Road to Progress?

The Socio-Cultural Impact of the Ho Chi Minh Highway on the Indigenous Population in the Central Truong Son Region of Vietnam

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Executive Summary

This report describes and analyses major development trends among the ethnic minority (indigenous) population along the Central Truong Son (CTS) section of the Ho Chi Minh Highway (HCMH). This section of the highway is recently completed (between 2003--5) and traffic is still scant. The report attempts to identify the socio-economic and cultural changes that can be attributed – directly or indirectly – to the HCMH in this region. Since the highway is recently opened for traffic, our task is also to forecast likely/possible long-term consequences of the road.

The report is based on two brief field surveys (a total of 25 days, May-July, 2006), library research and a review of available statistics at district, commune and village levels. The analysis of the material also builds on previous anthropological fieldwork in the region. The area covered by the two field surveys comprises eight roadside communes in six districts (Da Krong, A Luoi, Tay Giang, Nam Giang, Phuoc Son and Dak Glei) in the four provinces of Quang Tri, Thua Thien Hue, Quang Nam and Kontum.

The HCMH essentially follows the networks of trails and transport roads established by the North Vietnamese army during the American-Vietnam War, and known as the Ho Chi Minh trail. It runs, for long sections, through remote and inhospitable forests and highlands along Vietnam’s borders with Laos and Cambodia. These areas are largely inhabited by ethnic minority peoples. One important aim of the HCMH is thus to open up this inaccessible part of the national territory, and contribute to the integration of the ethnic minority populations into mainstream Vietnamese economy and society.

Accordingly, the HCMH project was conceived as a socio-economic and political as well as an infrastructural project; it is part and parcel of Vietnam’s ambitious development program at large. It is regarded as a key-project in the economic renovation efforts and a spearhead in the country’s ambitious poverty-reduction strategy. We have therefore, in this report, adopted a broad and inclusive perspective on the socio-cultural impact of the HCMH; thus we examine both the direct (immediate) effects of the HCMH – those directly associated with the highway \textit{per se} – and indirect effects caused by the general policies of which the highway project is a part and prominent expression. Indeed, we find it practically impossible and analytically unproductive/meaningless to separate these two impact dimensions.

\textit{Development interventions from an indigenous point of view}

A general contention of the report is that the HCMH fundamentally facilitates and speeds up the implementation of Vietnam’s national development policies and programs. Most of the programs and policies affecting the rural, indigenous population in the CTS region were initiated during or immediately after the American-Vietnam War, and later intensified with the renovation policy from the late 1980s onwards. Generally speaking, these policies have been, and continue to be, strongly centralised and of a “one-size-fit-all” character with little regard for local or regional variation in environmental and socio-cultural conditions.

The impact of these policies – and of the HCMH – is profound and locally experienced as both positive and negative. This ambivalent perception seems well grounded in the light of our
findings; some effects are rather incontrovertibly positive, others are negative or, at best, ambiguous – and experienced as such by the indigenous population. In fact, one of our principal contentions in this report is that there are few facts regarding the impact of development and poverty-reduction efforts in general and the HCMH project in particular that cannot be seen as either positive or negative depending on perspective and point of view.

In this report, when objective assessment is impractical, we present the explicit point of view of the indigenous population or a view that places indigenous culture and society at the centre, by either presenting the voiced opinion of local interlocutors or by subjecting particular issues to close analysis in terms of local conditions and the specific premises of the indigenous socio-cultural context. We consider such a perspective important since dominant development thinking in Vietnam is clearly biased towards a Kinh (majority) point of view which in many fundamental regards does not reflect – or even respect – local, indigenous interests and concerns.

Thus, what is generally seen by government officials as progress or positive effects of a particular policy or intervention may, from an indigenous point of view, be perceived as a change for the worse. This is the case, for example, with the policies inhibiting shifting cultivation and hunting, and the policy of selective preservation which regulate the promotion or suppression of certain indigenous institutions and traditions.

Our study indicates that there is a number of developments in the CTS region which are highly questionable in socio-economic, cultural and environmental terms: the heavy emphasis on transforming local subsistence economies into market-oriented production systems have boosted illegal, commercial hunting and logging with obvious environmentally detrimental consequences, caused overexploitation of agricultural land and increasing economic disparities within local communities as well as between rural communities and urban centres and between the indigenous and the Kinh population in the region.

**Indigenous culture in the Central Truong Son region**

The CTS section of the HCMH runs through a unique natural environment (documented in a series of WWF reports), increasingly receiving attention from the national government and the international community. The study region is also the home of four main indigenous, ethno-linguistic groups: the Bru-Van Kieu, Ta Oi, Katu and Gie-Trieng with an approximate total population of some 134 000 people. These groups are all culturally and linguistically related; they are still largely dependent for their living on shifting cultivation of upland rice (despite the government’s effort to reduce the practice), hunting, fishing and gathering of various wild forest products. Today their sustenance is supplemented by wet-rice cultivation (in some but not all localities), cash-crop production (principally cassava) and other small-scale, income-generating activities (hunting for sale, rattan and honey collection, industrial-tree cropping, livestock rearing, etc).

Many traditional social and religious practices are still in place, more so in remote areas away from the HCMH than in roadside communities and localities in the vicinity of towns and urban centres. The persistence of some of these indigenous cultural practices are seen by the Kinh population and government officials as vestiges of a “primitive” and “backward” way of life, obstructing current modernisation efforts.
We take a different view; indigenous culture in the CTS region is rich and valuable, and constitutes a significant contribution to the nation’s diverse cultural legacy. Analysis of the available ethnographic information on CTS societies (and indigenous societies in general) suggests that indigenous culture form an interconnected system of norms, values and practices, where every part contributes to the meaningfulness of the whole. Livelihood practices are invested with religious value, and ritual performances are locally regarded as essential aspects of everyday subsistence activities and, thus, for human wellbeing. Many seemingly irrational beliefs and practices can, furthermore, be shown to encode rational environmental knowledge, and to contribute to social cohesion and a sense of existential security.

Indigenous culture is currently under heavy pressure, both from the increasing, spontaneous contact with the Kinh majority population and from deliberate development interventions towards modernisation and industrialisation (considerably accelerated by the HCMH). The resulting progressive erosion of indigenous culture represents a significant loss of cultural value and of the country’s cultural legacy at large; it is also generally experienced as a loss by local people, and is, in our view, likely to have a number of indirect and unintended negative effects such as progressive social disintegration (loss of community cohesion), cultural poverty (self-deprecation and loss of collective self-esteem) and the emergence of so-called social evils.

Policy context

The principal policies impacting the indigenous population in the CTS region (and in Vietnam in general) over the past three decades are: The Fixed Cultivation and Settlement (Sedentarisation) Program, the cultural policy of Selective Preservation, the Land Reform and the Comprehensive Poverty Reduction and Growth Strategy (CPRGS). The sedentarisation program is, since the 1970s, responsible for the resettlement of the disperse and semi-mobile indigenous population in large, permanent and nucleated villages near roads and markets; at the same time the program has reduced and restricted shifting cultivation in favour of intensive wet-rice and permanent crop cultivation. Since 2002, this program falls under the CPRGS.

The policy of selective preservation has persistently sought to eradicate what is officially considered backward customs and superstitions with a view to promote the socialist transformation and modernisation of society. The land reform of 1993 has allocated tenure rights to households and local (ethnic minority) communities but excludes ownership rights in fallow land and does not recognise shifting cultivation as a legitimate form of land use. The CPRGS is, essentially, a formalisation of the socio-economic renovation policy (doi moi), and aims for the modernisation of Vietnamese society at large through market economy and industrialisation. For the rural population in general it translates as intensification and commercialisation of agriculture, increased emphasis on cash-crop production and agro-forestry projects (such as industrial-tree plantation etc). The CPRGS also comprises strong social and infra-structural development components such as improved provision and coverage of basic infra-structural and social services: roads, markets, hospitals and health stations, schools and education and the like – the universal modernisation package. The HCMH project is a manifestation of this strategy.

Together, these policies and programs have largely shaped the present reality of the indigenous communities in the CTS region; the HCMH essentially facilitates and significantly accelerates the implementation of these policies and programs.
Principal findings: costs and benefits

The HCMH has had a considerable impact on the CTS region in general: it has brought a number of secondary infrastructural developments (byroads, irrigation projects, hydro-power projects), created a number of urban centres along the road, enabled and encouraged immigration of (principally Kinh) lowlanders, including small-scale entrepreneurs, government officials and civil servants in the region and, as noted, considerably facilitated the implementation of the national development and poverty-reduction strategy (by increasing and improving social services of almost every kind). In short, the HCMH has improved the outreach of the government’s development and modernisation efforts. In the conventional development language, these are all straight-forward benefits of the development process. However, many of these “benefits” come with a considerable social, economic or cultural “cost”.

Improved infrastructural developments have ensured that virtually all communes along the highway now have electricity, schools, a health clinic and improved (clean) water supply. The HCMH has greatly facilitated commerce, trade and transport; access to schools, hospitals, shops and markets have increased. Significant achievements in education, health care and housing over the past few years are likely to be (to a considerable extent) a result of the completion of the HCMH. The highway has also increased the willingness of teachers, government officials, cadres and other civil servants to work and stay in the region on a permanent basis.

The HCMH has accelerated the penetration of Kinh entrepreneurs into the region. The road is seen by Kinh entrepreneurs as an economic resource exploited in various ways – in the form of roadside shops and business establishments, itinerant trading and other forms of trade with the indigenous population; land along the road is increasingly acquired by Kinh entrepreneurs in exchange for cash, and put to profitable use, etc. This Kinh penetration into ethnic minority areas leads to an increased social, economic and cultural interaction between the two populations. The indigenous people largely see this interaction as beneficial but also states that, so far, it has not improved their economic situation nor, to any significant degree, their material living conditions. In fact, our study suggests that, in economic terms, the HCMH mainly benefits the Kinh population; this is also the perception of the indigenous population.

Moreover, the educational system is poorly adapted to local – indigenous – conditions, and most teachers are still Kinh people. On the whole, the Kinh population have little understanding of indigenous culture and society, and misconceptions, prejudices and pejorative judgements are common. Through the intensified contact with the Kinh population and the increased school attendance, there is a real risk that such prejudices and pejorative views are spread and reproduced among the indigenous population. The educational system in many respects serves as an instrument of Vietnamisation (Kinhisation); in effect, this means that indigenous pupils “learn” to disregard and look down upon their own cultural traditions, and to replace them with concepts and values of the majority population.

A major change in the indigenous societies along the road in the past decade is the rapid commercialisation of the local economy – the transformation of the subsistence-oriented indigenous livelihood system into a market-oriented system increasingly integrated into the national economy. This is a process which started well before the HCMH project but one which have been conspicuously quickened by the new highway. Access to markets has improved notoriously. It is easier for the roadside indigenous population to sell products and buy consumer goods. The state has encouraged and subsidised cash-crop production – mainly cassava, maize,
beans and surplus rice, as well as garden produce and various kinds of tree crops (including cinnamon). The principal cash-crop in the study area is cassava.

However, the monetary return from cash-crop production is, on the whole, modest. Cash-crop production per se has not implied a significant increase in household income for most indigenous households in the area. The bulk of the cash-flow in the study communes is generated by sale of wild animals (meat, medicine), timber, rattan and other non-timber products. The cash earned by indigenous households appears to be less spent on food than on expensive consumer goods (such as TV sets and motorbikes) as well as on alcohol and tobacco; considerable amounts are also invested in housing and house improvements (Kinh-style houses are today rapidly replacing traditional houses – not necessarily because they are “better” but because they are invested with commanding prestige and connotations of “modernity”).

While the advance of the market economy in the study area does not seem to translate into an improved food situation (at least not in any evident way), the change is conspicuously manifest in the growing presence of petty consumer goods (clothes, cigarettes, alcohol…), expensive prestige objects (TV sets, motor-bikes…) and “modern” (Kinh-style) housing in the local communities. But this growing demand for – and circulation of – money and consumer goods in the indigenous communities come with considerable social, cultural and environmental costs: illegal hunting and logging has increased markedly over the past decade (and most significantly with the completion of the HCMH); cash-crop cultivation largely expands on swidden land at the expense of progressive soil degradation; traditional social and cultural practices (such as communal ritual feasting) are eroding and disappearing -- and, with them, social cohesion and traditional social controls.

Commercial hunting and fishing (along with the concentration of the previously dispersed population into permanent villages near roads and market towns) have caused notable depletion of game and fish resources in the region. As a result, the consumption of game and fish has, overall, decreased over the past decades. Very few households have the money to compensate this “protein loss” by purchasing meat and fish from the market. Livestock rearing and fish breeding are of very modest scale among the indigenous households and largely unsuccessful from a commercial (and nutritional) point of view.

To these sombre observations should be added the fact that the traditional system of rotational shifting cultivation of upland rice, which still provides the basis for the indigenous food system, is under heavy pressure as a result of the government’s efforts to reduce and eventually abolish it. Thus, fallow cycles are today reduced to five years or less (as compared to 10-15 years in the past); clearing of forest older than five years is not allowed; the land area under shifting cultivation is not allowed to expand, implying that much of the former swidden land is converted into land under commercial cassava production; and, according to current land legislation, ownership of fallow land is lost after three years. All these government rules and restrictions directed against shifting cultivation have, in effect, turned the traditional, long-cycle system of rotational shifting cultivation into an abortive, short-cycle and progressively unproductive and unsustainable system.

To make the situation worse, the government’s efforts to encourage and expand intensive wet-rice cultivation (as a replacement for shifting cultivation) are, if not a failure, greatly insufficient. There is simply not enough suitable land, nor sufficient water resources, for an adequate development of wet-rice cultivation in the region as a whole (though, in some localities, conditions are beneficial for this kind of cultivation). All in all, the indigenous food situation is, at present, far from encouraging, and there are strong indications that local food security is
deteriorating as a result of the progressive commercialisation and monetarisation of the indigenous livelihood systems. There are also indications that economic differences are growing within indigenous communities as well as between remote villages and roadside villages closer to urban centres. While some households manage to take advantage of new economic opportunities, the large majority do not and are likely to descend into deepening poverty as traditional livelihood practices are increasingly circumscribed by current development policies and forest resources either depleted or legally wrested from their control.

**Cultural erosion**

Indigenous culture and society are under strong pressure from the government’s modernisation and poverty-reduction policies. Though the Vietnamese constitution (of 1991) protects the cultural rights of the country’s ethnic minorities, the policy of selective cultural preservation implies a systematic debilitation of ethnic minority cultures. Indigenous cultural traditions in the CTS region are still vital in many localities; aesthetic expressions, social and religious institutions, and livelihood practices are here all closely interwoven. The policy of selective preservation tears this unity apart by encouraging certain, mostly aesthetic, traditions (songs, dances, ethnic music and the like) while repressing others on the (largely ethnocentric) grounds that they are “backward” (shifting cultivation, marriage and family practices), “superstitious” (religious and ritual practices) and generally incompatible with socialist development and modernisation.

Perhaps the most serious threat to indigenous socio-cultural institutions is the rapid transformation of their livelihood system as a result of the Fixed Cultivation and Sedentarisation Program and current modernisation and poverty-reduction efforts. Much of the indigenous religious life centred on the two pillars of the traditional livelihood system – shifting cultivation of upland rice and hunting. Both activities were accompanied by a series of collective rituals, one (rice rituals) centred on women’s work and role in society, the other (hunting rituals) on men’s; both categories of rituals contributed to forge the gender roles and social identity of each ethnic group, and both contributed to create a sense of community and social cohesion at the village level. Both of these ritual activities are now rapidly declining as a result of the repression and decline of shifting cultivation and the severe restriction of local hunting. The decrease in significance of communal hunting rituals has, if not spurred, at least allowed an increase in illegal, commercial hunting which is totally against traditional norms and ritual regulations; commercial hunting could only evolve in an environment of eroding religious traditions and weakening social controls.

The strong emphasis on modernisation and economic growth in national development and poverty-reduction policies work against indigenous values and social institutions. Indigenous culture and society in the CTS region centre on a domestic mode of production, oriented towards satisfaction of the subsistence needs of the household and the wellbeing of the local community; wellbeing is locally perceived in religious as much as economic-material terms – the capacity to lead a rewarding life in terms of customary norms and practices (a life centred on upland rice cultivation and its accompanying rituals, hunting and communal feasting, marriage and the exchange of marriage gifts according to ancient custom, and the performance of the proper funerary rituals to enlist the protection of the ancestors). Thus, from the indigenous point of view, wellbeing involves the regular performance of rituals – divinations, food offerings and animal sacrifices – directed towards the many spirits inhabiting the indigenous world: ancestors, the rice Mother, the Guardian of Forest Animals etc.
Policies which ignore these spiritual aspects of wellbeing and focus narrowly on material benefits and economic growth tend to devalue and delegitimize indigenous culture in toto. The promotion of education, health, “modern” housing and infra-structural developments all form part of the same development-and-modernisation package in which local cultural values have no place or role. As far as the indigenous population is concerned, current development policies and poverty-reduction measures tend to augment rather than diminish social cleavages, cultural disintegration and a sense of loss and disorientation which, in turn, may open the way for social evils such as alcoholism, criminality and prostitution – evils which are presently beginning to be felt in the most urbanized (modernised) communities along the road. The HCMH contributes significantly to this process of cultural erosion by facilitating the government’s modernisation policies and the spread of Kinh values (through Kinh immigration, urban expansions, formal education etc) at the expense of indigenous cultural values and traditions.

However, the government has also taken important and constructive steps to counteract the process of cultural erosion among the indigenous groups in the CTS region; paramount of these positive initiatives is the promotion of traditional Community Houses in the villages. These houses, and the communal rituals associated with them, played – and still play – an important role in indigenous communities and are essential for community cohesion and collective self-appreciation. The government also supports the preservation of indigenous musical traditions (most notably the gong tradition in the Central Highlands, recently approved as a cultural world heritage), and there are signs that traditional funerary houses (tomb houses) and village layouts are increasingly respected as cultural legacies of the CTS region.

However, if the spiritual beliefs and ritual practices underpinning these cultural forms and features are ignored or discredited (which is unfortunately the case), then the preservation of the form while ignoring its cultural content will serve little purpose other than remind people of a glorious but vanishing past. On the negative side, this report has also documented the rapid loss of local architectural traditions as a direct result of misconceived and misdirected government interventions under Program 134 – aiming at improved housing but resulting in the destruction of a significant cultural legacy (i.e. indigenous house-building traditions).

**Misconceptions and misguided policies**

On the basis of the evidence presented in the report we conclude that the national poverty-reduction strategy and the notion of culture underpinning the policy of selective cultural preservation are both seriously flawed when applied to indigenous populations.

Thus, the standardised, income-based indicators of poverty by definition disfavour and devalue ethnic minority societies since indigenous livelihood systems are fundamentally organised on a non-monetary, subsistence basis. A strict application of the national poverty-reduction strategy seriously compromises indigenous societies, and threatens to increase rather than reduce poverty if measured in terms of food security and nutritional standards. On this account, decreasing poverty rates in official statistics only indicate increasing access to money and consumer goods, not wellbeing in any integral sense. In effect, current poverty measurements indicate the degree of modernisation and Kinhisation (Vietnamisation) of the indigenous population rather than real poverty or wellbeing.
Similarly, the narrow, aesthetic notion of culture favoured by the Vietnamese government and expressed in national cultural policies – particularly the policy of selective preservation – is singularly misplaced in the context of indigenous culture and society and largely destructive in its consequences. The policy of selective preservation rips the tightly woven fabric of indigenous culture apart, and turns it into an assemblage of disconnected pieces and traits to be either discarded and repressed, or refined for public consumption and display.

These policies originate in and are sustained by a widespread ignorance about, and pejorative attitude towards, the country’s ethnic minority population. This ignorance and pejorative attitude are present at all levels of the Vietnamese society; at the national level they are manifest in cultural and socio-economic development policies, not least in the comprehensive poverty-reduction and growth strategy (CPRGS). Ethnic minority peoples are seen and depicted as backward, uneducated and unable, on their own accord, to “catch up” with the more developed majority population. These prejudices towards the ethnic minorities generate policies that are paternalistic and patronising.

Three such widespread pejorative misconceptions have particularly serious implications for indigenous living conditions and wellbeing: the idea that shifting cultivation is primitive, unproductive and environmentally destructive; the notion that indigenous peoples, because of their primitive livelihood practices, are living in hunger and misery; and the view that indigenous people “stick” to their backward practices because they are ignorant, superstitious and irrational – “because they don’t know better”. These views are typical not only for the Kinh majority (including government officials and policy makers) but also for international development specialists, and they largely justify the sedentarisation program, the policy of selective preservation and the national poverty-reduction strategy at large. Not only does our report repudiate these misconceptions but it also shows that the policies that follow from them have seriously negative socio-economic, cultural and environmental consequences.

(1) Owing to the idea that shifting cultivation is primitive, wasteful and destructive, the government refuse to allow shifting cultivators to practice their traditional agro-economic system to its full advantage and extent, and to legalise customary land rights (including rights in fallow land). As a result, the agricultural system is (as noted above) gravely inhibited, yields falling, and soils progressively exhausted, causing increasing hardships for the indigenous population. The report presents evidence to the effect that the traditional system of rotational shifting cultivation, contrary to the official and majority view, was productive, sustainable and eminently adapted to the environmental conditions in the region.

(2) The notion that indigenous population generally live in hunger and misery does not stand up to scrutiny. The only sensible conclusion one can draw concerning indigenous living conditions from the available gross poverty figures is that the livelihood situation in indigenous communities differs from that of rural and urban majority populations and, thus, does not fit the standardised, majority view of poverty and wellbeing: In other words; indigenous people are not really poor or hungry but simply live differently. The available evidence on the indigenous food situation in the region suggests that it was better in the past than in the present, and that it tends to be superior in more remote localities (less affected by current modernisation policies) than in localities along the road and near urban centres. Thus, the commercialisation of the local economy propelled by government policies appears to debilitate rather than strengthen local food security, and to increase the pressure on the land and its living resources to levels which are unsustainable in the long run.
The idea that indigenous people stick to outdated practices out of ignorance about more rational alternatives is similarly flawed and unsustained by evidence; not only does this notion ignore the cultural rationality informing indigenous life-ways (in which spiritual and moral gains are as important as practical and material ones) but also their economic realities. Today, as in the past, indigenous households – just as those of the immigrated Kinh entrepreneurs – follow the simple logic of engaging in economic activities in which they have a “comparative advantage”. Thus, the Kinh newcomers, who have limited access to, and knowledge about, the land into which they have moved, engage principally in trading and business, not farming. The indigenous population, on the other hand, unable to compete with Kinh entrepreneurs in the economic niches adopted by the latter, continue to engage in the activities in which they are most skilled – shifting cultivation, hunting and forest extraction. They “stick” to these activities out of rational economic choice, and they will continue to do so until new opportunities present themselves that allow them to build on and develop their particular skills.

