossing the bridge, there was a big greeting gate stating: “Thanh Hội commune – Qualified New Rural Model” (*Xã Thanh Hội – Đạt chuẩn nông thôn mới*). The island indeed had a very good system of concrete roads covering most of the island and several new residential constructions especially near the entrance of the commune, which almost resembled an urban township. During 2016-2018, the commune developed 16 rural transportation projects with a total cost of 15.4 billion VND. (Báo Bình Dương, 2018b).



*Figure 1: The greeting gate of Thanh Hội (Source: Báo Bình Dương, 2018c)*



*Figure 2: The lush rice fields*



*Figure 3: And buffaloes*



*Figure 4: Modern infrastructure: Street lights, concrete roads, and busy new constructions*

Reaching the other side of the island, I saw that people still had to take the old ferry to Bình Hòa, Đồng Nai, without a bridge to cross like the other side of the island (bordering Bình Dương). The ferry wharf was a precarious place without any sign, post or fence to mark the land border with water. I stopped to chat with a few locals who were waiting for the ferry with a lot of goods on their motorbikes. One of them was a middle-aged lady who was local to Thạnh Hội but lived on the other side of the river (across from the ferry) after she got married. The lady said that she appreciated the new bridge as it allowed locals like her to make their way back even at the middle of the night. The locals also admitted that the bridge had also brought a lot of newcomers to the island, as reflected by several house construction sites, modern brick houses and land sales ads along the road. The other was a middle-aged man who were transporting massive bags of pineapples and okras on his bike, probably to trade at a bigger wholesale market across the river.





*Figure 5: The ferry wharf with the sudden descent at the boarding area. The small blue sign to the right says: “This is a deep-water area. Beware of danger.”*



*Figure 6: One of the many new houses on Thạnh Hội*

As known by its reputation, people here indeed grow a lot of taro ear, but they also grow rice and other types of fruits and vegetables, such as pomelo. According to the President of the Thạnh Hội Commune Farmers’ Association, the region plans to develop sustainable agricultural practices by growing clean and safe produce that incorporate modern technology while provides more support to farmers (Nông nghiệp Việt Nam, 2016). An example of such initiatives is one that help growers specialize in producing crops and vegetables according to Vietnamese Good Agricultural Practices (VietGAP) standards on safe food production. In recent years, Thạnh Hội has established new agriculture cooperatives that grow VietGAP pumpkin, wintermelon and taro ear in modern greenhouses equipped with drip irrigation systems (Tân Uyên

Township Local Government, 2018; Báo Bình Dương, 2018a). As I observed, the number of greenhouses and safe-vegetable production areas were still small compared to the production areas of smallholder and individual farms. In one of the visits, I chatted with a middle-aged man who was drying out his rice grains on the side of the road. His farm mostly grew rice, with a few other fruits such as pomelos in between the rice growing seasons. Growing rice was not a lucrative business, and the man said that his rice was mostly for his own consumption as it was not profitable enough to sell on the market. He also said that his grown-up children had either moved out to work as factory workers or get married.



*Figure 7: One of the few greenhouses on the island*



*Figure 8: The infamous taro ear*





*Figure 9: And a diverse range of other crops*

Public services, health and education as well as other basic necessities on Thạnh Hội were relatively well-established for a rural commune. Both the Commune People's Committee as well as the Commune Health Station were relatively large and decent at the outside. In Thạnh Hòa hamlet, there was a street with a couple pharmacies, grocery stores and cafes. The Thạnh Hội primary school located nearby was also the only education institution on the island. Later as I left Thạnh Hội, a few older secondary school students were riding their bikes across the bridge, probably coming back home from secondary school across the rivers in the nearest town. Indeed, as the locals said earlier, only the middle-aged, elderly and young children spent most of the day on the island.