Unless fundamental misconceptions such as these are corrected, there are few prospects for a better life for the indigenous population in the CTS region. Current centralised development policies are culturally insensitive and, on the whole, unable to attend to the needs and requirements of the indigenous population. Evidence from upland Southeast Asia as a whole suggests that policies geared towards the rapid transformation of traditional subsistence economies into modernised market economies (including the development of commercial agro-forestry and state forest enterprises), large-scale infrastructural developments, and the immigration of outsiders into regions originally inhabited by indigenous minority populations, are likely to have serious, destructive environmental consequences. In this perspective, the resilience of local cultural traditions and the pragmatic flexibility at district and commune level in implementing otherwise rigid national development policies must be seen as positive, even hopeful, signs in an otherwise rather bleak development scenario.

**Recommendations**

The above findings, and the conclusions drawn from them, suggest a number of general and specific recommendations (elaborated at the end of the report):

- National development plans and policies would benefit from progressive decentralisation, local governance should be strengthened, and policies show greater sensitivity to culture in general and indigenous culture in particular.

- Poverty-reduction policies need to pay greater attention to specific, local socio-cultural and economic conditions, and the poverty concept underpinning such policies should be reformulated so as to better capture the indigenous reality in its manifold aspects.

- Land legislation and agricultural and forest policies need to be adjusted to permit sustainable forms of shifting cultivation as a basis for indigenous livelihood. Customary land laws should be recognised. In practice, it should suffice to strengthen the villages’ *communal* land rights over the swidden land the communities need for their subsistence (including fallow land). The customary land tenure system should not be discouraged because at present it is the most viable system for managing the land usage and minimise land conflicts and environmental degradation. The Government of Vietnam does not have
the resources necessary for monitoring the land usage of indigenous peoples the same way it can monitor land use among lowlanders/urban citizens. Unclear property rights will benefit no-one; causing land conflicts and environmental degradation (through over-exploitation of resources). Thus, it is our contention that the customary land tenure system should not be discarded but rather be given some official recognition.

- Agricultural development efforts should start from the needs and skills – the comparative advantages – of the indigenous population, and be compatible with local values and socio-cultural conditions (a development towards “composite swidden systems” would be an instructive example).
- Legal recognition of small-scale, subsistence hunting-and-trapping should be considered (with appropriate monitoring and controls) in view of its important place in indigenous culture and resource-use systems.
- Cultural policies should be adjusted so as to take proper account of the specific character of indigenous culture and its local and ethnic variety; when dealing with indigenous people, the narrow, aesthetic notion of culture which underpins national cultural policies should be replaced with a broader, integral concept of culture – culture as a total way of life – where all aspects of society are seen as interconnected and constitutive of a population’s cultural identity.
- The policy of selective cultural preservation should be down-played in favour of such a broad and integral notion of culture; cultural policies should show greater lenience towards indigenous cultural expressions, particularly spiritual beliefs and rituals because they are experienced as essential for local wellbeing and social (ethnic) identity.
- Every effort should be made to improve the knowledge and reduce the widespread prejudices about indigenous peoples, and to promote their cultural rights in accordance with the Vietnamese constitution; the equal value of all ethnic and cultural traditions should be recognised, and the vision of a multi-ethnic and pluri-cultural nation enshrined in the constitution should be turned into practice.

In order to substantiate and facilitate the implementation of these recommendations, the report suggests:

- That **systematic, in-depth studies** be carried out on indigenous culture, livelihood and social institutions (with particular focus on local conceptions of wellbeing, indigenous resource-use systems, and the effects of current socio-economic changes) in order to expand and deepen knowledge about the indigenous livelihood situation in its proper socio-cultural context; such studies would serve as a basis for culture-sensitive development efforts with a view to developing economic activities compatible with indigenous conditions and skills.
- That **a separate department** (of indigenous affairs) be established at provincial and/or district level (in provinces and districts with important indigenous populations) to be specifically dedicated to adapt, integrate and coordinate all policies concerning the indigenous population, and with the mandate to ensure that national policies are properly adjusted to local/indigenous conditions. The personnel of this department should have professional competence in anthropology, agronomy/forestry and biology,
and should work in close cooperation with the district administration as well as commune
and village leaders. Research and monitoring should be an important responsibility of the
proposed department; one of its task could be to commission (or execute) and coordinate
the above mentioned studies.

- That regular workshops (courses/seminars) be instituted on province and district levels,
directed by trained anthropologists and aimed at enhancing knowledge and understanding
of indigenous culture and tackling prevalent prejudices and pejorative attitudes towards
indigenous peoples. These workshops should be compulsory for provincial and district
government staff; they could be coordinated and administered by the department of
indigenous affairs proposed above.

- That “special cultural zones” be created in indigenous areas (perhaps in areas judged to
be of special cultural value, or where the indigenous cultural heritage is seriously
threatened – as along parts of the HCMH); the purpose of such zones would be to provide
particularly favourable conditions for adapting and readjusting national policies to the
specific conditions of local indigenous communities. In such zones, special consideration
for customary practices and local cultural institutions should be shown, and new and
innovative development initiatives could be tested on the basis of careful studies of local
socio-cultural and environmental conditions. Carefully monitored experiments of cultural
tourism could also be tried out as a source of revenue for local communities.

1. The Study

The Truong Son mountain range comprises an area of significant biodiversity importance in
Vietnam, being identified by WWF as one of the most important ecoregions in a global
assessment. The area is home to unique and endangered species such as the saola, doucs, tiger
and elephant. The landscape also has immense cultural importance for numerous indigenous
people, who lead a lifestyle closely associated with natural resources.

The Ho Chi Minh highway (HCMH) runs through much of the western edge of the Central
Truong Son area, and construction is nearly completed. However, this road has had serious
impacts during its construction and will inevitably have longer term impacts as areas of forest
become more accessible and the cumulative impacts of long-term erosion on aquatic resources
take hold. The effects on the culture and society of the indigenous ethnic groups along the road
are also likely to be considerable. WWF Indochina is therefore carrying out a series studies to
assess the environmental, socio-economic and cultural impacts of the HCMH in the four
provinces of Quang Tri, Thua Thien Hue, Quang Nam and Kon Tum in Central Vietnam.

The present study aims to assess the social, economic and cultural impact of the HCMH on the
communities along the road in the four provinces mentioned (the project area). According to the
terms of reference “[r]ecommendations for ensuring the cultural landscape is maintained will be
made, and culturally significant areas, customs and societies identified.” The expected outcome is
a series of recommendations for “reducing impacts and maintaining the cultural diversity and
heritage of the Central Truong Son region.
1.1. Point of departure

Box 1 below, (adapted from Talbott 1995), serves as a preliminary framework for exploring the effects of the HCMH. Of great concern for the present study are the possible benefits accruing to poverty reduction (under the label Reduce Poverty in the left-hand column) and the possible socio-cultural costs (under the label Social in the right-hand column). We will thus try to assess improvements in access to services and goods, enhanced employment opportunities and the effects of increased access to market. However, without ignoring the positive effects of the road, our emphasis will be on the (actual and potential) disruptive socio-cultural effects of the increasing accessibility of the study region and the rapid integration of the indigenous communities in the expanding market economy. As will be shown, these negative effects include deteriorating food security (with possible negative effects on nutritional standards), increased competition for resources, growing social inequalities, conflicts over land, emerging social evils and the erosion of traditional social and cultural institutions.

This focus on the potentially adverse effects of the road is justified by the fact that they are generally silenced in national media and glossed over rather lightly in policy documents and reports. Hence, very little is known about the social and cultural consequences of the HCMH, particularly as regards the indigenous communities in the region.

**Box 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefits</th>
<th>Costs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Facilitate Exchange</strong></td>
<td><strong>Environmental</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* urban-urban</td>
<td>* landslides</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* urban-rural</td>
<td>* erosion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* rural-rural</td>
<td>* siltation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* hydrological</td>
<td>* hydrological</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reduce Transport Costs</strong></td>
<td><strong>Social</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* increase efficiency</td>
<td>* threats to wildlife and biodiversity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* strengthen market forces</td>
<td>* uncontrolled pressure on resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* expand production</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reduce Poverty</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* access to services/goods</td>
<td>* cultural disruption</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* provide employment</td>
<td>* follow-on migration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* access to market/credit</td>
<td>* open access to land</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Environmental</strong></td>
<td>* public health issues (pollution, disease)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* natural resource management</td>
<td>* exacerbation of inequalities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* provide access</td>
<td>* political tensions and conflicts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* relieve pressure on natural resources</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1.2. Design, coverage and methods

In order to delineate the socio-cultural changes that are taking place in the study area we attempted (1) to compare remote villages and roadside villages and analyse differences between these two types of villages in terms of both livelihood and culture; (2) get a picture of the socio-cultural situation in communes villages before the construction of the highway in order to compare the present-day situation with that prevailing before the HCMH, and (3) evaluate the differences between what we assumed to be forest-based subsistence economies of traditional/remote villages and more market-oriented local economies of roadside villages.

This assumption of significant differences between roadside (market-oriented) and remote (forest-dependent) villages was based on earlier fieldwork (2004-5) by Nikolas Arhem in the two types of socio-cultural environments among ethnic Katu people (one of the indigenous groups in the study area) in Tay Giang and Dong Giang districts of Quang Nam province. This earlier research, which formed part of a comparative research project on Katuic groups (The Katuic Ethnography Project) under the auspices of the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology, also provided substantial background knowledge of importance for the present study. Among other things, this previous research suggested that remote villages retained traditional social and cultural institutions to a considerably greater extent than roadside villages and, thus, that the comparison between the two types of villages would be a useful strategy for eliciting socio-economic changes caused by the HCMH.

However, owing to time constraints this comparative ambition proved difficult to realise in practice. Thus, in the course of the present study only one village which can be classified as remote (14 km from the road/HCMH) was visited: Cup village in Huc Nhi commune, Da Krong district (QT). It is also important to note that very few remote villages currently exist in the study area (in roadside communes); all villages have been relocated to their present locations as a result of the nationwide Fixed Cultivation and Sedentarisation Program initiated by the government in 1968 (and which was launched in the study area after 1975. Thus, when drawing conclusions about, and describing differences between, roadside villages and more remote villages, we have made use of data from Tay Giang district (A Vuong commune, QN) collected by the Katuic Ethnographic Project.

Two field trips were carried out: the first trip – in which both researchers participated – lasted 10 days (March, 2006) and was considered as a ”reconnaissance trip”. Its purpose was to get an overview of the entire study area and identify the main sociocultural issues to be explored further in the second field trip. The second trip was conducted by Ms Binh and an assistant (Ms Mui) and lasted for two weeks (May, 2006). In both trips, the researchers were accompanied by staff from the provincial and/or district Forest Protection Department.

The two field trips covered four provinces (Quang Tri, Thua Thien Hue, Quang Nam and Kontum), six districts (Da Krong, A Luo, Tay Giang, Nam Giang, Phuoc Son and Dak Glei) and eight communes (Huc Nhi, A Roang, Bha Lee, Ca Dy, Thanh My town, Phuoc Nang, Phuoc My, and Dak Kroong). These eight communes will henceforth be referred to as the “study area”. During the second field trip, a village and household survey was carried out in fourteen villages; a total of 75 households from five communes were included in the household survey. These
communes were, from north to south: Huc Nghi, A Roang, Thanh My, Phuoc Nang and Dak Kroong (see Maps; survey communes are underlined on the district maps).

The main ethnic groups in the study area are, from north to south, the Bru Van Kieu, Ta Oi (Paco), Katu and the Gie Trieng (see Chapter 2). Kinh people are also present in all communes but, with the exception of Thanh My town, constitute a very small portion of the population in each. In the district centres, they (the Kinh) constitute a larger percentage of the population. The ethnic structure of the population in the study area (according to district) is presented in Chapter 2 (Table 1).

1.3. The data and its limitations

Data was mainly collected through semi-structured interviews. In the household survey, a questionnaire was employed. The questionnaire was tested on a selected number of households during the preparatory field trip and was then applied in refined form during the intensive field study (second trip). In conducting interviews, we followed a set of question sheets prepared in advance and continuously updated in the course of the study. Interviews were carried out with officials at district, commune and village levels. In the villages visited, a general overview of the situation of the village was usually obtained through the village headman (sometimes in a group interview with other villagers present). Village elders served as key informants on issues of cultural traditions and socio-cultural change. Additional male and female household heads (in equal proportions) were also interviewed in each village. Use has also been made of official statistical material collected at provincial, district and commune levels.

On the whole, a balance was sought between quantitative and qualitative data. The household survey was mainly intended to supplement official statistics and the interview material with respect to household economy and local livelihood activities. Great weight has been given to interlocutors’ perceptions and concerns with regard to the issues examined, and all data has been subjected to careful contextual analysis. Quantitative data has been used mainly to substantiate the qualitative analysis.

A short consultancy study, such as the present one, necessarily has a number of shortcomings and limitations with respect to the quality (representativity, validity and reliability) of the data collected. Thus, information on certain topics were not easily elicited and some collected data appear, after careful scrutiny, not to be entirely reliable. These observations apply particularly to certain portions of the quantitative data on household income and expenditure, crop yields and crop-land extension (specifically as regards shifting cultivation), hunting and food consumption.

The difficulty in obtaining reliable data on shifting cultivation and hunting must be understood against the background of the fact that shifting cultivation is strongly discouraged by government policy and big-game hunting is banned by law. Interlocutors naturally feel inhibited to talk about these topics to “strangers”, particularly in the presence of government staff. On other topics, such as household income and expenditure, villagers may also be reluctant to volunteer precise information for personal reasons and reasons of discretion.

In view of these considerations, we have excluded all data which we feel may not be entirely reliable. This judgement has been made on the basis of a careful weighing of contextual information and observations -- in the field and in the course of the analysis. The fact that we have decided to exclude certain portions of our collected data at this point does not exclude the
possibility that, after additional sorting and weighing of the data, we might include the material in a future analysis.

Finally, as noted above, it proved impractical to compare villages located near and far from the road; our comparative data along this continuum derive from one “remote” village in the present study (Cup village, Huc Nhi commune, Da Krong district) and more impressionistic information from previous fieldwork in Tay Giang district (A Vuong commune). In addition, systematic statistics was difficult to obtain from the time immediately before the HCMH was constructed, thus precluding a systematic comparison between the situation before and after the road in the study communes. For these reasons, exact measurements of the specific impact of the HCMH are difficult to present.

Our conclusions about the impact of the HCMH are therefore rather based on an assessment of the qualitative information (impact perceptions and accounts of change) elicited during interviews with local people (men and women) and officials at all administrative levels, supplemented by a somewhat patchy statistical/quantitative material. On the whole, we have taken a broad view of road-impact; we see the HCMH as part of a whole package of interventions impacting the region under study and its local communities. Indeed, it is one of our principal conclusions that it is impossible to isolate the road from the package of interventions of which it forms an integral part – government policies, programs and projects which all contribute to transform life along the road.
Map 1: Study provinces and districts, and the distribution of the main ethnic groups
Map 2: Quang Tri province. Note Da Krong district and Huc Nghi commune in the south.
Map 3: Thua Thien Huế province: A’luoi district and Aroang commune in the bottom SW corner of the map.
Map 4: Close-up of the three study districts in Quang Nam province (road 14 is now the HCMH): Tay Giang district (B Ha Lee and A Vuong communes); Nam Giang district (Ca Dy commune and Thanh My town); Phuoc Son district: Phuoc Nang and Phuoc My communes)
Map 5: Close-up of Dak Glei district (Dak Kroong commune) in Kontum province.
2. The Ho Chi Minh Highway and the Central Truong Son Region

2.1. HCMH – symbol of Vietnam and cornerstone of the master-plan for development

“We cut through the Truong Son jungles for national salvation. Now we cut through the Truong Son jungles for national industrialization and modernization.”
(former) Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet -- 2000

The Ho Chi Minh is perhaps the single largest infrastructural construction undertaken by Vietnam in modern times. Starting from Hoa Lac (Ha Tay province) in the north and ending in Dat Mui (Ca Mau province) in the south, it stretches over 3,167 kms. The total cost of the highway (henceforth referred to as HCMH) was in 2004 estimated at VND 33.6 trillion (US$2.1 billion). The decision to construct this enormous highway was taken in 1998 and construction work began in 2000. The highway takes its name from the famous network of supply trails running from North to South Vietnam along the Annamite mountain range (Truong Son) – and in part through Laos -- which enabled North Vietnam to eventually win the Vietnam-American War. The construction of the highway is to some extent a historical commemoration of the soldiers who died along the trail during the war but also, and more importantly, a cornerstone of the “socio-economic master-plan for development” of Vietnam’s least developed western areas.

In particular, the HCMH was conceived as a means of modernising and industrialising this remote corner of the country and thus incorporating the ethnic minority people living in the region into the process of national development. It is therefore important not to look at the HCMH merely as a transportation route but also as heavily policy laden project in the context of Vietnamese national development and national integration. Some of the main policy goals of the HCMH project include:

1. To develop and modernise the region as part of a national poverty reduction strategy, thereby lifting/raising the indigenous ethnic minority population from poverty and increasing their education levels while also improving the regional health infrastructure.

2. To put the rich natural resources in the Central Truong Son region to “efficient use” by, for example, constructing hydroelectric plants/dams, (sustainable) industrial logging operations, introducing ambitious schemes of industrial tree-planting, encouraging intensive wet-rice cultivation and cash-crop production, and otherwise creating new employment opportunities. In

1 From San Diego Union Tribune, April 16, 2006 (http://www.signonsandiego.com/uniontrib/20060416/news_1t16viet.html).
2 From article “National Assembly scrutinizes HCM Highway project” (VNS 8/11 2004).
3 The policy goals listed here have been synthesized from articles published in Vietnamese media and from interviews with government officials. The MOT (Ministry of Transport), which is in charge of the HCMH construction, explicitly informed us that all relevant policy information about the highway was available in the public media (and that all other information about the highway was classified). There is no comprehensive official document in English about the HCMH.
Vietnamese statistics indigenous subsistence farmers are considered “unemployed” and thus constitute a vast and untapped labour reserve. A Cuban road engineer working on the Quang Nam section of the HCMH told us that officials had explained to him that the HCMH would help the unemployed and destitute local people so that they would not have to emigrate to Danang and other coastal cities in search for job opportunities.\(^4\)

(3) To allow immigration of lowland settlers in order to increase the level of commercial activities along the highway. Furthermore, government officials – backed by official development rhetorics – generally hold the idea that Kinh immigration will help raise the “cultural” (intellectual, educational) level and improve the “perceptions” of the indigenous population which, in turn, so the argument goes, will raise the level of efficiency and productivity of the local economy.

(4) To increase national security in this remote frontier region (bordering on Laos and Cambodia). It is believed that the region will be made more secure by creating a number of new urban centres along the road, by encouraging immigration from other areas of the country and by creating so called “youth villages” (a type of government-financed villages populated by a blend of younger lowland immigrants and local, ethnic minority families).

(5) To constitute an alternative north-south route to Highway nr 1, the already existing Hanoi-HCM City route, by transferring much of the traffic to the HCMH.

The HCMH divides into the two branches at Khe Cat (Quang Binh province) which reunite at Thanh My town (Nam Giang province). The western branch passes through the following districts (and provinces): Huong Hoa, Da Krong (Quang Tri), A Luoi (Thua Thien Hué), Tay Giang, Dong Giang and Nam Giang (Quang Nam). The total length of this branch is 514 kms. This report will deal only with the socio-cultural impact of the western branch as it passes through the Central Truong Son region from Khe Sanh in Quang Tri province to Dak Glei district in Kontum province (see Maps 1-5).

This western branch of the highway is mainly upgraded from the network of trails and transport roads forming the so called Ho Chi Minh trail which had existing from the early 1970s. Some sections are very recently opened, such as the section connecting A Roang commune in A Luoi district with A Tep commune in Tay Giang district. The section from Thanh My town (Nam Giang district) to Ngoc Hoi district (Kon Tum province) is upgraded from Road No 14 which was originally built during French colonial times. On the whole, existing roads in the study area were poor (gravel roads) and, in many sections, impassable during rainy season before the late 1990s and the beginning of the construction of the HCMH. Before 2003, people in A Luoi, Thanh My and Kham Duc towns even found it difficult to travel to the cities of Hué and Da Nang.

The western branch of the HCMH passes high and rugged mountain areas along the border to Laos and Cambodia. The region includes high mountain peaks of Ngoc Tien, Ngoc Lum Leo and Ngoc Linh, the highest mountain of the Southern Truong Son range. The region also holds a network of important rivers like the Huong, Thu Bon and Ba rivers as well as large valleys and plains such as Khe Sanh, A Sau, A Luo and Thanh My river plains which have held

\(^4\) In fact, however, in the districts where the traditional subsistence economies are still functional, there is no desire whatsoever among the local people to migrate to other areas. Such a need might, however, arise in the future as a consequence of the HCMH and government policies (see Chapter 5 and Chapter 7 [7.2 and 7.3]).
comparatively large population concentrations for many generations. Bordering on Laos and Cambodia, the region is considered of great strategic importance.

2.2. The Truong Son region – a unique biodiversity landscape

The HCMH cuts through one of richest and most diverse biodiversity regions in Southeast Asia (and, indeed, in the world). Several world unique species have been discovered here in recent decades including the saola, the large-antlered muntjac and the annamite striped rabbit. Other rare species found in the CTS region include the Asian elephant, tiger and the Java rhinoceros.

Considering the unique value of this natural habitat, international environmental organisations from the very beginning of the HCMH construction project raised fears, based on observations of highway projects elsewhere in the world, that the construction of the highway could lead to large-scale immigration from other areas of the country, substantially increasing both logging and hunting activities (in particular of rare species valued as oriental medicine) with serious environmental depletion as a result. Frank Momberg (in 2000), the Vietnam director of Fauna and Flora International went as far as claiming that “To build a four-lane highway through [this region] will be nothing short of an ecological disaster.” In face of the fait accompli of the HCMH, however, many environmental organisations have opted to try to co-operate with the Vietnamese government in their efforts to mitigate and assess the damage of the HCMH.

Although there has also been some critique from Vietnamese biologists (ibid.) about the environmental impact of the road, the main criticisms that have been expressed in Vietnamese national media have concerned economic and technical issues. Vietnamese critics have claimed that the HCMH was unnecessary since there already exists a north–south highway (which is also badly in need of repair) and because it diverts funds from other, more vital infrastructural and economic investments.

There are grounds for both lines of criticism. A number of WWF reports have documented the environmental impact of the HCMH, and future reports from national and international environmental organisations are likely to follow with the increasing traffic and growing urbanisations along the road. National poverty-reduction programs appear to achieve relatively poor results in the Central Coast and Central Highland regions as measured by conventional poverty indicators (VDR 2004).

2.3. Population and Ethno-linguistic distribution

The six districts, covering four provinces, which constitute the study area, are inhabited by four major indigenous ethno-linguistic groups (in terms of the official Vietnamese ethno-linguistic classification); these are, from north to south: Bru-Van Kieu, Ta Oi, Ka Tu and Gie-Trieng. Their approximate numbers and geographical distribution are shown in Table 1 (based on district statistics from 2004; see also Map 1).

5 From Time Asia (June 26, 2000 VOL. 155 NO. 25)
All of these indigenous groups belong to the Mon-Khmer language family. The three first groups are all linguistically closely related and classified as belonging to the Katuic branch of the Mon-Khmer family, while the Gie-Trieng belong to the Bahnaric branch of the same language family. In addition to these major groups, indigenous to the region, there are a smaller number of immigrant groups, mainly Tay-Nung people from the northern part of the country; in the study area they are found mainly in Dak Glei district (Kontum province) and Phuoc Son district (Quang Nam province).

**Table 1: Size and distribution of ethnic groups in the study districts (2004)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Population (people)</th>
<th>Kinh %</th>
<th>Van Kieu</th>
<th>Ta Oi</th>
<th>Ka Tu</th>
<th>Gie Trieng</th>
<th>Others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Da Krong</td>
<td>Quang Tri</td>
<td>32,951</td>
<td>8,040</td>
<td>16,080</td>
<td>8,831</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>A Luoi</td>
<td>T.T. Hue</td>
<td>38,994</td>
<td>3,510</td>
<td>29,245</td>
<td>4,094</td>
<td></td>
<td>2,145</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Tay Giang</td>
<td>Quang Nam</td>
<td>14,609</td>
<td>724</td>
<td>13,870</td>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Nam Giang</td>
<td>Quang Nam</td>
<td>20,104</td>
<td>4,270</td>
<td>11,478</td>
<td>4,321</td>
<td>354</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Phuoc Son</td>
<td>Quang Nam</td>
<td>20,470</td>
<td>6,960</td>
<td>13,100</td>
<td></td>
<td>410</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Dak Glei</td>
<td>KonTum</td>
<td>32,371</td>
<td>2,686</td>
<td>22,951</td>
<td></td>
<td>6,734</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total nr of ethnic minority people: 133,688.
Total nr of Kinh people: 26,190.

Ethnic classification is to a large extent arbitrary and artificial, and therefore subject to continuous debate and revision. The official classification of Vietnam’s ethnic groups is no exception. This is particularly pertinent in the case of the Ta Oi inhabiting southern part of Da Krong district (Quang Tri) and the whole of A Luoi district (T. T. Hue). Officially the Ta Oi comprises three sub-groups – Ta Oi proper, Paco and Pa Hi; however, the Paco consider themselves an autonomous ethnic group and not a sub-unit of the Ta Oi (cf Nguyen Van Manh, 2005). The majority of the ethnic population of the three southernmost communes in Da Krong district (Ta Rut, A Ngo and A Bung communes) thus consider themselves Paco, and are thus recognised by the district authorities.

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6 In Dak Glei district, the majority of the population belongs to the Gie Trieng ethnic group, followed by Xo Dang people. Most of the 6,734 individuals who are not Gie Trieng, belong the Xo Dang group (with exception of about two hundred Tay and Nung individuals originating from the Northern Highlands).
The labelling and sub-classification of the Gie-Trieng group is also contentious. According to our survey, the dominant population in Phuoc Son district label themselves B’Noong (P’nong), while they are known (and, since 2003, officially recognised) by district authorities as Mnoong (assumedly because pronunciation in Vietnamese favour the latter spelling over the more accurate B’Noong); for this reason, when they communicate in Vietnamese and with Kinh people, they refer to themselves, and are referred to, as Mnoong (as distinct from Mnong which is the ethnonym of an entirely different ethno-linguistic group in the southern part of the Central Highlands). Furthermore, the Gie and Trieng (each with various local self-denominations and local sub-groupings) consider themselves as quite separate groups, the former inhabiting the southern part of Phuoc Son district (Quang Nam) and most of Dak Glei district (Kontum), while the Trieng tend to dominate in Ngoc Hoi district (Kontum) further south.

Although linguistically classified with the Bahnaric groups, the Gie-Trieng groups appear to be culturally more closely related to the Katuic groups to the north of their distribution. They also appear historically to have had close contact particularly with the Katu in Quang Nam and adjacent parts of Laos. All in all, all the major ethnic groups in the study region are thus culturally closely related and may in fact be said to share a common socio-cultural system (see Chapter 3 below).

All along the road there is also a small but steadily growing Kinh population, particularly in and near the district towns and townlets (Table 1). However, the Kinh population is everywhere in minority, and consists principally of government officials, shopkeepers and traders, many of whom only temporary reside in the study area (i.e., they are registered elsewhere as permanent residents). Virtually all roadside villages have at least one Kinh shop-keeper household, but few villages had more than three or four such households, presumably since the purchasing power of the indigenous population is still very limited. Most of these Kinh families came long before the construction of the HCMH.

As opposed to the situation in the Central Highlands, very few Kinh settlers in the study area are engaged in farming. Some districts, like Da Krong (Quang Tri) have actually promoted Kinh immigration, but with little notable result in district and commune statistics. In Nam Giang only 113 Kinh immigrants have been registered as permanent residents between 2003 and 2005 (Table 2). Because Kinh migrants tend to remain registered in their native districts (districts of origin) there no significant increase in Kinh immigration into the study districts is reflected in official statistics since the HCMH was opened (between 2000-2005) – despite the fact that the Kinh population is visibly increasing in most district centres from year to year.

All the ethnic groups in the study area are native inhabitants of both Laos and Vietnam and live on both sides of the border. Interaction between the populations in the two countries /each country/ is frequent, and relatives on either side frequently visit one another. Many villages now established on the Vietnamese side (particularly Ta Oi and Gie-Trieng people) have moved to Vietnam from Laos since the America-Vietnam War (after a border agreement between the two countries), and during the war several Gie-Trieng communities in Dak Glei district moved to Laos or up into the mountains along the border to escape bombing, only to return to Vietnam after the war when the opportunity presented itself (with the support of the Vietnamese government).

* * *

29
Table 2: Population and density in Nam Giang in 2000 and 2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Administration (commune/ward)</th>
<th>Area (km²)</th>
<th>Population in 2000 (people)</th>
<th>Density in 2000 people/km²</th>
<th>Population in 2004 (people)</th>
<th>Density in 2004 people/km²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Thanh My town</td>
<td>209.00</td>
<td>6,082</td>
<td>29.10</td>
<td>6,297</td>
<td>30.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Ca Dy</td>
<td>200.00</td>
<td>2,188</td>
<td>10.94</td>
<td>2,416</td>
<td>12.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Ta Bhing</td>
<td>228.00</td>
<td>2,310</td>
<td>10.13</td>
<td>2,519</td>
<td>11.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Cha Val</td>
<td>128.40</td>
<td>1,927</td>
<td>15.00</td>
<td>2,139</td>
<td>16.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>La Dee</td>
<td>182.20</td>
<td>1,991</td>
<td>10.92</td>
<td>1,992</td>
<td>10.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>La Ee</td>
<td>241.00</td>
<td>1,489</td>
<td>6.17</td>
<td>1,590</td>
<td>6.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Dak Pring</td>
<td>309.00</td>
<td>818</td>
<td>2.64</td>
<td>845</td>
<td>2.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Dak Pree</td>
<td>98.40</td>
<td>1,091</td>
<td>11.08</td>
<td>1,143</td>
<td>11.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>ZuoiH</td>
<td>240.50</td>
<td>1,295</td>
<td>5.38</td>
<td>1,326</td>
<td>5.51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Nam Giang census in 2000 and 2004

Apart from these war-time population movements, undertaken to escape the worst ravages of war, and the repatriation of war-refugees after the war, there has been another major relocation of the ethnic communities in the study area and in the Central Highland-Truong Son region as a whole, namely the government-propelled sedentarization program compelling remote and scattered highland communities to regroup and resettle in larger, permanent hamlets at lower altitudes, along roads and closer to markets and towns, ostentatiously to get access to infrastructural facilities (roads, schools, health care centres etc) but also to facilitate administration and permit greater government control.

The present distribution of villages in the region is a direct result of this program; its social, economic and cultural consequences for the ethnic communities are considerable and have, as will be seen, far from always been unambiguously beneficial. All indigenous villages were resettled or merged with other villages after 1975. Furthermore, many of the villages which were not located along the road were resettled a second time in conjunction with the HCMH construction (2000-2003).

Population densities vary considerably within the region (Table 3); A Luoi district has the highest density (32 persons/sq. km) in the study region owing to its high agricultural potential (being the largest valley in the study region), while Nam Giang has the lowest density (11.03 persons/sq.km). However, within the districts there is also great variation between communes. Thus, Dak Pring commune in Nam Giang district has a density of only 2.73 persons/sq. km (Table 2). The average density for the districts in the study region is 20.8 pers/sq.km (Table 3). All these figures are well below the average population density for the country as a whole.
(Nguyen Lam Thanh 2003). On the whole, there is no spectacular population growth in the study districts over the past five years (Table 4). District statistics, furthermore, suggest little population movements (migration) in and out of the study districts over the same period. In short, contrary to what might be expected, the population along the HCMH appears not to have increased significantly since the completion and opening of the road. (Note, however, the proviso, stated above, that the official statistics take no notice of temporary residents nor of temporary immigration into the area).

Table 3: Administrative units and population data from the six study districts in 2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>District/Province</th>
<th>Area (km²)</th>
<th>Administrative units (communes)</th>
<th>Population (people)</th>
<th>Density (people/km²)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Dakrong Quang Tri</td>
<td>1,223.3221</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>32,951</td>
<td>26.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>A Luoi T.T. Hue</td>
<td>1,229.018</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>38,994</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Tay Giang Quang Nam</td>
<td>901.20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14,268⁷</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Nam Giang Quang Nam</td>
<td>1,836.5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>20,104</td>
<td>11.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Phuoc Son Quang Nam</td>
<td>1,141.27</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>20.306</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Dakglei KonTum</td>
<td>1,484.9</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>32,371</td>
<td>21.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Population trends in the study districts 2000-2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Dakrong Quang Tri</td>
<td>_</td>
<td>31,860</td>
<td>_</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>A Luoi T.T. Hue</td>
<td>35,413</td>
<td>38,616</td>
<td>40,383</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

⁷ District population numbers are sometimes not consistent in the same statistical book. Therefore, data of this table might differ from that of others.
2.4. Communications with the lowlands

Owing to varying geographical and historical circumstances, communications with the lowlands and coastal regions and resulting contact with the Kinh majority population have, until recently, differed considerably between localities in the study area. These differences continue to influence the pattern of socio-economic and cultural change in the region. Thus, the Bru-Van Kieu in Quang Tri province have, for centuries, lived on a trade route between Vietnam and Laos, and have thus been more exposed to lowland/Kinh influences than, for example, the Katu in the more isolated Tay Giang and Dong Giang districts of Quang Nam. The Khe-Sanh valley, inhabited by Bru-Van Kieu, was also, of course, one of the most battered war theatres during the Vietnam-American War, but also the scene of the famous North-Vietnamese victory and capture of the US-military base at Khe Sanh.

The central and southern districts in the study area (from Tay Giang to Dak Glei) were historically comparatively poorly connected to the coastal areas. However, with the construction of National Road 14 (during the French colonial regime), the southern districts of Dak Glei, Phuoc Son and Nam Giang were connected with the (more developed) market towns and provincial centres of the Central Highlands (particularly Kontum). Nevertheless, many communes in these highland districts remained seasonally inaccessible from the coast until Road 14 was upgraded to the HCMH.

Despite poor communications, some localities such as Kham Duc have had rather intense contact with the lowlands and a substantial resident Kinh population since the Vietnam-American War. Thus, Kham Duc was an important US-supported military base under the Southern regime. Later, during the 1980s and 1990s, Kham Duc became a bustling boom-town when gold was found in the district. The town grew and business thrived during the years of the gold rush, but as the gold became increasingly hard to come by in the late 1990s, the town have lost some of its flair and returned to the slower rhythm/pace of the pre-gold days. Nevertheless, historical-economical trajectories/processes such as these greatly affect local patterns and processes of change in the present.

The main “axis of change” that can be observed today largely coincides with the patterns of cultural contacts and influences that existed in the past: in the northern districts (Da Krong, A Luoi) influences and immigrants usually came from the coast, whereas in the south (Dak Glei, KonTum)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Tay Giang</td>
<td>13,734</td>
<td></td>
<td>14,609</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Quang Nam</td>
<td>_</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Nam Giang</td>
<td>19,392</td>
<td>20,367</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Quang Nam</td>
<td>_</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Phuoc Son</td>
<td>18,907</td>
<td>19,399</td>
<td>_</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Quang Nam</td>
<td>_</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Dak Glei</td>
<td>30,751</td>
<td>31,866</td>
<td>33,157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>KonTum</td>
<td>_</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Phuoc Son) influences and immigrants have come from the heartland of the Central Highland provinces.

2.5. A cultural landscape at risk

The effects of the HCMH on the culture and livelihood of the indigenous groups in the CTS region have received little attention on the part of the Vietnamese government and international organisations. This report seeks to redress this unfortunate situation. The task is both urgent and difficult. Indigenous culture and society in the region are little studied and poorly understood. Yet, the region is targeted for grand development and poverty-reduction programs on the (shallow) assumption that the indigenous population belongs to “the poorest of the poor” in Vietnam. Thus, the HCMH is, in official development rhetoric, hailed as a means of bringing progress and development to this remote and marginalised region.

We will in the coming chapters argue against this depreciative view of indigenous culture and society. The CTS region is the home of an exuberant cultural richness and diversity which reach far beyond isolated cultural elements and commodified ethnic traditions – such as specific aesthetic traditions, songs, dances and gong music. Culture here refers to integral, collective ways of life – the more or less systemically interrelated patterns of ideas and behaviour, norms and practices constituting a way of life. More specifically, a culture can be taken to mean a specific, institutionalised way of relating to and using the natural environment for survival. Culture, then, is inseparable from livelihood and resource use. Cultural diversity refers to the various ways in which distinct societies and ethnic groups make use of their environments. Cultural diversity points to the extra-ordinary diversity of ways of making a living, of surviving.

From this perspective, policies which start from the assumption that indigenous peoples are poor, backward and disadvantaged are wrong from the outset and most likely to destructive in their consequences – for the simple reason that they devalue local culture and disregard culture as an important dimension in human life. Development policies which disregard (indigenous) culture (and thereby contribute to reducing the nation’s diverse cultural heritage), neglect a constitutional right of Vietnam’s ethnic minorities (see Appendix 3).

In the next chapter we seek to demonstrate the particular logic or rationality underpinning indigenous CTS culture. In so doing, we will play down the differences between the various ethnic groups inhabiting the region and, instead, emphasise the distinctiveness of the indigenous CTS cultural complex in relation to Vietnam’s other major cultural traditions which combine to constitute the rich and diverse national cultural heritage.8

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8 An account of the diversity of the ethnic groups in the CTS region – a task which deserves close attention – has to await another opportunity.
3. Indigenous Central Truong Son Culture: An Overview

In order to gauge the changes currently taking place in the ethnic communities along the HCMH, we attempt in the following to provide a baseline sketch of the socio-cultural systems of the ethnic groups in the study area. This is no easy task since it necessarily involves a considerable measure of conjectural historical reconstruction and theoretical abstraction. Nevertheless, such an effort is both justified and necessary to grasp the nature, scope and depth of the unfolding social, economic and cultural transformations in the region and the challenges they involve both for policy makers and the targeted populations.

The ethnic groups in the study area (C T S region) are culturally and linguistically closely related, belonging to two different branches of the Mon-Khmer linguistic family. They can be said to represent variations of a single socio-cultural system; they share a number of fundamental features (described below) but also differ and distinguish themselves from one another in cultural specificities (details of language, social organisation, names of clans, origin myths etc.). At a deeper level, they all share features common to most indigenous upland groups in Southeast Asia and, at a still deeper level, with most of the world’s indigenous (stateless, pre-industrial) peoples. These universally present features of indigenous peoples include: an economic orientation towards subsistence and self-sufficiency (domestic mode of production); a cultural integration of all aspects of society – economics, politics and religion forming an integrated and relatively undifferentiated whole; low-level political integration and non-hierarchical polities, non-scriptual religion; a deep social, economic and cultural anchoring in, and attachment to, the immediate local environment etc. In all these respects, indigenous socio-cultural systems differ, as a type, from what is usually glossed “modern societies” or “modernity” as a global socio-cultural system.

The picture we draw of indigenous CTS culture amounts to a type model rather than a historical reconstruction. Though it may be maintained that the model, to some extent, corresponds to the empirical, ethnographical reality a century – or even half a century – ago, the main point is to draw attention to the cultural logic that defines the type of society represented by the ethnic groups in the study area, and which underpinned the complex socio-cultural reality until the relatively recent past. Indeed, we maintain that this underlying cultural rationality, and the institutions and traditions in which it is embodied, still to a great extent guides thinking and behaviour among the ethnic groups in the region, despite all apparent changes in life-style and living conditions. At heart, the ethnic groups of the region still pursue a “domestic mode of production” based on a different and proper, indigenous cultural rationality, distinct from that of the Vietnamese society at large.

The account is based on literary research, previous field research among Katu communities in Quang Nam (within the framework of the Katuic Ethnography Project) and the present WWF survey/study.
3.1. Upland rice cultivation

Swidden- or shifting cultivation of dry-rice (upland rice) is the basis of the indigenous livelihood system; dry-rice is the staple and principal food. The indigenous form of shifting cultivation involves long fallow cycles of up to 10-12 years or more. In the past, settlements were small, dispersed and relatively mobile – changing location every 7-10 years or so within customarily defined village territories. The settlement movements were dictated by environmental as well as cultural factors (disease, conflicts, feuding etc). The system of shifting cultivation supplied a sufficient, nutritionally varied and balanced diet (Krahn 2005). The system was well adapted to the fragile and generally poor soils of the CTS upland forests, involving a great diversity of crops (varieties of rice, cassava and other tubers, millet, beans, fruit trees etc), elaborate cropping sequences and intercropping to optimize soil nutrients and minimize crop loss to plant diseases.

A fundamental premise of the traditional system of shifting cultivation was the integration of forest-and-fields; swidden fields were carved from the forest and returned to forest in a continuous cycle of clearing (and burning), cropping and regeneration (fallowing). Forest turned into fields, and fields turned into forest. Thus, there existed no absolute conceptual or material-practical separation between forest and fields. Forest and fields formed a unified domain in the indigenous worldview and livelihood system.

Box 2: Shifting cultivation

The term shifting cultivation refers to a broad spectrum of farming systems involving clearing, burning and cultivating patches of forest. It is also referred to as swidden agriculture and, often pejoratively, slash-and-burn cultivation. As a farming system it may vary considerably from one region to another in terms of crops, cropping and fallow periods, intercropping and cropping sequences etc.

Shifting cultivation is the dominant farming system in the mountainous area of mainland Southeast Asia, where it has been practised for at least a millennium. It is common to distinguish between two main varieties of shifting cultivation: pioneer and rotational shifting cultivation. The former means that a field, after one or more cropping seasons, is left permanently and allowed to regrow. Such a system is sustainable only where primary forest is abundant and populations small and mobile (as, f ex in large parts of pre-colonial Borneo). Pioneer shifting cultivation is also (and apparently increasingly) carried out on an unsustainable basis in some regions of SEA where farmers cultivate swidden fields for several years until the soil is degraded and the field permanently abandoned. This unsustainable form of cultivation tends to be associated with population migration or migratory populations, and/or occur in circumstances of high insecurity over land rights. By far the most common form of shifting cultivation in the region is, however, the rotational type where the same fields are re-cropped after relatively long fallow periods (ranging between 5-30 years) on a cyclical basis.

Rotational shifting cultivation implies “a system in which vegetation felled in patches of forest during the dry season is burned before the onset of the rainy season to open the site and release nutrients. The cleared fields are cultivated and harvested for one or more years, and then left to lie fallow for varying periods to allow secondary forest to regrow. Indigenous farmers manage the system in ways that integrate production from both cultivated fields and diverse secondary forests, including everything from grass and bushes in its early stages, to young open-canopy
Women play a central role in rice cultivation and, in fact, do most of the work in relation to sowing, weeding and harvesting as well as processing the rice grain into food. The rice cultivation process is accompanied by a series of family rituals constituting a full cycle of rituals from planting to harvesting (the “rice complex”). Women are the principal protagonists of these rituals which are still practised today. The senior woman in the family is the guardian and caretaker of the family rice. She supervises the sowing, the proper growth and the harvest of the rice. She is the master of the rice rituals; as such she represents all women as rice cultivators. Dry-rice cultivation thus forms the basis of female identity among all the indigenous groups in the region.

Today wet- or paddy rice is an important source of food in many ethnic villages. However, there is far from enough land suitable for wet-rice cultivation in most parts of the hilly land of the CTS region. It should also be noted that wet-rice cultivation is not invested with the same cultural significance as dry-rice cultivation. Thus it is not accompanied by the series of rituals which surrounds dry-rice cultivation, probably because it is a recent introduction into the region.

Swidden cultivation of upland rice remains the mainstay of most local economies, and it continues to be a cornerstone of indigenous culture and female status and identity. We want to emphasise that indigenous shifting-cultivation cannot be reduced to an economic system or agricultural technique; it forms a cultural system in the broadest sense of the term, integrating fundamental economic, social and religious values and practices. This cultural system, centred on dry-rice cultivation, is an essential part of the indigenous way of life and an important aspect of the collective identity of all groups in the region.

3.2. The hunting complex

_Hunting and trapping_ traditionally provided an important source of food (protein) and still represents a significant supplement to the daily diet in remoter villages. Hunting is an exclusively male occupation. As such, it was for men what rice cultivation was – and still is – for women: the fundamental source of male identity in indigenous society. Thus, the cultural significance of hunting goes far beyond its economic and nutritional importance; it symbolically and practically constitutes men as men.

Hunting and trapping are closely integrated with cultivation. Traps are set around the swidden fields, and a great deal of hunting-and-trapping is done in the fallow fields which appear to be the preferred habitat for various game animals. In a sense then, hunting forms a part of the cultivation system and vice versa; trapping around the swiddens protect the crop, and fallow fields constitute prime hunting ground. Just as hunting and rice cultivation are complementary in terms of gender construction, they constitute, as it were, two sides of the same livelihood system.

Like rice cultivation, hunting is surrounded by a whole complex of important public rituals where men – particularly the old men – play the principal roles. The killing of a substantial game animal...
(wild pig, deer etc.) is always and necessarily followed by a village-wide ritual where the meat of the slain animal is communally shared and consumed by all the families in the village. In remoter villages, where traditions are not entirely eroded, this traditional practice is as obligatory today as in the past.

The hunting rituals also involve the careful handling and ritual treatment of the skulls of the slain game animals which are seen as the vessels of the animal souls. Far from being a simple display of hunting accomplishments, the multiple skulls found carefully stuck in the ceiling of many indigenous houses (particularly in the communal houses of the Katu) form part of a complex and subtle sequence of religious rituals aimed at maintaining good relations with the forest animals and ensuring future hunting luck.

In short, hunting is an integral part of indigenous cultural and religious life; it expresses and largely constitutes manhood (maleness) in CTS society, and the ritual sharing of game meat following upon a successful hunt not only symbolises village unity but effectively creates and reproduces the village as an autonomous social unit. Indeed, in the local idiom “sharing game meat” means “belonging to the same village”. When game sharing stops, so does village solidarity and cohesion.