*Figure 10: The Commune's People Committee*



*Figure 11: The Thanh Hội Primary school*



*Figure 12: The only pharmacy on the island*



*Figure 13: A local shop offering basic household supplies and some grocery items*



I made a point of visiting a few archaeological and cultural sites that are reported on several news articles, one of them being the Khánh Sơn Ancient Pagoda (Khánh Sơn Cổ Tự), a two-hundred-year-old pagoda. Despite being an “ancient pagoda”, the Buddha statues and altars were all newly built and renovated in colorful paint. The surrounding area of the worshipping temple was not very well-kept with uncut grass verges, scattered with a few litter and construction waste piles. The archaeological site that uncovered remnants of an early civilization 3000 years ago did not seem to be accessible or open to the public for visits. The abundance of historic buildings and temples on the island had great potential to develop cultural tourism; however, there has not been much development despite the local government’s stated ambition.

Crossing the Thạnh Hội bridge again on my way out, I looked again at the large crane trucks mining sand for construction by the riverbank. In 1993, sand mining activities of a local construction company already created serious landslide and raised serious concerns (Báo Sông Bé, 1993). Most recently in September 2018, local people living near the area are afraid that their houses and lands will be at risk of collapsing into the river (VnExpress, 2018). Illegal sand mining activities are widespread in the whole Đồng Nai River Basin as the sand quality is considered desirable in the construction industry. Although the government has issued several bans on illegal sand mining, their efforts have not been effective, while the riverbanks continued to be damaged.



*Figure 14: Sand mining activities just below the bridge*

### From Policy Change to Livelihoods Strategies

In Thạnh Hội, people’s life choices are affected by the state’s rural development policies as well. Under Đổi Mới, local farmers choose to specialize in a particular type of cash crop (green onions before the 1990s and taro ear since the early 2000s) as a strategy to maximize production and profit instead of paddy farming. They are subject to volatile market prices of their food crops and are also reliant on the informal collectors to distribute their goods to the market. As green onions failed harvests and dropped in market value in the 1990s-2000s, farmers were forced change to a different crop. The young working-age population have mostly switched to non-farm, non-local jobs that pay higher wages or offer more exciting opportunities (Báo Bình Dương, 2013). New public infrastructure projects such as the Thạnh Hội bridge and the road systems help to transform the faces of the villages, facilitate movements

and create an impression of positive transformations. But the island only has one bridge that crosses the river to Bình Dương and none to cross to Biên Hòa city in Đồng Nai, which would grant islanders access to a major urban area with universities, large supermarkets, wholesale markets, hospitals, banks, etc. Furthermore, local people are still powerless against destructive activities of the local sand mining industry, which have threatened their living environment, without any adequate response or support from the authorities.

Nevertheless, people in Thạnh Hội show their resilience against external stress. Farmers made the initiative to test, grow, scale up certain kinds of crops (namely green onions and taro ear) which they believed were profitable and resilient to the environment. They did not switch to the new cash crops altogether but still kept some paddy fields for self- subsistence, while growing a wide range of other high-value fruit crops such as pomelo to supplement their income. Their success was taken advantage of by the media and the local government to earn NRD recognition for their province (Báo Bình Dương, 2011b, 2013). But in this way, the local initiatives have also influenced policymakers to create new projects that harness development, such as implementing technology in farming or forming new farmers' collectives. However, these official initiatives so far have not proven to be effective without full engagement of the community, while local residents continue to employ their farming strategies based on local experience and knowledge.

The tensions between policy enforcement, environmental stress and farmers' resilience could be explained through the livelihoods approach, which many scholars on rural development have used as a lens to understand how marginalized people experience and respond to structural problems. The livelihoods approach points out that rural people adopt several strategies of coping, adaptation, negotiation, and resistance against political and economic transformations. However, these strategies are only meant to get by on a daily basis or for short-term gains instead of conscious and collective acts that try to subvert the system. In other words, they are what anthropologist James Scott termed as "everyday forms of peasant resistance" - subtle forms of strategies that rural people use, not to revolutionize and change the whole system, but for short-term material goals that help them maintain their livelihoods (Scott, 1985, 1986).