### 3.3. The autonomous village and the Community House

The village was – and to a considerable extent, still is – the fundamental social and political unit of indigenous CTS society. As such, the village provides a basic social environment of trust and security for individuals and households. Villages were, in the past, generally small, mobile and dispersed. They were – and still are – organised around close relationships of kinship and marriage. Families are integrated into wider kinship groups – patrilineages and patrilineal clans. Lineages are bound together by repeated inter-marriages creating strong relations of marriage alliance which often form the basis for village cohesion and community solidarity. In times of trouble and misfortune/crop failure, the traditional village acted as a single supportive body, sharing its resources among all households in the village.

In all ethnic groups in the CTS region, the village was – and, among various groups, still is – centred on a large and beautifully decorated Community House reflecting the numerical strength and political status of the village. The Community House is intimately associated with men and the activities of men. In the past (and to some extent still), unmarried men used to sleep in the Community House. Elders gathered in it to discuss village affairs, and it is still the village meeting place where all important political matters are discussed and settled. The Community House is also a ritual arena where village-wide rituals are performed and where villagers, principally men, gather to feast on food and drink and celebrate at weddings, funerals and other important ritual events – mainly the rituals connected with hunting. Because of its strong male connotations and its intimate connection with hunting, women only sporadically and furtively entered the Community House.

Above all, however, the Community House is identified with the village as a social and spiritual community; in it resides the protective spirit of the village and the souls of its deceased headmen. Symbolically and materially, the Community House is the supreme expression of village unity.
3.4. Indigenous religion

*Indigenous religion* forms an important aspect of the basic livelihood activities – women’s rice cultivation and men’s hunting. Thus, as mentioned above, public rituals accompany every major stage in the rice cycle and, ideally, every successful hunt. Religious rituals also mark the principal stages in a person’s life cycle – at marriage and death. At weddings and funerals, which are major, public events in CTS society, community members come together to express solidarity among themselves and to seek support and protection from the plurality of spirits inhabiting the indigenous world.

The marriage involves an elaborate series of exchanges between the two parties which all serve to strengthen the ties between them. Equally elaborate funerary rites transform the souls of the deceased from harmful ghosts into benevolent and protective ancestors. Both ritual complexes involve animal sacrifices – the ritual killing of pigs and, ideally, buffaloes – to ensure the blessing and protection of the spirits and ancestors. The native religious system as a whole – the life cycle rituals, the buffalo sacrifice and a series of other, minor sacrifices and ritual acts, and the belief in ancestors and spirits of various kinds – supplies individuals with basic existential trust and security in an uncertain and unpredictable world, not least in today’s ever-changing society.

3.5. A spiritual economy

Indigenous CTS culture can be seen as a regional instance of a wider socio-cultural pattern characteristic of Southeast Asian minority peoples in general. All these societies share a common, fundamental religious scheme based on certain notions about the reproduction of society and the regeneration of life. The system has been characterised as a “ritual economy” (Kirsch, Chamberlain) centred on the relationship between spirits and humans, and geared towards the maximisation of fertility and spiritual potency. Life-giving potency is conferred on the living by the ancestors and is manifest in the form of wealth, a large and healthy family, several wives, abundant rice, prowess in hunting, and so on. All these attributes are eventually convertible into political prestige and influence. Thus, the wealth, numerical strength and wellbeing of a local lineage are the signs of spiritual power and potency, and by virtue of its spiritual potency, the lineage (impersonated by its head) commands respect and exerts authority over other, less provided lineage heads.

In the operation of this economy, some households will be more successful than others. *The system of feasting tends to increase relative difference in ritual status but equalize the material standards of living.* The life blood of upland society is competition; men (lineages) compete for spiritual potency-cum-political status but there are no mechanisms for monopolising these coveted “commodities”; the means are, in principle, accessible to all. *The significant point is that, among the upland minorities of Southeast Asia, economic activities are fundamentally driven by a religious motive – the search for spiritual potency.* Pragmatic concerns are subordinated to and embedded in a moral and religious system – a ritual economy – which is formally analogous to, but substantially at odds with, the market economy and modernisation policies dominating current nation-states in the region.
3.6. The domestic mode of production

At a yet more inclusive level, indigenous CTS culture exemplifies a general economic structure which is universally present among indigenous groups around the globe, and which is referred to, by anthropologists, as the “domestic mode of production” (Sahlins). Centred in the domestic group, the domestic mode of production (DMP) is characterised by a relatively simple technology, a division of labour along sex and age lines, undifferentiated access to basic natural resources and sharing of food within the domestic group. This economic structure is embedded in a complex cultural system of powerful religious norms, ritual rules and regulations which ultimately govern and direct economic practices. The DMP aims at production for livelihood rather than surplus production and tends towards under-production rather than maximal utilization of resources. If surplus production is defined as output beyond the needs of the producer, the DMP is simply not organised for it – it is intrinsically an anti-surplus system.

As a whole, this culturally underpinned economic structure is designed to assure the availability of all essential nutrients without endangering the sustainability of the wider (human-use) ecosystem of which it forms a part. Elaborate cultural norms and restrictions tend to counteract any tendency towards over-exploitation of natural resources. While the economy is centred on the domestic group, the socio-political and religious system serves to solidify and strengthen the ties between domestic groups, thus counteracting the centrifugal and atomistic tendencies of the economy and integrating the domestic groups into communities and larger socio-cultural formations.

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By way of summary, in all indigenous CTS societies, shifting cultivation of upland rice and hunting form part of a single religious-economic system where ritual and practical acts are closely integrated. In this important sense, the livelihood system is a cultural system – a system deeply invested with spiritual and existential meaning. Making a living in their own particular ways constitutes, for indigenous peoples everywhere, their specific ethnic and cultural identities. For the ethnic groups in the CTS region this cultural identity is largely defined by the integration of shifting cultivation of upland rice and hunting, with all accompanying rituals and gender-based ceremonies.

This integrated cultural-and-economic system follows a different economic rationality than that implied by commercially and profit-oriented market economy – the rationality currently guiding economic development in Vietnam as a whole. Indigenous economies operate according to a cultural logic aiming at optimising supreme spiritual and social values (performing the correct rituals, appeasing the ancestors or deities, achieving traditional authority according to customary laws and practices…). They are, to put it differently, spiritual or ritual economies pursuing moral and cultural values rather than profit. Thus, production tends to be oriented towards domestic subsistence and satisfying local standards of well-being rather than optimal output. As such, indigenous economies are at odds with the policies and programs currently aiming to transform them into commercially viable production systems serving the economic growth of the nation as a whole.

It is necessary to understand this profound cultural logic in order grasp the nature and scope of the changes taking place along the HCMH and, on a national scale, the challenge involved in pursuing poverty-reduction policies based on economic growth and the commercialisation of
agriculture. Such policies go against the grain of indigenous CTS culture and indigenous societies at large.

The CTS region was first opened up and, in parts, integrated into the rest of what is today the Vietnamese nation during the French colonial period. Some of the main roads of what today form part of the HCM highway network were constructed under French supervision between the 1930s and 50s. Isolated indigenous groups were brought – often by the use of military force – under colonial control, taxed and “pacified”. The French rule is still remembered by old people as heavy handed and oppressive, causing major changes and dislocations in indigenous communities.

Within a decade of the French defeat in 1954, the second Indochina War – known in the West as the Vietnam War and in Vietnam as the American War – started. This war, ending with American withdrawal and the fall of the Saigon regime in 1975, heavily affected the study area. Located just south of the boundary between communist North Vietnam and US-backed South Vietnam (known as the Demilitarized Zone, DMZ), the study area was the scene of some of the most fierce battles during the war.

The HCMH, then a strategic network of trails and dirt roads, known as the HCM trail, was the main supply link between communist troops in the North and the South, and was constantly under attack from US forces. Enormous quantities of bombs and lethal dioxins were dropped and sprayed over the area by US planes. Areas in Quang Tri, Quang Nam, Kontum and, particularly, the A Lluoi district in TT Hue province are among the areas most heavily affected by dioxine (Agent Orange) in the country – with incalculable human suffering as a result.

Apart from the killing and wounding of thousands of people, the war implied, for the indigenous population in the region, a total disruption of livelihood activities, dispersal of settlements and an almost continuous movement of people and goods in order to avoid bombing and the spraying of herbicides. Though the war meant living under conditions of extreme insecurity, it also brought a deep and intensive contact with communist troops and cadres and, in many parts, a full involvement in the war in support of the North Vietnamese Army. As a result, social, economic and cultural life among the indigenous population was deeply affected and entirely reshaped.

*The post-war socialist reconstruction and development policies must be understood against this background of war, social turmoil and national insecurity.*

4.1. Socialist transformation of indigenous upland societies

Immediate post-war policies were bent on incorporating the indigenous, highland peoples into the unified socialist nation, securing lasting administrative control over the unruly indigenous population and, thus, ensuring national security in the remote border areas. The incorporation and integration of the many ethnic minority groups into the mainstream society meant, to the new socialist government, breaking down traditional social institutions and loyalties (kinship and marriage patterns, clan institutions etc), suppressing old religious notions and practices and replacing them with institutions and values compatible with the idea of a socialist nation-state, based on scientific thinking, rational production and supreme loyalty to party and government.
Key elements of this new, visionary upland society were clearly modelled on fundamental institutions of the lowland Kinh society: a population firmly settled in permanent villages and relying, for a living, on intensive wet-rice cultivation. One of the first measures, therefore, of the new government was to implement a policy of sedentarisation and fixed cultivation among the upland minorities.

### 4.2. The sedentarisation program

From 1968 onwards, the key policy for upland development was the Fixed Cultivation and Sedentarisation Program (*Dinh Canh Dinh Cu*, literally “fixed cultivation, fixed residence”), also referred to as the *ha son* policy (literally “down from the mountains”) or, simply, the sedentarisation program. The threefold aim of the program was (1) to resettle the highland population on lower, more fertile land, (2) concentrate dispersed and mobile settlements of shifting cultivators in larger, permanent villages nearer to roads and markets, thus making them more accessible to government agencies and institutions, and (3) make them switch from extensive, rotational shifting cultivation in the forest to intensive wet-rice cultivation in valleys and flatlands.

The explicit rationale for the program was to reduce forest destruction and to improve what was perceived as primitive agricultural practices and, thus, contribute to the economic and material development of the ethnic minorities in the uplands and accelerate their integration into the mainstream Vietnamese society and economy. An equally important but less publicised motive for the program was to enhance administrative control over the elusive minorities and, thereby, the national security in strategically important border regions.

The sedentarisation program amounts to a gigantic feat of social engineering, involving the relocation of thousands of villages and with momentous consequences – social, economic and existential – for hundreds of thousands people. Virtually all villages in the survey area were relocated to their present sites as a result of this program. Though persistently pursued till this day (now as a part of the CPRGS9), the rationale for the entire sedentarisation program can be seriously questioned on every score, and the results have been far from encouraging. The program is arguably the main factor responsible for the current predicament of the indigenous minority population in the region – shortage of swidden land, decline of shifting cultivation and depletion of game and fish in the vicinity of the relocated, permanent villages.

### 4.3. Cultural Policies

Cultural policies in Vietnam are tailored to support and implement the political and socio-economic goals of the state. An outstanding feature of the cultural policies, which has been remarkably constant over the past decades, is the policy of *selective preservation*: the mandate of the government to selectively preserve cultural traditions considered socially benign and compatible with the values and policies of the government.

The policy of selective preservation served – and still serves – as an instrument to transform traditional upland societies into modern, socialist societies; in the early decades of socialist

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9 Comprehensive Poverty Reduction and Growth Strategy (see References).
reconstruction, the cultural policy served to justify and legitimise the suppression and eradication of customs considered backward and outdated, such as large, extended families, multi-family longhouses, traditional kinship- and marriage institutions, superstitious beliefs in spirits -- in short, the key institutions of traditional indigenous society.

It goes without saying that such a cultural policy is highly normative and, in no small measure, paternalistic and ethnocentric. A knowledgeable and respected observer of Vietnamese society writes: “the relationship between the Vietnamese state and its ethnic minorities remains a paternalistic one in which the ultimate authority to make decisions about appropriate directions for cultural change remains in the hands of the central government…” (Rambo et al., 1995:xvii).

Currently, cultural policies are considerably more open-minded and sensitive to ethnic and cultural diversity but still determined by the political agenda of the state. Thus, modernisation and commercialisation are today – in the era of modernisation and industrialisation – at the forefront of cultural policies; ethnic art and objects, as well as intangible cultural traditions such as songs and dances (often duly modernised and adapted for the market), are commercially promoted for national and international consumption.

The notion of culture underlying current policies is a rather narrow, aesthetizised and commodity-oriented one – one which, ironically, in the West is closely associated with bourgeoisie society: culture as a product or epiphenomenon of society, an aesthetic commodity produced for consumption. Such a concept is singularly ill suited as a basis for cultural policies directed towards ethnic minority societies where economy, politics, religion and social organisation are all closely integrated. An entirely different – broad and integral – concept of culture is called for; one which makes justice to the integral nature of indigenous culture and society: culture as an interconnected whole, a total way of life.

4.4. Migration and the New Economic Zone policy

Alongside the sedentarisation program, and complementary to it, the government encouraged the migration of lowland Kinh farmers to specific highland areas known as New Economic Zones. The aim of this government-sponsored and directed transmigration, officially begun in the early 1970s, was to move farmers from densely or overpopulated lowland areas to what was perceived as under-populated and under-exploited highland areas and, thereby boost economic development in poorly developed ethnic minority areas. The assumption behind this goal was that ethnic minorities would benefit from the presence of Kinh farmers by learning more efficient agricultural production techniques – i.e., intensive, irrigation-fed paddy cultivation. There was also a security motive: by creating pockets of the Kinh majority population in areas dominated by ethnic minorities, the latter would be more easily administrated and politically controlled. The transmigration program thus served the overarching goal of creating a uniform national culture and society.

The planned migration towards New Economic Zones in the highlands gained momentum in the late 1970s and continued through the 1980s. In the country as a whole some 3-5 million people had moved to NEZ by 2001.

The greatest push to the NEZ was directed towards the Central Highlands, since this region was the least densely populated region in the whole country. From an indigenous population of 420,000 in 1926, the population in the Central Highlands jumped to over 2,8 million by 1991.
From then on, spontaneous migration into the highland has overtaken the organised, government-sponsored migration to NEZ. In 2001, the population in the Central Highlands has surged to more than 4 millions, the majority being Kinh immigrants from the lowlands (Salemink, 2000). Initial HCMH plans envisaged a similar type of immigration to the CTS region but so far it has not taken place.

The migration from the lowlands into the highlands, particularly into the Central Highlands, has completely changed the ethnic composition in the highlands. A number of unanticipated changes have occurred: conflicts over land between highlanders and Kinh lowlanders have flared with concomitant inter-ethnic tensions and a growing land scarcity among the indigenous minority population as a result. Environmental destruction and land degradation is also conspicuous in some areas of the Central Highlands. By and large, the migration policies have benefited the immigrating Kinh population at the cost of the indigenous minority population.

4.5. Doi Moi – poverty alleviation through economic growth

With the economic renovation policy (doi moi) launched in 1986, state control was eased and the economy opened up. Since the early 1990s, Vietnam has firmly embarked on a road towards market economy. Modernisation and industrialisation are key elements of its development agenda; equitable economic growth is seen as the recipe for development and poverty alleviation. Modernisation, diversification and commercialisation of agriculture – along with a progressive industrialisation of the country as a whole – are hailed as the necessary steps towards improved living conditions for the country’s rural population.

With substantial and growing support from international donors, a number of reforms and programs have been launched to boost the economy and to achieve the government’s ambitious development goals:

- **Program 327** (“Regreening of the Barren Hills Program”) was launched in 1992 to address the accelerating deforestation in the highlands. It aimed to reforest barren areas, protect and sustainably exploit existing forests and unused lands, and resettle ethnic minority people (thus continuing the earlier sedentarisation program). Program 327 was later replaced by:

- **“The Five Million Hectar Reforestation Program”** (based on decree 661), which was launched in 1998. Its ambitious goal was to reforest five million hectares of “barren land”, principally in the highlands, by inducing families to reforest barren areas in exchange for certain user rights.

- **Program 133**, launched 1998, and later referred to as “the hunger eradication and poverty reduction program” (HEPR), was a broad socio-economic development program (promoting health care, education, housing, rural credits, agricultural extension, infrastructure, resettlement and sedentarisation of ethnic minorities...), specifically targeting poor households across the country. The program was recently expanded and is currently known as Program 143.

- **Program 135** split off from Program 133 (HEPR) to allow greater attention on, and a concentration of resources directed towards, “communes faced with extreme difficulties” (which essentially translates into “lowest-income communes”). It is largely focused on improved infrastructure in mountainous communes. Sedentarisation projects and support to minority population within P 133 were, in 2001, incorporated into P 135. Program 135 mainly targets ethnic minority populations which make up the bulk of the category of “communes faced with extreme difficulties”. The main goals of P 135 are to: provide
adequate social services (health, water, sanitation, education…) and promote market economy in disadvantaged areas and, generally, to promote national security and the integration of ethnic minorities into the national society.

- The *Comprehensive Poverty Reduction and Growth Strategy* (CPRGS), launched in 2002 and supported by WB and IMF, is the principal policy document and steering instrument setting out the direction for Vietnam’s socio-economic development and poverty alleviation efforts in the coming decade. Its fundamental premise is that poverty reduction is to be achieved through economic growth and administrative reform. Its goal is to accelerate industrialisation and modernisation along a socialist line so as to make Vietnam a fully industrialised nation by 2020.

Remarkable results have been achieved over the past decade with respect to economic growth and poverty reduction. Vietnam’s achievements on these scores count as one of the greatest success stories worldwide. Thus, using a poverty line computed according to international standards, poverty has been halved in less than a decade (between 1993 and 2002). Or, put differently, almost a third of the total population has been lifted out of poverty in less than ten years (Vietnam Development Report [VDR] 2004:xi). The two main contributing factors to this success story are the reallocation of agricultural land to individual households (see Box on Land Reform below) and the increased integration of agriculture into the market economy (ibid).

But the same source (VDR 2004) also reports problems and worrying tendencies: thus, there is a striking disparity in terms of wellbeing/poverty between urban and rural households, where urban households are markedly better off suggesting a massive rural-to-urban migration in coming years. Secondly, and equally worrying, there is an evident and steady tendency towards growing socio-economic inequality between households. The gap between rich and poor increases – the poorest households are growing steadily poorer while the richest ones grow richer. Finally, poverty reduction achievements are notably slow and limited among ethnic minorities. The Central Highlands are reported as the poorest region in the country; food poverty in this region has remained almost unchanged for a decade in sharp contrast with the improvements obtained elsewhere (VDR 2004: xiii). The VDR 2004 forecasts that, by 2010, more than two thirds of the population living in hunger (below the food poverty line) will be ethnic minority people (ibid).

*Of particular relevance for the present study is the observation, in the same report, that the persistence of poverty in the Central Coast region of Vietnam (covering the study area) is directly related to decreasing access to forest land (which was previously common property, presumably – at least in part – under shifting cultivation) and the concomitant inability to turn forest land into productive use (VDR 2004: 107-8).*

**Box 3: Land reform**

A key element of the economic renovation policy during the past two decades was the New Land Law of 1993, transferring long-term user-rights of land to individual households. With the new land law, control of economic activities and agricultural production has effectively been shifted from the state-backed production cooperatives to individuals, households and private enterprises. In rural areas, the household has now become the basic economic unit. The land reform has substantially increased agricultural productivity in rural areas and accounts for much of the initial success of the nation’s success in poverty reduction.

The state is still the legal owner of land, but individuals and households can now acquire rights to use and occupy land, and to buy, sell, inherit and lease land-use rights. User rights are given for
annual cropland (paddy land) for up to 20 years, while user rights for land with perennial crops (fruit trees and forest land) are given for up to 50 years. District authorities are responsible for allocating land to households and for issuing land-use certificates.

However, the land law covers only land designated for “permanent agriculture”, thus providing no adequate legal framework for titling land under customary shifting cultivation. Thus, for example, there is no legal provision for individual ownership of fallow land (not under cultivation), making progress in land allocation slow and difficult in upland areas where shifting cultivation is practised. Indeed, the land reform has, on the whole, affected shifting cultivation among ethnic minorities adversely: rotation between cropping and fallow is hampered, pushing traditional systems of shifting cultivation towards more intensive, short-fallow cultivation regimes which, in turn, result in land degradation declining agricultural productivity in upland fields.

In addition, the 1993 land law does not accommodate customary communal ownership and land management. The law is heavily weighted toward privatised, individual ownership rather than recognition of communal resource management traditions prevalent among indigenous minorities. Land which under traditional shifting cultivation regimes was communally managed, particularly swidden fields left fallow for reforestation and future use, has in many cases been reclassified as forest land – natural (production) forest or protection forest (see Land Classification below) – thus precluding its clearing and re-cultivation within the customary rotational swidden regime.

It should be noted, however, that the 1993 land law has been subject to repeated revisions to enhance its flexibility and applicability to a diverse range of land management regimes. Currently (2006), amendments of the law are announced to accommodate communal and customary land-use systems. It is still too early to evaluate their effects on land use among upland minorities.

Though Vietnam as a whole has achieved important feats in the fields of economic growth and poverty reduction during the past two decades, its numerous ethnic minorities have on the whole benefited comparatively less from socio-economic development policies and programs than the Kinh majority population. On balance, there is a disturbing similarity between post-unification socialist development and cultural policies towards ethnic minorities and the assimilation policies of the South Vietnamese regime before the countries reunification 1975-6. The latter policies have been aptly characterised by McElwee (2002:193) thus: “plans … were based on the notion that the highlanders were ignorant and poor and needed to be “developed” by sedentarizing any populations assumed to be practicing swidden agriculture in the highlands and by moving people from the over-populated coastal areas into these lands.” The continuities with later, socialist policies are strikingly evident.

Recent socio-economic and cultural policies have become rather more sensitive to the nation’s ethnic and cultural diversity, but development planning is still overly rigid and strongly centralised, and executed with insufficient regard to the social and cultural particularities of ethnic minority populations and their specific environmental conditions.

The problem is compounded by a heavy and unfortunate reliance on the international development industry, including donor agencies and consultants, which provide overtly streamlined “solutions” to inadequately understood problems of upland development (cf Rambo et al 1995). Some of the persistent problems and misunderstandings plaguing development thinking in Vietnam are: (1) ethnic minorities are still generally perceived as ignorant and their
social institutions and livelihood practices as backward; (2) upland areas are still perceived as
endowed with immense unexploited resources waiting to be exploited by Kinh
immigrants/settlers and the application of modern technology, and (3) much of the development
efforts in the uplands still rely on lowland models which are ill suited to upland conditions.
5.
The Transformation of Local Livelihood Systems

5.1. Changes in indigenous settlement patterns

The vast majority of the indigenous people in the study area live in rural communes. The only urban areas in the study districts are the district centres, and these too, are townlets (thi tran) rather than towns with registered populations rarely exceeding 2,000 people (but which are also inhabited by an unknown number of unregistered lowlanders). The indigenous people living in and adjacent to the district towns are generally residents in villages which were already settled in the area before the establishment of the urban centre. There has been virtually no indigenous migration into these urban centres, and living conditions for the indigenous residents of towns and townlets appear, in fact, to be poorer than residents in rural communities (see Box 4).

Box 4:
District centres

Before the HCMH, district towns were described as rather dull places where government officials and other professionals, mostly Kinh from the lowlands, did not want to work or live/settle on a more permanent basis (interviews with cadres in several districts). Since the construction of the HCMH, however, these people have become much more willing to settle permanently in the area since they feel that, with the increased availability of services and goods in the growing urban centres, life is becoming easier and more attractive to everyone.

Some of the district centres have grown dramatically over the past few years (since the construction of the HCMH) – from being clusters of villages with a few government buildings to becoming small towns (for example, Prao town, the district capital of Dong Giang). Others towns were already fairly large before the HCMH; this is the case, for example, with Kham Duc town, which used to be the commercial hub for the waves of small-scale gold miners converging on the town during the gold-rush in Phuoc Son district during the 1980s and 90s (to a smaller extent this also applied to Thanh My town in Nam Giang).

Ethnic minorities constitute, on the average, about half of the total population in district capitals. Most of them continue living as shifting cultivators, hunters and collectors of forest products, even when their hamlets are being absorbed by the expanding town. Most of the attractive agricultural and residential land in the vicinity of towns have today been sold to the urban population or Kinh entrepreneurs. The indigenous population is, as a rule, not engaged in commerce, trade or service occupations.

Most villages along the road have been relocated to their present location as a result of the Fixed Cultivation and Sedentarisation Program (effective in the region since 1975). Some of the villages have been relocated from remote locations in the high area near the Vietnam-Laos border while others, indigenous to the study districts and communes, have been encouraged to move closer to the road and market centres along the road. The most recent round of resettlement took place with
the completion of the HCMH, when a number of villages were relocated (mostly relatively short distances) to their present location along the highway.

These government-sponsored relocations have implied profound social and economic changes for the communities in question; generally several smaller settlements have been grouped together into larger, permanent villages, swidden cultivation have been progressively restricted and wet-rice cultivation strongly promoted. Schools, health care services, piped water and electricity have been provided to most communes and villages. The most fundamental change is that villages are now permanent. Though short-cycle, rotational shifting cultivation is still permitted in aborted form, settlements no longer move with the fields as was the case in the traditional system.

Box 5:
An example of village resettlements in Talu commune, Dong Giang district (QN)

In Talu commune there are presently four villages within a distance of 10 km from Prao town along the main road to Danang (14D). Only two of these, Bana 1 and Bana 2 (an off-shoot of Bana 1) are indigenous to the commune, whereas the other two, Dhoong and Areh were relocated to the commune after 1975 as a part of the FCSP from other localities (Dhoong from the Vietnam-Laos border area, Areh from the highlands of the present Za Hung and Ma Cooh communes). As a result, the pressure on land, particularly good paddy land, is today great and the livelihood situation in some of the villages is precarious (see WWF report on Ecotourism 2006 with respect to Dhoong village, Dong Giang district).

In the past it would have been inconceivable for villages to be located so close to each other; as a rule traditional settlements were small and dispersed (numbering somewhere between 70-150 individuals and located at least 30 minutes walking distance from each other).

5.2. Agriculture and land use

5.2.1. Land legislation and its implications on traditional land use

The changes in settlement and land-use patterns are reflected in, and partly driven by the national land-use legislation (cf Box 3, Chapter 4). Thus, the land use and livelihood systems of the ethnic communities in the study area are largely determined by the laws and policy regulations regarding land use and land tenure. A complex system of land classification (as regards forest land, there exists, in fact, two parallel systems of classification) defines, for each commune and village, the various uses to which villagers and households can put the village land. This legal framework, though more or less rigidly applied, severely circumscribes local livelihood practices and strategies. In particular, it works against the traditional pattern of long-cycle, rotational shifting cultivation.

Very briefly, land is classified into residential land, agricultural land, forest land and “bare land” (the latter category including degraded land, forested or not, or land not designated for any specific purpose – steep, rocky land or land otherwise regarded as unusable). Residential land (đất thổ cư) includes land for house building and home gardens in the vicinity of the dwellings; in effect, residential land consists of the settlement area visibly identified with a particular village or
hamlet with its houses, yards, gardens, fish ponds and adjacent grazing land for livestock. *Forest land* (đất làm nghề) is sub-classified into 16 sub-units, three of which make up the generic category “natural forest” which, by definition, excludes activities involving forest destruction (logging or tree-cutting for other purposes – agriculture, firewood and house construction). As a rule, any kind of agriculture is prohibited on forest land, though non-timber extraction (collection of forest fruits, rattan, honey…) may be permitted in certain parts/within certain categories of forest land.

*Agricultural land* (đất nông nghề) includes all land designated for agricultural purposes/crop cultivation, including intensive and permanent wet-rice cultivation and more extensive, upland-rice cultivation on a rotational basis (involving sequential cropping and fallowing in short cycles of up to 3-5 years, see below). Within this category also falls the continuous and/or rotational cultivation of subsistence-cum cash crops such as cassava, maize and beans (of various kinds) as well as strict cash crops, introduced by district agricultural extension cadres and grown for sale on local markets. The definition of the category of agricultural land is clearly based on the notion of permanent cultivation; accordingly it does not allow for extensive cropping-and-fallowing systems based on long rotational cycles such as the indigenous systems of shifting cultivation of upland rice which until recently formed the basis of local livelihood systems in the region.

Superimposed on this basic classificatory grid is another, partly overlapping grid, specifying three categories of forests: *protection forest* (rừng phòng hộ; forest land designated for watershed protection), *special-use forest* (rừng đặc dụng) including National Parks, nature reserves and sites of national historical and cultural value…), and *production forest* (rừng sản xuất; forest land designated for timber extraction and commercial tree plantations). The latter category, production forest, is somewhat vague; thus, much of the current, local tree-planting enterprises/initiatives for commercial exploitation occur on land classified as residential, agricultural or bare land. All three categories of forest land (protection, special-use and production forest) exclude food-crop cultivation.

The point to emphasise here is that both classificatory grids mentioned above, specifying the uses to which local land resources can be put, effectively exclude a sustainable system of shifting cultivation of upland rice which is still the subsistence base for most of the ethnic communities in the region. There is no “slot” in the legal classification system in which to fit the traditional/indigenous system of shifting cultivation, i.e., rotational cropping with sufficiently long fallow periods (cultivation cycles) to make the system sustainable. To put it differently: the official land classification is construed as if shifting cultivation does not exist (cf. Box 3 on Land Reform above).

While the traditional system of shifting cultivation made no distinction between forest and agricultural land – since the forest was continually converted into cultivated fields (swiddens) and, conversely, fields were progressively converted into secondary forest of different stages of maturation in a cyclical process – current policies assume and are, indeed, based on the absolute separation of agricultural land from forest land. This radical shift in perception and practice came about as a result of the FCSP from 1975 and onwards, when villages were regrouped and resettled in areas near roads and market towns. The introduction of wet-rice cultivation and the current (perverted) practices of upland cultivation stem from this period.

As a result, indigenous communities are today legally allocated much less land for cultivation than they traditionally used under rotational shifting cultivation. A typical indigenous rural
commune in the study area, A’vuong (Tay Giang district), nowadays only has ca 2% of its overall land designated for agriculture (292.4 ha out of a total of 14,760 ha). This is far lower than the provincial percentage of 10.6% agricultural land (Quang Nam) which includes the Kinh lowland population. These figures contrast sharply with the huge tracts of land which the indigenous population possessed in the past (see below) and which they still consider “communal land” according to custom. The implication of this dramatic reduction of forest land, legally available for shifting cultivation, has radically altered indigenous cultivation practices and converted the traditional, long-cycle and sustainable form into a more intensive, short-cycle and environmentally unsustainable form of swidden cultivation. This aborted form of shifting cultivation is also less productive than the traditional cultivation regime.

Thus, villagers in the study area repeatedly stated that, in their view, land suitable for upland-rice cultivation is in short supply and appropriate wet-rice land is not sufficient to compensate for the shortage of swidden land. It is our contention that government policies and current land legislation do not permit a sustainable form of shifting cultivation. At the same time, they fail to provide sufficient alternative means of securing food. The irony – or tragedy – is that the prevailing atrophied form of shifting cultivation (with too short cultivation cycles) is a great deal less sustainable than the traditional forms which current policies and development interventions were aimed to do away with—precisely on environmental grounds.

5.2.2. Upland shifting cultivation

The sedentarisation policies and land legislation notwithstanding, the bulk of the communities in the study area remain primarily shifting cultivators. The staple crop in all localities except A Roang commune (A Luoi district) where wet rice is now the main crop, is dry- or upland rice of which a number of varieties exist. The rice is planted by hand on the cleared and burnt fields (swiddens, mostly on sloping fields) in March or May-June depending on variety. The rice plants are intercropped with a number of other crops (including maize, millet, gourds, cucumbers and beans of various kinds) with similar ripening periods (so that they can be harvested at roughly the same time). The fields are then harvested in July-August or October-November. Fertilisers and insecticides are generally not used.

After a field has been used for dry rice for one year, it is subsequently used as a cassava field for 1 or 2 years after which it is left fallow (for varying periods depending on the land shortage situation in different localities; see below). Cassava roots require a longer period then rice to ripen, often up to one year, but can remain in the soil for several years. Cassava fields are usually intercropped with pineapple, banana plants and other perennial fruit trees.

Dry rice is a vulnerable crop and harvest failures are common and constitute an accepted reality for indigenous cultivators (there was one in 2004, another in 2006). Factors such as strong wind, heavy rain storms, heat, insects, birds and hungry wild pigs may easily destroy the harvest. The productivity of dry rice (and other crops cultivated on the swidden fields) varies considerably depending on the quality of the soil which itself depends on a number of factors including the inclination of the sloping field, the humidity of the soil and the properties of the soil itself. Most importantly, productivity depends on the age of the forest cleared – in other words, how long the swidden field had been left fallow before clearing and planting. The older the forest cleared, the more productive the field.

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10 The figure is from 2002. Source: Tay Giang district statistics.
A single harvest on a relatively small area (0.5 ha) of cleared 25-30 year old forest can easily provide a family with rice for several years. Despite this fact, even in the traditional indigenous agricultural system, old forests were not cleared every year but usually only when the entire village resettled in a new area. This generally happened every 7-10 years. Traditional (pre-war), standard fallow periods appear to have ranged between 7-12 years (with considerable individual variations from locality to locality). In the past, villages also tended to move within the boundaries of the village territory or a larger territory which was considered the common property of a closely tied group of small settlements.

Box 6:
The local importance of cassava

Cassava is the second most important crop of the indigenous communities in the study area. Although less appreciated than rice, the exemplary food, cassava is a much less vulnerable crop than dry rice and thus provides food security for households in years when rice harvests fail. Cassava is also used for feeding livestock as well as for making wine. Moreover, cassava is increasingly being sold for cash (see below).

Although rice is considered the favoured food, cassava is in no way depreciated. It has for generations been used as supplementary food in the local diet. However, today, local people appear increasingly to consider cassava as “poor people’s food”. Thus, many Katu, living near towns or otherwise influenced by Kinh culture, seem to no longer to accept the idea of eating cassava a few months of the year. This notion that cassava is “poor” food is very likely something that local people have picked up from Kinh people in the towns. To Kinh people in the region, eating cassava is equated with suffering extreme hardship.

As opposed to this depreciative view of cassava, Krahn – a nutritionist working among the Katu in Lao – has pointed out that a diet based on a variety of different crops, including tubers (such as cassava) and wild ”forest vegetables” is much more nutritious than a rice-only diet, even at high levels of rice intake (Krahn 2005).

Such bounded village territories could, in the past, be quite extensive; often only a small number of settlements (with each settlement in the past rarely exceeding 100 inhabitants) would share the entirety of the areas which today constitute communes. Most of the forest land was considered potentially available for agriculture, and villages as well as fields “rotated” within the extensive village land – thus allowing for long fallow periods and sufficient periods for secondary forest to regenerate.

As a consequence of current land legislation (basically excluding legal ownership of fallow land) and the provisional ban on shifting cultivation as part of the Sedentarisation Program, forest land available for shifting cultivation has been dramatically reduced and confined to the immediate vicinity of villages. Today – as we saw above -- the situation is reversed. In Phuoc Nang commune, f ex, out of a total of 7204.82 ha of land, only 253.7 ha has been allocated as “agricultural land”. While settlements in the past tended to move periodically within the settlement territory (every 7-10 years or so), villages today are permanently fixed to a specific locality (though cultivation is still rotational in most localities – albeit in shorter cycles than was traditionally the case).
Furthermore, not a single household in our survey claimed to have cleared forest older than five years in recent years (since 2003) and in many localities villagers claimed they only left their fields fallow 1-2 years. As can be seen from Diagram 1 below, most of the interviewed households that reported fallow periods of 5 years were from Huc Nhi, primarily from Cup village (the most remote village in our survey). We were also told that land lying fallow for more than three years is considered unused (according to the national land regulations; not the customary land laws) and is thus (legally) open for anyone to cultivate or clear.

Due to the government policies suppressing shifting cultivation of upland rice in favour of wet-rice and cash-crop production, the area under dry-rice cultivation in all districts have, by and large, remained constant (or shrinking slightly) over the past eight years (Table 5 below). Note, however that the actual use of land may differ substantially from what appears in district statistics since district statistics often show the officially allotted land [in accordance with the official land policy] rather than constituting an actual measurement of land usage).

Diagram 1: Fallow periods in different communes (from survey)

Table 5: Land under dry-rice cultivation (ha)

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Da Krong</td>
<td>1938</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1880</td>
<td>1887.3</td>
<td>1890</td>
<td>1878.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nam Giang</td>
<td>2556.9</td>
<td>2575.8</td>
<td>2400.5</td>
<td>2506.9</td>
<td>2525</td>
<td>2668.0</td>
<td>2440</td>
<td>2452.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phuoc Son</td>
<td>595</td>
<td>556</td>
<td>616</td>
<td>578</td>
<td>550</td>
<td>527</td>
<td>520</td>
<td>530</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Another factor contributing to the “freezing” (confinement) of the land area available for shifting cultivation is the rapid expansion of intensive cash-crop production. In the localities showing extremely short or no fallow periods (see Diagram 1) it appears that this can be correlated with the very strong pressure/incentive (in the southernmost district communes in particular) to put as much land as possible under cash-crop production (see below section about cash crop cultivation). There is little doubt that this intensive crop production is progressively exhausting the soils in the area. For land under dry-rice cultivation, this extreme shortening of fallow periods is devastating for the soil and, thus, the productivity of the fields:

“I used to have 2 ha of swidden land which produced enough food for my family. In 2005, I cleared 1 more ha in remote young forest that had not been schemed. I cleared more land to grow cassava and potatoes for selling. Rice is used for eating only. Before, when I cleared one field, I grew dry rice in the first year and then cassavas in the 2nd and 3rd. After that I left the fields fallow for 3 years. Nowadays, for hilly fields, I just leave them fallow for 1 and a half year. With flat land, I grow crops every year. However, the productivity has fallen 50% as compared to the past.” (Villager, Phuoc Nang commune, Phuoc Son district)

“Before we only grew cassava and maize for consumption. Since the road was constructed, traders are coming to buy these crops so we grow more of them to sell. Our need for land has become bigger and bigger and nowadays we always feel that we lack land. The soil has become less fertile than before because people do not leave fields fallow. If the situation becomes worse, we will ask for permission to clear more swidden land.” (A Lac, Dakbok village head, Dak Kroong commune, Dak Glei district)

**Box 7: Traditional land tenure and emerging land conflicts**

Ownership of swidden land is still managed on the basis of customary law. According to traditional practices, different families/lineages took possession of specific areas of forest when a village first settled in a particular territory. Often, several families would have swiddens on the same hill. Ownership is permanent and passed on to male descendants indefinitely until the family/lineage moves away (permanently) or all of its male members die. Traditionally, land could be given away or transacted to another family but only to fellow villagers. Land, always had to stay within the village and any land transaction had to be approved by the village headman and/or the village elder(s). Thus, the village as a community was the “owner” of all village land. Conflicts over land seem to have been rare within villages, but could occur between neighbouring villages.

Today, land conflicts are still rare in the study area, and most of the reported cases are due to the incomensurability between customary and Vietnamese national land laws. Contrary to customary law, the national land laws – essentially moulded on lowland wet-rice agriculture – state that land left uncultivated more than three years is free for anyone to claim. The national Vietnamese land laws have thereby created uncertain property rights which are not only creating conflicts over land but also serve as an incentive for the traditional owners of land to reduce fallow periods substantially in order to retain their land rights.
In the southern districts of Phuoc Son and Dak Glei, where demand for cash appears to have become acute and where villagers are focussing heavily on cash-crop cultivation along the HCMH, there are an increasing number of land disputes.

One communal official in Phuoc Nang commune explained that:

"before the HCMH there were no conflicts over land. Now, however, in villages no 2 and 4 people have started competing over land. Since the road, people feel that they need the land near the road to grow cassava for sale to traders. Many of the people who are disputing over land do not report to the commune so we do not know the exact number of conflicts. They have land conflicts about their ancestral land so the commune and district cannot solve these issues. The main reason for these conflicts is that Vietnamese law states that if land is left fallow more than 3 years other people can clear and claim it. But according to the customary law, ownership stays within the lineage forever."

5.2.3. Wet rice cultivation

Wet rice is a new crop (introduced after 1975) in the study area. Although wet rice is far less important as a food crop than dry rice and cassava, it is a crop which is steadily increasing in economic importance in all study communes; at least a few households in every village have started growing wet rice (except Ro village in Nam Giang).

The extent to which wet rice cultivation is being practised usually depends on the specific geographic conditions of the area. Except for relatively extensive and fertile valley land in A Roang, A Luoi and around Kham Duc, most of the land in the study area is unsuitable for wet rice cultivation due to sloping fields or water shortage. To make more areas suitable for wet rice cultivation requires substantial investments in irrigation and land-levelling; in fact, substantial amounts of government funds are every year spent in creating new paddy land.

Wet-rice cultivation is at the heart of Vietnam’s rural development and poverty-reduction programs, and the area under paddy cultivation is steadily increasing in all districts and communes (Table 6), even those where the physical conditions are not well suited for the purpose. Table 6 shows that paddy rice cultivation, as opposed to dry-rice cultivation which has diminished slightly over the past decade, has more than doubled in the three districts from which detailed data is available (and, indeed, tripled in Nam Giang district between 1997-2004).

Table 6: Land under paddy cultivation (ha)

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Da Krong</td>
<td>350.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>559.1</td>
<td>620.6</td>
<td>686.3</td>
<td>788.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nam Giang</td>
<td>143.2</td>
<td>174.2</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>387</td>
<td>409</td>
<td>439.4</td>
<td>445.8</td>
<td>492.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phuoc Son</td>
<td>212</td>
<td>212</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>359</td>
<td>386</td>
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As can be seen from Diagram 2 (below) the number of households cultivating wet rice varies considerable between communes, presumably because of differences in natural conditions. In areas with suitable conditions -- such as A Roang commune -- all households are engaged in wet-rice cultivation while in other communes with a more rugged landscape with steep hills and narrow stream- and river valleys, such as most of Huc Nghi commune, the situation is the opposite, with only a few households engaging in paddy cultivation. In Cup village in Huc Nghi commune, forest land suitable for shifting cultivation is still relatively abundant and few villagers feel the need for taking up intensive paddy cultivation. The diagram further reveals that the size of paddy fields varies significantly between communes; thus, it is worth noting that most of the households in A Roang and Dak Kroong communes possess fairly small plots.

Diagram 2: Variation in areas under wet-rice cultivation between communes.

Note the large number of households in Huc Nghi with no wet rice fields at all.

Wet-rice cultivation gives considerably more stable yields than upland-rice under shifting cultivation (Diagram 13 in Appendix 4 shows how much dry rice yields may vary from year to year). Preliminary calculations from data in A’vuong commune suggest that productivity per ang of rice planted/sown is roughly similar between the two cultivation regimes. However, more rice can be planted per area-unit in the paddy field than in the swidden field and with adequate water supply paddy fields normally yield two crops/year in the region.

Virtually all farmers interviewed are keen on expanding wet rice cultivation despite the great variation in natural conditions between the study communes. The fundamental reason for this wish is the fact that swidden cultivation of dry rice – due to the packages of policies and programs working against it – is increasingly becoming insufficient as a basis for household subsistence in most communes. Farmers thus want to expand wet rice cultivation as a complement to existing dry rice cultivation. It should be emphasised, however, that paddy
cultivation can hardly replace dry-rice cultivation entirely since suitable wet-rice land is very scarce in the region (see, for example, CTSI Report 5) and the water supply often insufficient (as is the case in the valleys of A Roang and A Luoi). Any expansion of paddy land in the study area thus requires substantial investments in irrigation and other infrastructural works (including levelling of sloping ground etc).

5.2.4. Cash-crop production

The transformation of subsistence agriculture into an agricultural system combining subsistence and cash-crop cultivation is proceeding fastest in the southernmost districts of the study area (Nam Giang, Phuoc Son and Dak Glei) whereas in the central districts of Tay Giang and Dong Giang – the most isolated before the construction of HCMH – cash-crop production is still on a very small scale. District officials in Nam Giang commented that extensive contacts with the more “developed” and cash-crop oriented districts in Kontum were one of the reasons why Nam Giang was “more developed than the more backward district of Tay Giang.”

The district of A Luoi, with relatively easy access to the coast and the provincial capital Hue, also display a rapid commercialisation of its agricultural production. Table 7 below shows the area under cash-crop cultivation in various districts during the past few years. It can be seen that Dak Glei district has tripled its cash-crop production land between 2000 and 2005, while A Luoi district has doubled it between 1997 and 2004. Interestingly, in the northernmost district of Da Krong, also with access to the provincial capital, Dong Ha, and the market town of Khe Sanh, the development of cash-crop production is comparatively slow.

Table 7: Total area under cash crop production (including cassava, maize, beans, peanuts etc.) (ha)

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Da Krong</td>
<td>1,829</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2,386.6</td>
<td>2,526.2</td>
<td>2,616.2</td>
<td>2,697.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Luoi</td>
<td>1,097.0</td>
<td>1,834.7</td>
<td>1,957.9</td>
<td>2,048.8</td>
<td>2,340.6</td>
<td>2,617.0</td>
<td>2,465.5</td>
<td>2,212.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phuoc Son</td>
<td>1,222</td>
<td>1,222</td>
<td>1,264</td>
<td>1,307</td>
<td>1,312</td>
<td>1,384.7</td>
<td>1,447</td>
<td>1,498</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dak Glei</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>449</td>
<td>444</td>
<td>559</td>
<td>833</td>
<td>941</td>
<td>1,467</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Cash crops”, in study area as a whole, mainly include cassava, maize, beans, peanuts and sweet potatoes. A minority of the surveyed households also sell rice. Very few households in the study communes sold rice from the swidden fields (and in small quantities) while a slightly larger -- but still small -- number of households sell paddy rice in large quantities (Table 8). Thus, the sale of

12 This influence from the more developed south has been taking place for several decades. This can be seen also from the fact that much of the immigration, both of non-autochthonous ethnic minorities (some belonging to the same ethnic groups as the indigenous populations, others belonging to ethnic minorities from Vietnam’s north, notably Nung and Tay groups) and Kinh people, has mainly come from the south. Many of these non-autochthonous settlers have also brought with them new agricultural and livestock raising techniques. Like the Kinh, the Tay and the Nung are usually more adept in modern livestock raising techniques than the indigenous Gie Trieng and Katu groups.
Paddy rice provides a considerable income for some households, but is overall not a large source of revenue in the study area. The average annual income from the sale of paddy rice, for the households which do sell it, amounts to 4-5 million VND.