"Everyday forms of resistance" are exhibited through migration, utilization of old and new rural infrastructure, and resistance against natural resource exploiters. Migration is a coping and adaptation strategy that rural people use to diversify household income sources, absorb economic shocks, and explore new opportunities. When young pupils regularly travel across the newly-built bridge to attend secondary schools, they utilize the material structure to pursue their rights to education while fulfilling the policy planners' purpose in building the bridge. Using the old and dangerous ferry to transport goods to the bigger market in Đồng Nai is also a coping strategy when public infrastructures have not satisfied their demands. People also resist when their living environment and livelihoods are threatened. For at least three decades, illegal sand mining activities along the Đồng Nai River have created major landslide and even destroyed people's houses but local authorities have consistently failed to respond and resolve the issue. Local people thus take matters into their own hands and perform the community-run night patrols, despite the danger of a violent respite by the "sand thieves" (Baomoi.com, 2018). Although their actions are not

enough to stop these lucrative activities, they have raised the issues with the media and prompted more coordinated government action. “Everyday forms of resistance” are evident in the way the locals do not challenge the system but rather try to accommodate their needs within the restrictions of public infrastructure, facilities and services as well as the incompetence of the local authorities in maintaining law and order.

## **Conclusion**

The paper has demonstrated how rural development policies are incongruent with the realities of local contexts and people’s livelihoods in Viet Nam. The NTP-NRD and its related agricultural structuring package are designed to address these social inequalities and limitations of Đổi Mới with more people-centered initiatives and emphasis on developing infrastructures as well as other public goods. However, the top-down, centralized policy-making process, the same market-oriented approach to development, and the overall lack of engagement and consultation with the community make it difficult to deliver the NTP-NRD’s desirable outcomes.

However, rural people do not idly accept these policy and economic transformations but instead adopt different strategies to protect their livelihoods. This is illustrated through the case study of Thạnh Hội, a rural commune in the rapidly industrializing and urbanizing province. In order to cope with and adapt to the changing socio-economic system that emphasizes growth and productivity via market-based mechanisms, people on Thạnh Hội have adopted different coping and adaptation strategies in order to maintain their livelihoods. Locals seek out opportunities in non-farm employment outside of the island or specialize in a high-profit vegetable crop while maintaining self-sufficiency. These strategies could be understood under the livelihoods framework and James Scott’s theory on “everyday forms of peasant resistance”, which are subtle forms of resistance that people use to achieve short-term material goals that help them maintain their livelihoods on a day-to-day basis (Scott, 1985, 1986). The strategies are not meant to subvert development policies that make them worse off; in fact, people do not express their intention of resistance in order to ensure their own safety and ability to continue surviving within the system. However, if these subtle forms of resistance occur in greater scale and frequency, they still have the power to gradually influence the authorities to accommodate and change policy directions.

This provides a scope for rural development programs in Viet Nam to improve its outcomes and step forward on its ambitious “sustainable development goals”. First, the government could learn from farmers’ initiatives and work with them to create more opportunities for growth. In fact, Viet Nam already has a small but growing alternative agriculture sector where farmers and civil society actors form agricultural cooperatives and social enterprises to help farmers get a better deal in production while consumers enjoy better-quality food. Second, rural development must take into account the local and regional dynamics that already happened after economic liberalization, such as socio-economic inequality, internal migration, the shift and diversification of rural income away from agriculture, as well as environmental issues that impact living conditions and productivity. Programs like OCOP for example could help provinces redefine their growth strategy, but it must include smallholders and consider how different groups in the community may already employ off-farm

livelihoods strategies. Third, while roads and infrastructure projects might help to facilitate trade and mobility, they fall short of delivering benefits to the rural community if there is still minimal access to education, health care, and employment opportunities. On Thanh Hội, for instance, the local government should consider building vocational training capacity and post-education opportunities in order to incentivize young locals to stay and work on the island instead of moving away.

As the NTP-NRD becomes institutionalized in Vietnam's rural development policy in 2020, it is time for the government to change their policy-making and implementation approach to a bottom-up process where the community contribute their insights for planning, participate in execution, and hold project implementers accountable for their interventions.

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