**Table 8: Sale of rice (% of total households in survey; N=75)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Swidden rice (dry rice)</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>2.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paddy rice (wet rice)</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>18.7</td>
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</table>

*Rice, however, is never considered a cash crop*, neither by local villagers, nor by district or commune authorities. By contrast, most other food crops (including cassava and maize) are counted as cash crops in official production statistics – regardless whether they are grown for sale or domestic consumption. Presumably, this ample definition of cash crops gives better production figures. (For a similar reason – to make production figures correspond more closely with policy guidelines – there may be reasons to doubt the accuracy of the official figures regarding dry-rice yields and swidden land under cultivation [cf. Table 5 above]).

In 2005, approximately 50% of the surveyed households in the study communes sold cash crops – excluding cassava. However, the income most households received from this was limited, with 76% of them earning less than 1 million VND/year from this activity (and none earning more than 4 million VND/year).

**Diagram 3: Nr of households in study communes earning money from cash crop sale (not including cassava; N = 75).**

*Income from cash crops (not including cassava)*

- Dak Kroong
- Phuoc Nang
- Thanh My
- A Roang
- Huc Nghiep

- 0,000,000-4,000,000
- 1,000,000-4,000,000
- 200,000-800,000
- 30,000-100,000

# hhs 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
The diagram should be read as follows: in Dak Kroong 7 hhs earned between 1-4 million VND, and 7hhs between 200-800,000 VND etc.

The most important cash crop, however, is cassava (total earnings from cassava among the interviewed households was higher than the amount earned from all other cash crops put together). Usually, cassava is grown on sloping fields and has to be harvested by hand. Sold at a price of 400-500 VND/kg it is hardly a cash crop that many Kinh farmers would feel inclined to cultivate. Yet, due to the appearance of a number of large buyers – including the Quang Nam Powder Factory -- offering more stable prizes than was previously the case, commercial cassava cultivation is expanding steadily. The number of households (in our survey) selling cassava increased from 33.3% in 2004 to 45.3% in 2005 and 40% of the cassava selling households in fact earned more than 5 million from this activity. At a price of 500 VND/kg this means that these households transported and sold more than 10 tons of cassava/year.

Table 9: Area under cassava cultivation (ha)*

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Da Kroong</td>
<td>470.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>498.0</td>
<td>541.0</td>
<td>561.5</td>
<td>579.8</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Nam Giang</td>
<td>371.1</td>
<td>371.4</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>463.7</td>
<td>448</td>
<td>477</td>
<td>731.2</td>
<td>595.8</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Dak Glei</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1,023</td>
<td>959</td>
<td>1,203</td>
<td>1,170</td>
<td>1,400</td>
<td>1,687</td>
</tr>
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* These district statistics showing a steadily increasing amount of land used for cassava cultivation might not reflect the real situation “on the ground”. Some villagers in the southernmost communes claimed that they nowadays grew ten times more cassava than before the HCMH.

A close scrutiny of the survey data on cash-crop production in five of the study communes (Diagrams above/below) suggests a number of preliminary conclusions. Thus, it is clear that, in the northernmost commune of Hue Nghi (Da Kroong district), cash-crop production has not taken root to any significant degree. One likely reason for this circumstance is that, in the roadside villages, there is a severe lack of land. In the more remote village of Cup, where swidden land is still abundant and shifting cultivation provide abundant yields of dry rice, there is, by contrast, not much interest in growing cash crops for the market. This village is still a fairly traditional village and villagers here prefer to cultivate crops for subsistence only.

In A Roang commune (Thua Thien Hue), as we noted earlier, lack of suitable land seems to be one reason why these villagers do not engage in growing cash crops. Most of the flat land is already being used for wet rice agriculture. One might also assume that the extensive paddy cultivation in this commune, in fact, supply most households with the income they need for adequate subsistence and survival. (Swidden cultivation does not “officially” exist in the commune, though our survey reveals that it does occur – albeit on a smaller scale than in other study communes).

The geographical disparities as regards cash crop production become even more accentuated when we look at income from the commercial cultivation of cassava (Diagram 4 below). Dak Kroong commune (in Kontum) is clearly the study commune where cassava agriculture is most intensive (followed by Phuoc Nang, Quang Nam). It is not so important in Thanh My town,
perhaps due to lack of cultivable land (as is often the case closer to the district centres). Farmers in Dak Kroong earned substantially more money from the sale of cassava (cultivated on swidden fields) than any other community in the survey. As can be seen from the Diagram 4, all interviewed households in Dak Kroong received income from selling cassava, with 66.7% of the interviewees in Dak Kroong earning between 510,000 and 2,000,000VND/year and 26.7% earning more than 2,000,000 VND/year from the sale of cassava.

![Diagram 4: Income from sale of cassava](image)

Thus, local farmers in Dak Kroong and Phuoc Nang have clearly increased their cassava production considerably in recent years, much due to a growing demand for cassava flour in China. This increasing demand/production has produced significant changes in other aspects of the agricultural practises in the region. The intensified cassava cultivation entails a significantly increased work burden, in particular for women: cassava is still harvested by hand on sloping fields and then transported (often in back-baskets carried by women on foot) several kilometres to the HCMH. The hard labour involved has alarmed staff at the Dak Kroong health clinic, who commented that, recently, many people (mostly women) complained about pains in their backs, chests and necks during the harvest period.

However, the most serious issue for the villages engaged in intensive cash-crop cultivation is perhaps not the extra labour required for this work but rather the long-term impact on the land of this expanding and intensified land use. One interviewee explained that, presently, people in the village were planting ten times more cassava than in the past. Obviously this expansion of commercial cassava cultivation requires much more land under permanent cropping than was the case with the traditional regime of subsistence cultivation. Many interviewees acknowledged that this was a problem and were worried about the future consequences of their current practice:
"(...) the issue of land is becoming more complicated. People have started to feel that they need more land. In the past they only grew enough cassava for their own use. Now people have started to grow cassava for the market. They now need much more land than before. Also, the fertility of the land is quickly deteriorating. If people keep cultivating like this, it will become totally infertile. Before people worked on fields further away, now they are concentrating all their fields along the road to be able to transport rice and cassava easier...."

In Phuoc Nang commune villagers stated that land pressure had increased substantially since farmers had started to grow cassava for the market and communal cadres commented that there has been an increasing number of land disputes between villagers every year since the commercial cultivation of cassava started a few years back. The same trend of intensive cassava cultivation had also made people encroach more than usual into forest land on which they were not allowed to cultivate as well as reducing the fallow land for all their fields, including dry rice fields. As concerns the cassava fields specifically they are either cropped permanently or left fallow only for 2-3 years after an equal period of cropping. This intensive land use is a new phenomenon in the region and clearly a direct result of current development policies – the official emphasis on agricultural intensification and commercialisation.

Despite these evident, emerging problems, this new trend of growing cassava for the market is lauded in Vietnamese media, probably since it is the only cash crop that has become popular (has not failed) in the Truong Son region to date. The trend and its consequences can only be justified in the context of a short-sighted policy promoting “growth at all costs”. The below quotation is from an article appearing in Nhan Dan (21/3 2005)13 showing the “remarkable improvements” of people’s livelihoods along the HCMH:

"Last January, 8,000 tonnes of cassava slices of the Minh An Co. Ltd. were transported by the road from the Central Highlands to Da Nang Port for export to China. It is estimated that around 200,000 tonnes of cassava will be transported by this route to Da Nang Port for export this year."

5.2.5. Changes in agriculture: a summary

National land-use legislation and the policies of sedentarisation and agricultural commercialisation have created a situation where the indigenous peoples in the CTS region are progressively forced to abandon the traditional basis for their subsistence and survival – rotational shifting cultivation of upland rice – and replace it with intensive wet-rice cultivation and cash-crop production. Although local people do not always respect them, and district and commune officers implement them with a certain pragmatic flexibility, these policies and regulations have fundamentally transformed agricultural activities in the study area. Shifting cultivation today entails much shorter fallow periods than in the past (in the southernmost districts many farmers are in fact not letting fields fallow at all), and cultivation has become much more concentrated around villages and along the HCMH than in the past. The ban on swidden cultivation implies, in practice, that people are not allowed to clear forests older than five years.

This change can hardly be regarded as an optimal solution to the “problem” of shifting cultivation. Soils are rapidly becoming exhausted and fields less productive, thus both causing land degradation and debilitating food security in the region. The currently evolving abortive

form of shifting cultivation is environmentally unsustainable and less productive than the traditional form involving long rotational cycles.

The government has persistently sought to eliminate the need for shifting cultivation of upland rice by encouraging people to grow wet rice and rear livestock for the market. But suitable wet rice land is scarce in the region and the expansion of wet rice cultivation thus slow. While the traditional form of livestock rearing is rapidly becoming unviable in the new agricultural landscape, the indigenous population is slow in adopting the new, more costly and labour intensive forms of market-oriented livestock rearing – principally because they require new skills and substantial investments in fodder and labour (see below).

The local governments in all the study districts are also trying to replace shifting cultivation by plantations of what it calls “industrial trees”, i.e. a number of fast-growing tree species such as keo, tram gio and boi loi (suitable for making [cheap] furniture etc.). Many of the indigenous people have now started trying to grow these species, but it was reported that Kinh are much more skilled in managing these “industrial tree” plantations. Many incidences were also reported -- especially in Nam Giang and Phuoc Son -- of urban Kinh taking advantage of local people and buying their land through dubious transactions for the purpose of establishing these plantations. It could also be observed that whereas most villagers would have very small plantations of these new species, a few richer households in each village as well (Kinh) outsiders had much larger plantations than the average village household; in the future this trend might exacerbate the economic inequality in the villages.

A villager in Phuoc Nang explained that:

“A normal household only grows 100-200 keo and boi loi trees. But the village headman has 8000 trees and outsiders from Kham Duc town have a lot of trees too.”

In sum, despite sedentarisation and the government’s consistent efforts to eradicate it, shifting cultivation is still the dominant form of agriculture (and overall the main livelihood activity) in the study area and dry rice the basis for subsistence in all study communes except A Roang (A Luoi district). But, and we reiterate, the evolving form of short-cycle cultivation is a perversion of the traditional, indigenous form of rotational cultivation. Ironically, it is evolving in response and as a direct result of past and present government policies.

Cash crops, mostly on swidden land, are expanding across the region. From a social and environmental perspective, there are reasons for concern about the rapid expansion of commercial cassava production in the southern communes of the study area (particularly Dak Kroong, Dak Glei district). Intensive cassava cultivation on swidden land (with no or short fallow cycles) represents a serious threat to the environment. Our study also suggests that the strong push towards cash-crop production entails social problems, including the collapse of customary land laws, with land conflicts as a result, and a significant increase in the work burden of women (see Table 11 below).

These evident problems notwithstanding, the trend continues unabated. Communes committed to cash-crop production are indeed hailed as model communes and regarded as more modern and progressive than communes in which agriculture is less commercialised; indeed such subsistence-oriented communes are regarded backward. Increased and intensified cash-crop production is part of the country’s development and poverty-reduction strategy and therefore encouraged by province and district authorities. However, there can be no doubt about the fact the expansion of cash-crop production in combination with the abortive form of shifting cultivation is both
environmentally unsustainable and misguided on socio-economic grounds. In a setting where paddy cultivation will remain marginal in terms of food production for the foreseeable future, this emerging agro-economic system will undermine (and, judging from interviews, is actively undermining) rather than strengthen food security in the region.

5.3. Complementary livelihood activities

"(…) today’s development discussions are mainly based on the erroneous idea that ethnic minorities in tropical forest areas have always been impoverished and suffering from various illnesses and a poor diet. As mentioned before, the major assumption for development is that these people have always eked out a miserable existence." (Krahn 2005, p 25)

The recent changes in the indigenous people’s livelihood are not limited to their agricultural activities but encompass the entire range of local livelihood activities including hunting and fishing, livestock rearing and the gathering of forest products. Whereas the new practices introduced have benefits, they often have a disruptive impact on the traditional practises which are not taken into account in official records or studies. In fact, most interviewed villagers claimed that, in the past, they ate more domestic meat, wild game meat and fish than today. In the words of one elder in Phuoc Nang commune:

"In the 1990s and earlier people could raise more livestock than today since at that time people only engaged in swidden cultivation. After some people started cultivating wet rice and cash crops, and making home gardens, other people were no longer free to let livestock graze freely around the village. In my village, there are today about 15-16 young couples [recently established households] which lack land. Since they have no land, they also lack food. They have to eat cassava. In the past, people had more meat to eat. In winter time they could eat wild animals every day. In summer time, they ate meat at least once per month, periodically several times per week [because of ritual sacrifices, see below] and a lot of fish. At that time, our village was located in the Ngoc Linh area [a "remote" area in Kontum]. Since we came here, everything has become worse because of the polluted environment from the gold exploitation and the decrease in the number of wild pigs in the forest [due to commercial hunting]. Nowadays, in one year, the entire village can only catch about 10 animals, but nobody shares the game meat with other villagers anymore – it's all sold to outsiders [in the district centre].

However, the changes are not only about food, they are also about perceptions. Despite, eating less, the elderly man quoted above went on to say that people now ate more "civilised" and "hygienic" food.

5.3.1. Hunting

As mentioned in Chapter 3 on indigenous culture, hunting is not only an important subsistence activity for the ethnic minorities in the study area, but also an activity with a profound social and religious-spiritual meaning. In the past, and in some more traditional villages still today, specific hunting rituals were carried out in connection with hunting in order to ensure its sustainability in the village territory. Offerings were made to hunting deities – the Spirit Guardian of the game animals so as to ensure the regeneration of game animals in the forest (the decorated skulls seen in many local houses and in the Community Houses are the visible manifestation of these ritual offerings). This ritualisation of hunting points to the fact that local people were deeply concerned
about the sustainability of their hunting activities and well aware of the fact that their continuing survival depended on the regeneration of forest game and plants.

Hunting and the sharing of game meat were also intimately connected to village solidarity and community cohesion. Thus, every successful hunt (of a reasonably big animal) entailed village-wide, communal feasting; this institution was compulsory and part of the public ritual ensuring hunting success for the village in the future. In this way, hunting was instrumental for village cohesion.

Hunting and fishing supplied a great proportion of the protein consumed by villagers in the traditional food system. A neglected aspect of this system is that hunting and fishing, and the ritual feasting on meat from domestic stock largely complemented each other in the course of the traditional annual food cycle; thus, fishing mainly took place in the warm spring months (March-June), while hunting predominated in the cold post-harvest months (November-February). Domestic livestock was ritually consumed in connection with the rice-cycle rituals accompanying the planting, sprouting and harvesting of the rice (May-November) as well as at irregular occasions throughout the year in connection with wedding, funerals and other major, public rituals. Hunting, fishing and the ritual consumption of livestock thus formed part of a subtly integrated food system.

Hunting was also, as described in Chapter 3, intimately connected to shifting cultivation; traps were largely set (this is still the practice today) around the household’s swidden fields so as to protect the crops. Fallow fields also constituted prime hunting grounds for certain animal species feeding on plants growing in the recently abandoned fields. (Studies from other parts of the tropical world show that fallow fields are deliberately managed so as to attract certain game animals). One can say that hunting and cultivation form part of – indeed, are two sides of – a single food-procuring system.

Changes in hunting practises before the HCMH
In the past, local hunters hunted with cross-bows (and poisoned darts), spears and traps – the indigenous people of the CTS are known for their elaborate trap technology. During the American-Vietnam War, a large number of guns and rifles came in the possession of the indigenous people in the region, and hunting with guns became widespread. As a result, the skills required to hunt using crossbows (in particularly the knowledge how to produce the poison for the darts) was gradually forgotten.

Hunting of large game has been prohibited (but weakly enforced before the HCMH) as part of Vietnam’s conservation policies since the 1980s but not until the implementation of the ban on possessing guns in 1997 did this policy have any notable effect on the indigenous communities in the region. The strongly enforced ban on gun possession appears to have caused a decrease in hunting in most communes, but trapping with steel-wire snares (obtained from traders and shops in town) increased proportionally in some, more commercially oriented and accessible communes and villages (notably in Nam Giang and Phuoc Son). Hunting using the traditional trap technology, still persists to a reduced extent in remote, traditional villages.

Changes after the HCMH
The HCMH appears to have had a major and direct effect on the hunting practises of virtually all communities along the highway in that it contributes to the rapid transformation of hunting from a communally oriented, ritualised subsistence activity to an increasingly individualised, commercial pursuit.
In villages which were poorly connected to towns and markets before the HCMH, the tradition of sharing game meat was functioning until recently (and is still vital in some more remote villages). According to one villager in Phuoc Nang commune, the tradition started to break down:

“…because people needed money, and they found that they could sell game meat to traders and shops in town. Initially, villagers were divided about this issue, with many villagers complaining that the hunters were not respecting the tradition, but eventually, when people realised that all other villages were doing the same, they began to accept the new practise.”

In other communes, with better road communication already before the construction of the HCMH, the tradition had started to erode well before the opening of the highway. In Ca Dy commune (Nam Giang), villagers claimed that the last time they had shared a game animal in the traditional way was in 1998. Similarly, in roadside villages of Huc Nghi (Da Krong) and A Roang (A Luoi) communes, game sharing no longer exist and had disappeared well before the HCMH. By contrast, in Tay Giang and Dong Giang (and in the remote village of Cup in Huc Nghi commune), the tradition of sharing game is still practised in villages some distance away from the highway. However, even in these more traditional and remoter villages, an increasing number of hunters are beginning to sell game in town.

Thus, instead of sharing game meat with their fellow villagers, hunters today increasingly consume part of the meat in their household – often together with a circle of invited relatives and friends – whilst the rest (the lion’s share) is sold outside the village. Whether game meat is traditionally shared or not (i.e., divided up and sold) seems to depend on the relative vicinity or remoteness of the village in question to the road/HCMH and/or a town or townlet (the district or commune centre). In Cup village, for example, located 14 kms from the road, large game are still shared within the community, whereas in the roadside villages of the same commune (Huc Nghi) game animals are exclusively sold to traders for transportation to restaurants in the district town. And in villages surrounding Prao town in Dong Giang district, the practise of selling game animals exists in the villages very close the town but not in villages just a few kilometres away from it.

Thus, by and large, it appears that most adult men still engage in hunting at least at least sporadically (mainly during the hunting season between November and February). The main difference between the present and the past is that game meat is increasingly being sold to district centres rather than consumed communally in the village (sometimes game meat is both consumed and sold; the proportions depending on the size of the animal, the hunter’s demand for money and the ease with which the meat can be sold) and it appears that, today, only remote villages still preserve the tradition of communally sharing game animal meat. However, rare “medicine animals” such as bears and pangolins are probably much more sought after today than in the past due to the presence of (Kinh) buyers in virtually all the district centres. In the past, the hunting of these rare animals was sometimes surrounded by certain taboos. These highly prized animals are today sought after by hunters in both the remote and roadside villages (the fact that they are

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14 This was the case with both bears and pangolins, for instance. This is no coincidence, Chinese medicine and indigenous belief systems are probably ultimately rooted in the same type of ideas concerning these animal species; it is their rarity or strange features [as in the case of pangolins] which have surrounded them with the taboos [in the CTS indigenous cultures] and/or given rise to the ideas about their potent health properties [in the case of Oriental medicine]. Following a similar logic, both the indigenous peoples and Kinh people value the meat of wild game (in general) higher than the meat of domestic animals.
often smaller and/or can be sold in parts make even hunters from remote villages interested in selling them.

Hunting exclusively for sale is most common among young men in the more commercially developed districts of Nam Giang and Phuoc Son where there are still forests near the road. In fact, it appears that even in Dak Glei district -- despite the fact that the game supply is scarce and requires hunters to walk very far from their villages -- hunting (for sale) is still prevalent. In these districts illegal hunting constitutes a major source of income for young men. Thus, in Phuoc Nang commune we were told that a single hunter could easily earn 2-3 million VND annually on hunting (not counting “Chinese medicine animals”). Indeed (in Nam Giang), we were told that “the richest men in the villages are those engaged in commercial hunting”. Elders and commune officials in these districts commented that this money (earned from hunting) was often spent on alcohol and entertainment in the district town rather than being used for family or household consumption. Sometimes, however, it is used to invest in livestock, buy motorcycles and other consumer goods -- effectively explaining how some of the hunters’ households had become wealthy. It was also commented in the same districts that to make a good profit from hunting (and also logging) required “good relationships with Kinh people [traders]”.

Unfortunately, due to the sensitive nature of this topic, it is impossible for us to estimate the proportion of men in the villages which engaged in hunting, nor to estimate where the overall level of hunting was highest. Some locals commented that hunting was “the best job” (meaning that it was the best way to get money) but as stated above it was unclear what proportion of the villagers engaged regularly in this activity. Interviews and observations, however, would suggest that in remoter villages a larger proportion of the adult men still engage in hunting -- but only occasionally -- whereas in the more developed/roadside villages hunting is becoming more professionalised (with a smaller number of hunters but with some of these depending almost exclusively on hunting for their income; buying rice or hiring other villagers to work on their fields when needed). Most people would not admit hunting themselves, but would nonetheless comment on the hunting of others, or give other more general information about the hunting in their village or commune.

In Phuoc Son and Nam Giang we were also told that “outsiders come to the district to hunt, using modern rifles and steel-wire snares. Allegedly these outsiders may “stay in the forest” for several months and also engage in illegal logging.

Even in the most remote and traditional communities, hunting for sale is rapidly becoming popular among young men. However, although the practise is now common, it is not highly regarded by village elders and the youngsters often hunt and sell game in secret, without other villagers’ knowledge. This (muted) disapproval of the new individualised, profit-oriented hunting practices was expressed by one villager as follows:

"the disappearance of sharing game in the village has not only made life harder for certain people who are unable to work well (widows and widowers etc) but also reduced village cohesion and the solidarity among villagers…”

Traditionally, hunting formed part of a whole complex of ritual regulations and practices regarding the use of forest resources. Thus, villagers were not allowed to hunt everywhere in the village territory (and certainly not outside it). Within the village territory, different households claimed rights to specific hunting areas and hunting trails, and hunters took care not to trespass on another hunter’s domain. As a rule, there were also parts of the forest which were excluded from hunting – or where hunting of certain species were prohibited during certain times of the year –
on religious grounds. Transgressions of these rules were believed to result in spiritual punishments – disease, misfortune or even death.

With the eroding hunting traditions, these beliefs and practices are also losing force and disappearing. Where they are still in force, as in many parts of A’vuong commune (Tay Giang district), they are being increasingly challenged by young men. Thus, we were told about a young man in A Vuong who had recently fallen ill and died, allegedly as a result of having ignored and transgressed a taboo on hunting in a certain, sacred area of the forest.

As a result of these changes in hunting practices – the erosion of traditional hunting and forest-management practices and the increasing prevalence of hunting for sale as a result of the commercialisation of the local economy at large, (as well as -- of course -- due to the increased population pressure compared to what would have been the case under the traditional regime of settlement patterns) – game is becoming notably scarcer in all study communes. Most elderly informants claimed that game had become progressively depleted ever since the Vietnam War, but increasingly so after the HCMH.

Statements like the following by one man in were expressed in several communes:

“In the past, even until a few years ago, we could catch up to 30-40 big animals in a year; now we rarely catch more than 10 or 20, even when we walk far away”.

The main factor restricting illegal hunting in the region is the vicinity to forestry stations inside or adjacent to forest reserves (such as those in Da Krong, A Luoi, Nam Giang and Phuoc Son). Forestry staff are known to fine poachers heavily (even for catching small game), and therefore hunting is reduced considerably in villages near forestry stations. In many localities, we were told that hunting for sale and commercial logging had increased dramatically in the initial stages of the highway construction (with villagers doing all kinds of deals with road workers and other HCMH-staff) but later decreased as a result of stricter enforcement of forest conservation policies and the establishment of forestry stations.

5.3.2. Fishing

In the pre-war period, fish was probably the main source of protein for the all the indigenous communities in the study area. During the cold months, however, the indigenous populations considered the streams and rivers too cold to fish in. As we saw above, the cold months were instead the months when men engaged very actively in hunting. Thus, during the three to four months long hunting season (November-February in Quang Nam) wild game meat replaced fish as the primary protein source.

All interviews with people who remember the pre-war life indicate that fish were far more abundant in the past than they are today. In all the villages (except Cup village in Hue Nghi – the only remote village included in the village survey), villagers complained that fish resources had decreased dramatically, in particular since the construction of the HCMH. Despite this decrease, however, river and stream fish still appears to be the main source of protein since only a small minority of the households in the village study can afford (or are willing to) to buy domestic meat or fish from shops. Fish bred in fish ponds constitute a very minor supplement to the local diet.

Many factors have contributed to the depletion of fish resources in the study. The decline appears to have started during the war as a result of over-fishing by the Vietnamese soldiers and the
defoliants and other toxins discharged by the Americans. This assault against the CTS environment notwithstanding, locals maintained that the most dramatic decrease in fish resources dates from the construction of the HCMH; first as a consequence of the construction work itself (due to the siltation) and later due to heavy over-fishing by outsiders. Some of these outsiders are allegedly skilled fishermen who use modern equipment and catch large amounts for sale to markets, shops and restaurants in towns. The post-sedentarisation concentration of the indigenous population in larger villages is another factor contributing to steady decline in fish resources. In other words, the reduced availability of fish is yet another consequence of the sedentarisation program.

In the few remote villages that remain in the region, however, fish is still abundant and form part of the everyday diet during the spring and summer months (f ex in A’vuong commune and in Cup village). The government-backed incentive of creating fish ponds in every village (an integral part of the VAT package which is widely regarded as having bolstered food security among rural Kinh) has not been successful in the study area; in fact both bought fish and pond fish were only consumed to any significant extent in A Rroang, Thanh My town and Dak Kroong. Only 25% of the interviewed households had functioning fish-ponds, and A Rroang had the largest number of households with fishponds (50%). In some places, the creation has been more or less mandatory for villagers, in others not. Therefore fish ponds cannot be seen as having eliminated the need for other protein sources (such as wild game meat, stream fish, etc). Several villagers also complained that feeding the fish was too expensive.

5.3.3. Livestock and poultry

Domestic livestock (buffaloes and pigs) were one of the primary indicators of wealth in the traditional (pre-war) indigenous social setting. Ritual prestige was achieved by household heads who committed their livestock for public sacrificial rituals and feasting. Buffaloes, in particular, were considered a supremely valued asset, and formed part of the compulsory bride-wealth paid by a groom’s family to the bride’s family at wedding. Just as every other aspect of indigenous life, livestock rearing has undergone considerable changes as a consequence of the sedentarisation program and the ensuing transformation of agriculture (some of Krahn’s informants [Katu in Laos] claimed to have had buffalo herds of 10-20 animals in the pre-War period!). Traditionally, livestock was exclusively bred for ritual consumption and, whereas in the past livestock were generally left to roam freely in and around the village, today they need to be tethered or fenced-in, or carefully supervised lest they prey on the growing number of gardens and cash-crop fields in the vicinity of the villages.

Cows and the new breed of “lowland pigs” which is gradually replacing the indigenous breed of “upland pigs”, did not exist in the region before 1975 but is now common in all communes. Cows, though less ritually valued than buffaloes, are now seen as a faster way to make money than the latter. Remote villages, such as Cup in Huc Nghi commun, still have a significant number of free-roaming pigs of the traditional upland variety (explaining the comparatively large number of pigs in the commune (see Diagram 5, next page). The raising of cows and the new variety of lowland pigs requires particular methods of livestock rearing – skills which few indigenous livestock owners have. F ex, the new breeds are more vulnerable to livestock diseases and successful raising requires substantial investment in veterinary medicines. By contrast, some Kinh households are very adept livestock breeders and keep substantial herds of pigs. In one of the surveyed villages (in Dak Kroong), a single Kinh household accounted for the majority of the pig population in the village – a situation which may well apply to other villages as well. Local people recognise the skills of Kinh settlers in raising the new varieties of livestock and try to
learn from them. The comparatively large amount of cows in Dak Kroong and Thanh My also reflects this new and specialised form of commercial livestock breeding (involving “foreign” livestock breeds, close supervision and costly fodder-feeding).

Table 10: Ownership of livestock, poultry and fish ponds (percentage of households; N = 75)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No of animals in herd</th>
<th>Hhs with livestock, poultry etc</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>&gt;3</th>
<th>&gt;4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Buffaloes</td>
<td>32.0 %</td>
<td>70 %</td>
<td>15 %</td>
<td>15 %</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cows</td>
<td>34.0 %</td>
<td>50 %</td>
<td>19 %</td>
<td>31 %</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pigs</td>
<td>48.7 %</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poultry</td>
<td>54.7 %</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fish ponds</td>
<td>24.0 %</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Diagram 5: Livestock ownership in the study communes
5.3.4. Timber logging and collection of non-timber forest products (NTFPs)

Illegal logging appears to be an important source of income – and a serious environmental problem only (or principally) in two districts, Phuoc Son and Nam Giang – i.e., the same districts were commercial hunting is widespread, and for the same reason: communications with market towns are relatively good (there are direct, all-weather roads to the city of Danang from both district capitals, Thanh My and Kham Duc. From Nam Giang the Song Cai river is also used for transporting timber.

Thus, we were told by district officials in Phuoc Son that illegal timber exploitation is a serious problem in the district. In 2003 alone, 104 cases of illegal logging and hunting were reported and processed. In Phuoc Nang commune we were told by commune cadres that men in the commune principally engage in logging and hunting, and only secondarily in cultivation. In Ca Dy commune and Thanh My town in Nam Giang district, one official assessed that 30% of the households were engaged in illegal logging! There are three wood enterprises in Than My town apparently dealing with illegal timber.

The collection of rattan and, to a lesser extent, other forest products such as *litsea* bark for making brooms (*dot*) and *la non* leaves for making straw hats, are other important sources of household income. In A Roang (A Luoi) and Huc Nghi (Da Kroong) communes, rattan and *litsea* collection are the main cash sources. In Phuoc Son, according to district statistics, 348 tons of rattan and 9.3 tons of *uoi* fruits were collected and sold during 2003.
The communes least involved in cash crop cultivation appeared to be those who were most dependent on NTFPs for their income. However, the rattan resources are being rapidly depleted, particularly in the south (to the extent that most households no longer collected rattan in Dak Kroong and and Phuoc Nang).

In the communes were rattan is still collected, we were told that 10 days of rattan collection could yield about 500,000 VND for a single household, while litsea collection could yield 15,000 VND/day for a single collector. In Dak Glei, were forests are heavily depleted, we were told that the depletion of rattan had begun over a decade ago, in other places rattan depletion began with the HCMH. The reduced availability of rattan in all communes clearly indicates that rattan cannot become a primary source of income for the local populations in the study area. Nowadays, rattan collectors often have to go far away into the forest to find suitable rattan. Two comments from villagers illustrate the current situation: “wherever a motorbike can reach, there is no more rattan left” and “before, there was a lot of rattan and litsea but no-one to buy them; now, they are difficult to find but easy to sell”.

Another source of substantial income for households, particularly for young men, is honey collection. In more remote and traditional villages, honey is an important source of small cash. A bottle of honey can be sold for ca 40,000 VND which makes a difference for households that have few other sources of cash. Honey is collected during May-July, while rattan is mainly collected in October and November, and litsea between February and April (in the central and northern districts of the study area), thus forming an annual cycle of income-generating, forest-related gathering activities.

**Box 8:**
**The livelihood situation in urban centres: The case of Thanh My town**

With the construction of the HCMH, existing market centres and district capitals have grown into small towns or townlets, and new urban centres are rapidly emerging. The expansion of existing urban centres and the creation of new ones are part and parcel of the HCMH socio-economic masterplan. Thus, new market centres are planned and currently mushrooming all along the highway, such as the growing commune centres in Ta Rut (Da Krong district) and Bha Lee (Tay Giang district).

For the indigenous population living in or near these new and expanding urban centres, life is changing dramatically: access to shops and markets, schools and health-care institutions improve markedly.

However, all changes may not be for the better. The demand for money and trade goods also increases sharply in the vicinity of urban centres. Land is becoming scarce and expensive, and for the people staying along the road near a sprawling and expanding urban centre, the pressure to sell valuable land can become irresistible – in particular when capital is scarce and demands growing. Thus, a common occurrence in such situations is that the “urban” indigenous households sell attractive land along the road to Kinh settlers or entrepreneurs – who then set up shops and sundry small businesses along the road. Sometimes, indigenous households sell all their “urban” land suitable for paddy and cash crop cultivation and move their own agricultural activities further away from the road/town, clearing unused land for swidden cultivation in less attractive forest land (including land classed as protection or conservation forest).
Our study indicates that the large majority of indigenous households living in or near urban centres continue to pursue traditional subsistence activities – shifting cultivation of upland rice, hunting, fishing and collecting of forest produce – in combination (when possible) with paddy cultivation and cash-crop production (in varying degrees) according to the general pattern of the indigenous population in the study area (as described above) – regardless whether they live near or far away from the road and/or town. In other words, urban indigenous households pursue the same livelihood strategies as the rural households; the difference is that the urban population has rather worse conditions to pursue these activities than the rural ones. Virtually all villagers living in or near urban centres claim that fish and wild game resources are severely depleted due to the heavy hunting pressure and, in particular to commercial hunting and fishing carried out by outsiders using modern technologies (weapons, traps and snares). The result is that urban indigenous households appear to be economically worse off than rural households and, in terms of food security, notoriously so in comparison with the indigenous population living in relatively remote and commercially unexploited localities.

To compound the difficulties, we were told that villages located inside the urban perimetre of district capitals are not entitled to the various benefits provided by “poverty reduction” programs. Thus, a man in Pa Duong village (Thanh My town) commented that:

"since a long time ago, life here is more difficult than in other communes because upland communes are always given priority for all [poverty reduction] programmes. Here, people are living in difficult conditions: We have less forest land, less animals, no gold mines or other resources. Everything in this area is difficult. People living in the remote highland areas have a better life. They have more plentiful game and their dry-rice, swidden fields are bigger and much more fertile. The only difficulties they have is exchanging [buying and selling] goods and going to the hospital. Here people have to clear land anew after only 2-3 years of fallow. We cannot go to remote forests and we only have the land surrounding the village.”

Another man in the same village claimed that villagers now grow enough rice for only three months per year, but – fortunately – are able to ”buy the rice they need for the rest of the year by selling beans and peanuts (two crops per year)”. Hunting is still an ongoing activity in the village but has been severely reduced since the collection of guns (97-99) and the opening of the HCMH (2000).

Before 1996, villagers claimed, the whole village would usually catch 20-30 large animals in a year which would all be shared by the community. Now, on average, 5-6 big animals were caught per year and they would not be shared within the community. The situation of the above village in Thanh My town is far from unique. Significantly, despite the problems repeatedly attested to by villagers living in towns, poverty statistics from towns and urban centres are always better than for rural and remote villages.

5.4. Household economy and emerging social differentiation

5.4.1. Labour and gender division

One important conclusion of our study, confirmed by local interlocutors and district and commune officials, is that the changes in the agro-economic system of the indigenous population are increasing peoples’ work burden. This is particularly pronounced in the most commercially
developed southern communes where cash-crop agriculture production has increased sharply in recent years.

Table 11: Division of labour in agriculture before and after 1998
(Source: a woman in Dak Kroong commune, Dak Glei district)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>-- Rest --</td>
<td>Plant wet rice (first crop)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(Men and women)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February</td>
<td>Clear dry rice fields (Men)</td>
<td>Clear dry rice field (Men)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(End of) March</td>
<td>Burning slope fields (one day) (Men)</td>
<td>Burning slope fields (men), Weeding wet rice fields (women)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>Sowing (ca one week). (Men and women)</td>
<td>Sowing dry rice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>-- Rest --</td>
<td>Harvest wet rice (Women)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>Weeding dry rice fields (Women)</td>
<td>Planting wet rice (second crop) (Men and women)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July</td>
<td>-- Rest --</td>
<td>Weeding dry rice fields (Women)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August</td>
<td>Weeding dry rice fields (Women)</td>
<td>Harvest maize (Women)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>Men rest, Women collect firewood</td>
<td>Husk corn to sell (Women)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td>Harvest dry rice (Women)</td>
<td>Harvest dry rice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>Wine-making (Men)</td>
<td>Harvest wet rice (Women)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>-- Rest --</td>
<td>Harvest cassava (Women)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 11 above outlines how agricultural work has changed in Dak Kroong commune (Dak Glei). The table indicates that agricultural work has increased in recent years (the calendar indicates four months of "rest" before 1998 which have completely disappeared since then). We can also observe that the division of agricultural labour is gendered: women do most of the agricultural work including planting, weeding and harvesting. Men’s agricultural work is essentially limited to clearing forest for swidden fields (which is heavy work), burning the swiddens and, today, doing the heavy work in creating and maintaining the paddy fields and the irrigation work involved (water channels, sluices, dams etc). While many men participate in planting (together with women) and carrying the harvested rice from field to granary, women also help in burning and clearing debris from the swidden, and the maintenance work on paddy fields (including doing most of the work of preparing the soil for planting twice a year).

Thus, while women, traditionally – before the introduction of wet-rice cultivation – did almost all agricultural work as well as processing the crops into food, cooking and skilled textile weaving, men were exclusively responsible for hunting and most of the fishing, house construction and
basket weaving. Basically this gendered division of labour still applies today, with the addition of paddy cultivation, roughly following the same gender lines as swidden cultivation (see Table and comments above). The implication is that it is the women's work burden that has increased most dramatically with the introduction of paddy cultivation and expanded cash-crop production – most importantly of cassava.

As regards this increased (female) work burden, the clinic staff in Dak Kroong commune (Dak Glei) commented that:

"(...) after each cassava harvest, people often complain over pains in their necks, chests and backs. Each person has to carry cassava baskets at least ten times per day (3 km from the fields to the road) and each basket weighs between 30-50 kg."

One woman from Thanh My town also commented that:

"(...) women have to work much harder than men. They have to do both the agricultural work and the housework. The road does not improve their lives."

Another woman, from Phuoc Nang commune (Phuoc Son district), noted that:

"Since the road, women have to work much harder to produce cassava and maize [for sale] and we worry much more than before about how to earn money for the family's needs"

But the gendered division of labour also implies that, despite the dramatic increase in agricultural work, men still have as much time as before to engage in hunting – something they appear to continue doing regardless of the expansion of cash-crop production. Even when animals have been depleted in the vicinity of the villages (as is the case in Dak Kroong and Phuoc Nang communes), men will nonetheless continue there seasonal hunting – although now primarily for sale and much further away than before (often two or more days walking distance from the village). The income from hunting often surpasses that from agricultural activities (a figure of "2-3 million VND/year, and more if rare animals are caught", was given to us by a villager in Phuoc Nang). A woman in Dak Kroong made the following comment on the relationship between men’s and women’s work:

"Here men just work if they like, otherwise they sleep all day or walk around the village. They only help women when clearing and sowing fields. Only a few men, who understand our hardship, help us carry rice during the harvest. Most just say: "that is your work" and then go and drink. If the women complain, they will say: 'how much do you earn from cassava and maize? On average you just earn about 2000 VND/day. You live on me...' [our italics]"

Since women do most of the agricultural work (including cash-crop production) they appear also largely to control the proceeds from the sale of cash crops, and this money is usually used to pay for the increasing costs of maintaining the household. Although most men share their cash income from hunting and logging with their families, they also spend a substantial part of it on typically "male" activities, such as drinking, smoking and other forms of entertainment in the district centres.

5.4.2. Income, expenditure and socio-economic differentiation

In Vietnam, there are several ways in which poverty rates and poverty measurements are calculated. The one used by the authorities at district and commune levels is calculated on
household income according to certain threshold values (poverty lines) given by the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA). Between 2000 and 2004, the poverty line for households in mountainous areas (where most ethnic minorities live, including the study area) was drawn at 80,000 VND/month. Households below that line were considered poor. Households with a monthly income less than 50,000 VND were officially classified as “hungry”. The latter figure, referred to as the “food-poverty line”, is based on the estimated minimum income to ensure adequate food requirements (calculated at 2100 Kcal per capita) – i.e., the cost/market price of the corresponding amount of food (rice). Households below this line are classified as “hungry”.

In 2005, the national poverty line was recalculated to take account of changing price levels and socio-economic developments in the country. Thus the poverty line for mountainous areas was raised to 200,000 VND per month/household. Household income figures are collected by communal cadres according to instructions from the Ministry; district authorities are expected to update these figures annually on the basis of a relatively simple census administered by commune and village cadres in every village.

**Table 12: Poverty rates in the study districts (2000-2005)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District Province</th>
<th>Percentage of Poor Households (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Da Krong</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quang Tri</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Luoi</td>
<td>65.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T.T. Hue</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tay Giang</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quang Nam</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nam Giang</td>
<td>38.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quang Nam</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phuoc Son</td>
<td>40.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quang Nam</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dak Glei</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kon Tum</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*According to the chairman of the district, other percentages from district statistics.

In Tables 12 and 13, and Diagrams 7 and 8, we present the poverty figures we were able to collect in the study districts and communes; unfortunately, we were not able to collect official figures for all the communes, and only for a few years.

There is also reason to be fairly sceptical about the accuracy of the figures presented, not least for the fact that the large majority of households in the study area are subsistence farmers and lack a regular income. The district poverty rates (Table 12) indicate that Tay Giang is, by far, the “poorest” district in the sample (with a poverty rate of 84% for 2005) which corresponds well with our observations above that Tay Giang is the least commercialised district of all; it is
inhabited almost exclusively with indigenous Katu people, and its district capital is currently under construction (Tay Giang was made an independent/separate district only in 2003). At the other extreme is A Luoi, appearing as the “wealthiest” district with the lowest poverty rate in the sample (48.5 % for the same year). Note that the figures rise sharply in 20005 (Diagram 7) as a result of the new poverty criteria.

Diagram 7. Poverty rates over time (graphic representation of the data in Table 10)

A break-down of the district figures at commune level yields some unexpected and intriguing results (Table 13 and diagram 8). Although the data is incomplete, it suggests that Than My town in Nam Giang is -- by far -- the “wealthiest” commune (with a poverty rate of 25,8 % for 2004) which, indeed, is not surprising given the fact that it is the only urban centre in the sample (and its population thus includes a substantial amount of salaried households (mainly Kinh), as well as a much larger percentage of shopkeepers, traders etc. (almost exclusively Kinh) than the rural communes. Huc Nghi and Ca Dy communes fall in the medium range in the sample (with a poverty incidence ranging between 35 and 45 % of the households). Surprisingly, however, the two “poorest” communes in the sample are, A Roang (A Luoi district; 54,5 % in 2005) and Dak Kroong (Dak Glei district; 67,5 % the same year).

Table 13: Poverty rates in selected communes (% of total households)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Commune</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2006</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Huc Nghi</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>40,7</td>
<td></td>
<td>39,5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Roang</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>45,2</td>
<td></td>
<td>54,5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Other observations and contextual information suggest, as we have seen in preceding sections of this report, that Dak Glei (in which Dak Kroong is located) is the most commercially developed district of all which, indeed, was supported by the relatively low poverty incidence at district level (Table 12 above).

The figure for Dak Kroong commune may, of course, be wrong (but so might the figures for the other communes). Assuming, on the other hand, that the figure is roughly correct, we might speculate that the high incidence of poor households in this highly commercialised and market-oriented commune reflects a pronounced polarisation between a majority of “poor” and “hungry” households and a small minority of wealthy households which take full advantage of the commercial opportunities provided by easy access to markets, paddy cultivation and cash-crop production. We do not have sufficient information to confirm or reject this interpretation, nor to evaluate the accuracy of the figure itself, but as a hypothesis it is not implausible.

Thus, we know that there is a conspicuous differentiation between rich and poor households in most villages in the study area, both from our own observations and from our interview data. We also know, from a growing literature on the topic from other parts of the country that socio-

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### Table 8: Poverty rates in selected communes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Commune</th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ca Dy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thanh My</td>
<td>23.7</td>
<td>26.0</td>
<td>25.8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dak Kroong</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>45.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>67.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Diagram 8: Poverty rates in selected communes

![Diagram 8: Poverty rates in selected communes](image-url)
economic differentiation is growing as a result of the rapid push for the commercialisation of the rural economy (VDR 2004). Below are some local commentaries about the difference between rich and poor in some villages:

“In the past, the rich ate and wear similar things like the poor. Now, they are different and it is easy to distinguish them and the poor. They eat more meat and fish, travel by motorbike and their children have higher education. In former times, the rich were different in that they had more valuable items in their houses like gongs, jars, bronze pots…They slaughtered their buffaloes for village rituals and often “sponsored” the harvest ceremony of the village. They offered a lot of their food and livestock for people to eat and therefore villagers respected them. Nowadays, the rich often spend their income on building house and buying expensive items” (A Lac, Dak Kroong commune).

In several villages we were told that poor men work for rich households because they need money. The rich are too busy with non-agricultural activities to take care of their land; they work in offices or collect timber or other forest products.

“People are poor not because they lack land. In fact, people are quite equal in terms of land ownership but the poor don’t know how to plan their work and how to both produce food and generate [monetary] income. The rich are rich for two reasons: either they know how to work and save money or they simply cooperate with Kinh people cutting timber and hunting” (A Lang Don, head of Department of Ethnicity, Nam Giang district).

“Nowadays, the rich are people who know how to hunt and exploit timber. However, the poor have to spend their income on buying rice and food. Meanwhile, the rich spend the money they earn on building houses and buying motorbikes” (Dinh Van Nao, Ca Dy Commune).

In A Roang, we were told, 50% of the poor households consist of young couples who have recently established independent households – i.e. separate from the households of their parents – but not yet received/inherited any paddy land (since paddy land is allocated to the senior household heads). A Roang is a commune where officially shifting cultivation is non-existent and land for cash-crop production is exceedingly scarce. The total focus on paddy cultivation has thus created a poverty problem for the young generation.

Alongside the official poverty rating on the basis of annual income surveys, there exists a different system based on a subjective and qualitative assessment by village cadres under the supervision of the village headman. The list of poor households thus prepared is usually discussed and approved during village meetings in which all concerned household heads participate, and then submitted to the commune. The list is an important document since it forms the basis for allocating all kinds of benefits – including support under Program 135 and other poverty-reduction projects – to the villages. Political manoeuvring in connection with its preparation is therefore likely to occur in the villages on the part of potential benefactors and stakeholders.

Determining which households classify as “poor” in each specific village is, thus, not only a subjective but also a highly contentious political act where local power relations may play an important role. We have observed cases where some of the most well-off households are actually classified as “poor” – and thus beneficiaries of substantial government support in the form of money and material (iron-roof sheets) – because they are influential in the village and because they are relatively young and legally not owners of the family farming land (swidden- and paddy land). The fluid criteria of poverty thus invite for this sort of political manipulation; this is a quite obvious and expectable consequence of the enormous amount of money involved in the poverty-
reduction “industry”. Ironically, from the local perspective, “being poor” may be construed as a resource.

The following are some of the listed local criteria for differentiating “poor” and “rich” households in different villages:

**Rich:** have more than enough food, several buffaloes and/or cows and pigs, Kinh-style house with tiled roof; TV, motorbike and other "modern"possessions and available cash; children get higher education.

**Medium:** enough food, smaller house than the rich

**Poor:** lack of food for three months, no/little family property (traditional or modern), no money; children not going to school.

In Cup village, the following criteria were given:

**Rich:** have cash from selling buffaloes and cows, modern stilt-houses with tiled roof, TV, and more than enough food to eat (meaning they can sell rice and other crops…)

**Medium:** enough food to eat, some money, and a "stable" (permanent) house (meaning a house modeled on Kinh-style houses with iron-sheet roof).

**Poor:** enough food to eat, no cash, small house (meaning traditional-style house, usually with thatched roof and walls of woven palm-leaves or bamboo splinters, or a small and derelict “modern” house), and little commerce (“no selling and buying”).

In Cup village, one interlocutor commented that, presently there are no “really rich” people in the village; “we are all poor, because we don’t have TVs, motorcycles, electricity or tiled-roof houses”. The comment, and the criteria for poor and rich households listed above clearly reflect heavy influence from the Kinh majority population and the norms and values promoted by current development and modernisation policies. The notion of poverty, as currently perceived and understood by the indigenous people, is alien to their own cultural context. It is defined in relation to the majority culture; it comes with, and is part and parcel of, the development policies aimed at eradicating it.

### 5.4.3. Income sources

In the study area, household income is principally generated from the following (legal and illegal) sources:

**Cash crops (maize, beans, cassava , peanuts... and “surplus” rice)**

- According to our survey cassava was the largest source of revenue of all cash crops (34 out of 75 households [45.3 %] sold cassava). The total amount earned from cassava sales by all interviewed households in the surveyed communes was larger than the total amount earned from all other cash crops put together (not including rice). The total annual revenue for the households in the sample selling cassava (N = 34) was 34,970,000 VND (which yields an average income of 1,028 529 VND/hh engaged in the activity).

- 36 out of 75 households (48 %) sold cash crops other than cassava and the total annual revenue for these cash crops was 27,410,000 VND (yielding an average annual income for these households of 761,389 VND/hh).
- Revenues from the sale of cash crops were generally controlled by the wife of the household head and would be used for the running expenses of the household as a whole. Very little or none of this money could be saved from year to year.

**Livestock sale**
- Livestock sale was also a large source of revenue but many households did not have much livestock and could therefore only sell large livestock once every few years. Expensive consumer goods, such as TVs and motorbikes were generally bought by proceeds from livestock sales, yielding an immediate and large sum of cash (as opposed to the sale of cash crops which is normally piecemeal and spread out over the year). Decisions to sell livestock would usually be taken by the male household head.

**Hunting**
- Hunting of large game animals for sale (mostly to restaurants in towns/district capitals) is likely to account for a substantial part of the annual income for households living near these urban centres and/or in the most commercially developed districts (Phuoc Son, Nam Giang) where ample forests are still available. Naturally (since hunting is illegal), exact income figures are all but impossible to come by. Possibly as much as, or more than, the income from cassava and cash crops come from hunting in these districts (see above). However, not all male villagers are engaged in hunting. In the “hunting districts”, interviewees claimed that it was mainly young people who went hunting for cash to sustain their increasingly “urban” habits (drinking, smoking, buying “modern” consumer goods, entertainment – karaoke – etc.).

- Hunting of rare animals such as bear and pangolin for sale as “Chinese medicine” was possibly even more profitable than the selling of game meat. Thus, we were told that one kg of live pangolin, for example, was worth 700,000 VND on the market. Although game animals are becoming depleted, particularly in the southern study districts, hunters still continue hunting these animals – even if it takes several days of walking in the forest. Rare game animals are the fastest ticket to a substantial cash income for the indigenous communities. In several communes of the “hunting districts” villagers said that the richest households had obtained their wealth through hunting. Proceeds from hunting are usually spent on buying livestock or investing in improved houses (usually the building of a Kinh-style, modern wood- or brick house).

**Timber logging**
- Logging is clearly also an important source of income, especially in the south (Nam Giang, Phuoc Son). We were told, however, that only a few young men in every village were engaged in this activity. As a rule, the indigenous loggers work for Kinh entrepreneurs or middle-men and, thus, never get the lion share of the proceeds of the timber sale. For example, for a timber trunk worth 3,000,000 VND in Danang, a villager is likely to get no more than 200,000 VND, or even less – though this money may make a lot of difference for the logger’s household economy.

**The sale of non-timber forest products (NTFPs): rattan, dot, honey... etc.**
- NTFPs in the study area did not account for a very large part of the total household income. Rattan, for example, was only collected by 25 out of the 75 households (33.3 %), and the total annual revenue of the rattan collectors was merely 6,250,000 VND (amounting to an average annual income of a mere 250,000 VND/hh from rattan
collection). Other NTFPs, such as dot (for making palm leaf hats), and litsea bark (for broom manufacture) gave even smaller revenues. Villagers, however, would only engage in NTFP collection for sale during short periods of the year. However, despite the fact the revenues from sold NTFPs were very low (but evidently important for some households), forest products were nonetheless absolutely vital in the people’s diets, as medicine, construction materials etc.

**Pensions and salaries for village functionaries**
- Government pensions are a substantial source of income for elderly people, who often are richer than today’s youngsters (a fact frequently commented on by young and old villagers). Some elders who served in the Vietnam-American War have pensions of up to 1 million VND/month which, compared to other sources of income, is a substantial amount indeed.

- Salaries for part-time village and commune functionaries range from 50,000 up to a few hundred thousand VND/month – again a significant contribution to the household economy.

**Sale of handicrafts (traditional textile, clothing, basketry etc)**
- Commercial handicrafts were produced in very few of the study villages and proceeds were not large. Some basketry and traditional textiles are sold within or between villages, but our survey sample did not include specialised craft-producing households such as do exist in some other villages (ex the “weaving village of Dhroong in Dong Giang district).

**Firewood**
- Only 5 of the 75 households in our sample claimed they sold firewood and none of these earned more than 200,000/hh/year from this activity.

**Industrial-tree planting**
- The planting and sale of “industrial trees” like keo, tho dau, boi loi (etc.) is an important source of cash for very few households in the study area. Villagers stressed, however, that this activity was alien to them and that they lacked the skills to pursue this activity on a larger scale. Some men also derive some income from working on industrial-tree plantations owned by Kinh entrepreneurs.

**Wage labour**
- Very few households engaged in wage labour; some poor men work as day labourers for wealthier farmers, some work – as noted earlier (and see also below) – as hunters and logger for Kinh entrepreneurs on an occasional basis, and may do other odd jobs as and when opportunity is given. On the whole, wage earnings are negligible/extremely limited in our household survey.

In sum, the main sources of income in the study area are the sale of: cash crops and surplus rice (rice which is not consumed in the household), livestock and game animals (the relative order of

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15 A Roang is the only study commune where women are (still) weaving for cash. For some families, income from this activity plays important role in their lives. However, these women face many difficulties marketing their products.
importance varying from commune to commune and district to district). All the income generating activities are most developed in the southern, commercially developed districts of Nam Giang, Phuoc Son and Dak Glei.

Interestingly, the money earned from cash crops is spent on rice (for consumption) and other consumer goods deemed necessary for the wellbeing of the household members (salt, fish, cooking oil, soap etc.), while the proceeds from livestock sale are said to be used principally for expensive consumer goods (TV, motorbikes, furniture…) and costly investments (building a new house or repairing an old one, expanding paddy fields etc.; see Appendix 1). Since hunting (and logging) is an activity mainly for young men, the income from the sale of game meat and rare animals does not enter the household in the same manner as the above incomes; the money is allegedly spent on drinking and other entertainments in town, or is simply not reported (in our survey) due to the illegal nature of these activities.

Diagram 9: Household savings according to commune

![Diagram showing household savings according to commune](image)

NOTE: The fact that cash savings in A Roang commune are notably smaller than in the other communes may be related to the lack of swidden land for cash-crops and dry-rice cultivation. (The figure may also be inaccurate).

It is clear that all households in the study area are increasingly involved in the market economy and thus progressively becoming more and more dependent on consumer goods. Nevertheless, most indigenous households are notoriously inept at saving money (Diagram 9). Traditionally, wealth was stored in livestock and ritual valuables such as ceramic/porcelain jars (preferably old jars), gongs and bronze drums and kettles. This traditional practice rapidly disappearing along the road though surviving in more remote parts of the region (parts of Tay Giang, f ex). Today,
wealth is rather invested in expensive prestige goods and objects – modern, Kinh-style houses, motorbikes, TV sets etc. Diagram 10 describes the distribution of such prestige goods between the study communes.

Diagram 10: Distribution of modern consumer goods between study communes

![Diagram 10: Distribution of modern consumer goods between study communes](chart.png)

Note: The above diagram illustrates the fact that villagers in Huc Nghi commune (in particular Cup village), despite having decent conditions as regards food security (see below), have focussed less on investing in modern consumer goods than the people in the southernmost study communes (Phuoc Nang and Dak Kroong).

Money is also invested in livestock but, as noted, villagers claim that it is difficult for them to keep stock owing to the new agricultural practices prevailing in the area – cash crop production and paddy cultivation (which require skills and labour which the indigenous population either don’t have or are unwilling to commit for the purpose). Thus, it appears that household herds are becoming smaller rather than growing bigger in recent years (cf. Table 10, above, on livestock holdings). Instead of expanding livestock herds, indigenous householders seem to prefer to convert them into coveted prestige goods.

Since indigenous people, on their own account, are inept at commercial livestock raising and, since the cash crop agriculture is mainly carried out by women (and yields are very low in relation to the necessary labour effort), indigenous men are increasingly engaging in hunting wild game for sale (instead of hunting for subsistence) wherever and whenever opportunities are given. Hunting is traditionally the principal male livelihood activity and continue to be so in many areas although in a new, modernised and commercialised form – it is obviously easier for a local man to excel as a hunter (even commercial) than to find a salaried job in town.
Elderly people who benefit from pensions feel that they are economically fairly comfortable – indeed, they are often "the richest people in the village". In A Roang commune, we were told that young men asked their parents to use their pension books to borrow money for buying motorbikes for them. There is also an evident jealousy about the fact that some households have pensions and other’s not. Today’s land scarcity does not affect them directly since they have these pensions and can buy rice with it, but they are concerned about the future of their children. One elder in A Roang said:

"in the past it was the old who could no longer work who were poor, today it is the young people [who have yet no paddy land]..."

A closer look at Huc Nghi commune (Da Krong district) highlights and summarises several general trends and features of the economic situation in the study area as a whole. Data from the commune thus reveals significant differences between the roadside villages (Huc Nghi commune centre, La To, and village no 37) and the “remote” village of Cup (situated at 14 kms from the road and the commune centre at Huc Nghi village).

Huc Nghi commune centre here represents the larger, more urbanised and commercially developed communities in the region while Cup village represents the smaller, more traditional villages. Thus, Cup village have no motorbikes, and only one TV set, it has larger per capita livestock herds than the commune centre, more land under paddy and maize cultivation and only slightly less per capita swidden land for dry-rice cultivation (0.12 as compared to 0.13 ha in the commune centre). Commune leaders and villagers in all villages stressed, however, that the quality (fertility) of the swidden land in Cup village is far superior to that of the other villages, and dry-rice yields in Cup are much higher per unit-area than in the others. Indeed, Cup village supplied poor households in other villages with surplus rice. In terms of food, Cup village is the wealthiest of all the villages in Huc Nghi commune.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Village</th>
<th>Hhs.</th>
<th>Inhabitants</th>
<th>Paddy Rice (ha)</th>
<th>Dry Rice (ha)</th>
<th>Maize Area (ha)</th>
<th>Cows/ Buffaloes (heads)</th>
<th>Pigs/ Goats (heads)</th>
<th>Motor-bikes</th>
<th>TV sets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Huc Nghi</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>514</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>65.8</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La To</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>258</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>37.9</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cup</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>266</td>
<td>7.26</td>
<td>32.4</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Huc Nghi People Committee statistics 2005

And yet, the villagers in Cup considered themselves as “poor” – simply because they lacked the modern, Kinh-style houses in the roadside villages and had fewer consumer goods. What is more, residents in the other villages, including commune officials, referred to Cup villagers as “backward”— “they know nothing about modern life”. “Before the highway”, Cup villagers said,

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16 Per capita maize land in Cup village is more than double that of Huc Nghi; the number of cows/per capita is slightly higher, while the number of pigs per capita is more than three times as high as that of Huc Nghi.
"we did not think much about money but after we saw how people along the road started to change their ways of living we felt pressure to adapt to the new ways and to look for money to buy the new things…"

The mainstream concept of “poverty” has reached them and, before long, life will have changed also in Cup village.
6. Social and Cultural Change

6.1. Health and nutrition

The HCMH has facilitated the implementation of national health programmes and campaigns. All roadside communes have their own health stations (although staffed to a varying degree). Health staff based at the commune regularly visit all villages in the commune. In addition, provincial and district health staff visit all communes annually in the context of specific health programs and campaigns. Notwithstanding, both the number and the level of training of health staff in the study districts are far inferior to corresponding figures and levels in the lowlands.

Interviewed district and commune officials as well as health staff all state that the health situation in the region has improved considerably in the past few years (since 2000), partly due to the improved local access to clinics and health stations, partly due to increased outreach of health education, programs and campaigns. Officials and staff particularly point out the decrease in incidents of malaria and child malnutrition; in both these areas there is official statistics to support these affirmations (Table 14, Diagrams 11 and 12). However, it is difficult to assess to what extent improvements are due to the completion of the HCMH.

Officials and health staff stress that the improvements in health are due mainly to: easier access to health care facilities; improved health education in the villages and greater awareness about health problems, their prevention and cure; improved availability of food in shops and markets (and improved income-generating opportunities in villages); improved sanitary conditions (clean water and latrines).

The two last points are, in our opinion, debatable; access to piped water may have improved health and sanitation, but the overall standard of self-made latrines in the villages are far from satisfactory. In both these respects, the sanitary situation under traditional conditions – small and dispersed villages – is likely to have been better or at least as good as under current condition. Only in the context of present-day, large, nucleated and permanent villages may piped water and rudimentary latrines be considered an improvement over traditional practices (of collecting stream water and defecating in the brush/forest surrounding the village. Such an assessment is supported by detailed health data from Katu villages in Laos (Krahm 2005).

The dramatic reduction of malaria cases in the past few years is, however, incontrovertible and a testimony to the efficiency of the government’s anti-malaria campaigns (Diagram 11). These campaigns have successfully promoted the use of mosquito nets, and made available cheap (or free) anti-malaria medicine/prophylaxis. Currently, however, health staff expresses a certain concern about a return of the disease as a consequence of the growing immigration of alien people into the region and the increased and uncontrolled population mobility along the highway.

Table 14: Cases of malaria in three study districts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Luoï</td>
<td>914</td>
<td>494</td>
<td>364</td>
<td>398</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Diagram 11: Reported incidences of malaria in three districts
(graphic representation of Table 14)

The decrease in child malnutrition may perhaps be less significant than the modest statistical trend indicates (Diagram 12, below). Thus, one medical doctor in Nam Giang district intimated that commune figures are likely to be somewhat inflated (in order to attract resources) and slightly adjusted to conform to expected results (so as to show a steady decrease and, thus, legitimate and justify the investments in health care).

Though we have no figures to substantiate it, it is generally believed among health staff (as well as cadres) that child malnutrition is more common in remote communes and villages were the population is less educated and access to clinics is more difficult than in roadside villages and villages near urban centres. Present malnutrition rates in the study districts range somewhere between 25-35 % of all children under 5 years of age. Note, however, that figures from Huc Nghi commune indicate that the state of child nutrition may, in fact, be better in the remote and traditional village of Cup than in roadside commune centre (Diagram 12).

Indeed, this picture accords with circumstantial evidence from Tay Giang district, where an earlier survey (2004) suggested that the food situation in a small and remote village was considerably better than in a larger and commercially more developed village near the HCMH (K. Århem 2005). The same picture is corroborated with ample and detailed data from Laos (Krahn 2005) – and flatly contradicts the stereotypical and widespread image of “poor” and “hungry” indigenous minority people eking out a bleak/wretched existence in remote mountain areas.
However, the matter is complex and the picture far from clear-cut. Child malnutrition – like malnutrition in general – is closely related to other health factors (e.g. parasites, diarrhoeas etc) which may indeed produce relatively high incidences of child malnutrition in remote communes with poor access to modern medicine and health-care facilities. On the other hand, Krahn (ibid.) demonstrates that some of the ingredients that are now disappearing from the traditional indigenous diet might have protected people from parasites and other afflictions. She also claims that toxins, such as Agent Orange which were spread by the Americans during the war, might still be affecting the health of the indigenous people in the region adversely and more so in remote villages. She further reports that Katu interlocutors (in her study villages) generally claimed that people were healthier in the past. However, one terrible affliction of the past has now virtually disappeared, namely epidemics which in the past could wipe out entire communities (Krahn, ibid).

Diagram 12: Child malnutrition rates in three districts and one commune (from district and commune statistics)

*Note: According to officials in Huc Nhi commune, Huc Nhi village (along the HCMH) has the highest rate of malnourished children while Cup village (the most remote village in the same commune) has the lowest rate since “people there have more food than others”. For example, in 2002, the malnutrition rate in Huc Nhi village was 73.3% while the rate in Cup was 55.1%.

Box 9:
Katu traditional medicine and health

Compared to some tibeto-burman groups, such as the Zao (Dao), the Katu, Gie Trieng, Ta Oi and Bru appear to have developed comparatively little herbal medicine. Katu ideas about diseases is that they are generally caused by malevolent or displeased spirits who consequently have to be placated by ritual sacrifices in order to withdraw the affliction. Krahn – who studied Katu health
practises in depth – hypothesizes that the lack of herbal remedies indicates that the Katu traditionally relied heavily on their diet for disease prevention. In other words, the focus of their health system lies on the preventive side (Krahn 2005). The fact that Katu are rapidly abandoning their traditional diet as a result of the commercialisation of their livelihood system and growing lowland might thus pose a health problem.

Today, most Katu buy Western medicines for minor and common afflictions (such as fever, flus etc.) while still consulting traditional ritual specialists and healers for “strange” and “uncommon” illnesses, in particular if biomedical treatment does not cure the affliction. This dual and complementary reliance on both the traditional and the modern biomedical health-care systems is common even in the most “developed” and “modern” communes, such as Ca Dy in Nam Giang (soon to be dropped from Program 135 due to its progress). Here, buffaloes are still sacrificed as offerings in the case of serious diseases. In fact, the greater monetary wealth in these commercially developed communes appear to entail larger-scale and more costly animal sacrifices in case of serious illness than in the less developed and more traditional communes (in Tay Giang, e.g.).

On the whole, health staff in the study communes and districts gave a rather optimistic picture of the health situation among the indigenous people in the region. When asked to assess the major health problems in their communes, a head nurse in Ta Binh and a medical doctor in Cha Val (both in nam Giang district) both stressed respiratory problems as the most widespread problem. None of them reckoned malaria or malnutrition as a serious health problem today. Both stressed the dramatic decline of malaria cases in the past few years, and reported a steady fall in child malnutrition rates (estimated at 28% and 35% respectively in 2006). A similar picture was presented by health staff in other communes. Unfortunately we were not able to collect figures on child mortality, nor other, health-related vital statistics.

6.2. Education

Primary-school attendance is high in all districts (Table 16); drop-out rates are falling, and the number of children going to secondary school increase steadily. Table 17 illustrates these tendencies in Dak Glei district. Table 18 (I-III) illustrates that the number of female ethnic minority students in secondary school (Dak Kroong commune, Dak Glei district) is steadily growing, and that drop-out levels are relatively low and comparable to overall rates in the commune and district. Numbers of primary and secondary schools have increased notably since 2000, and all study villages today have a primary school. (In Dak Glei district there is now also a secondary school in each commune).

District and commune officials in all districts stressed that education has improved markedly with the completion of the HCMH. Before the road, Kinh teachers were reluctant to work in the region. Today, owing to the improved communications and the commercial development in several districts and district centres, teachers are more willing to work in the communes and villages. (We lack information on the exact proportion of indigenous teachers in the study communes but district officials said that the vast majority of teachers were Kinh).
Table 16: Primary-school attendance (% of school age population)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Da Krong</td>
<td>97.1</td>
<td>97.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Luoi</td>
<td>96.4</td>
<td>98.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nam Giang**</td>
<td>99.8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phuoc Son</td>
<td>97.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>99.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dak Glei</td>
<td>90.2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>98.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Children 6 years old registered in primary school
** Children born 1991-99

Most parents encourage their children to attend school. In the past, many parents were reluctant to send all their children to school since they needed help in the agricultural work (this particularly applied to girls who help their mothers in the fields); this still occurs, but school attendance is much higher today than only a few years ago. On the other hand, several interviewees intimated an emerging problem: in cash-crop growing areas, many children tend to be absent during harvest times and, in the towns/district capitals, there is a tendency that school children spend time in internet shops and coffee shops instead of attending school.17

Table 17: Number of students and drop-out rates in Dakglei district

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No of Primary students</td>
<td>6654</td>
<td>6323</td>
<td>5941</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of drop outs at Primary level</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No of secondary students</td>
<td>1741</td>
<td>2776</td>
<td>3062</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of drop outs at Secondary level</td>
<td>15.2%</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 18: Number of students and drop-out rates 2001-2005 in Dak Kroong Secondary School (Dak Glei district)

I: 2001-2002 academic year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Total student</th>
<th>Female students</th>
<th>Ethnic minority student</th>
<th>Female Ethnic minority student</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beginning of the year</td>
<td>287</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>283</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At the end of the year</td>
<td>271</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>267</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

17 Absences from school also occur during the harvest time of various forest products such as litsea bark and dot leaves.
II: 2002-2003 academic year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Total student</th>
<th>Female students</th>
<th>Ethnic minority student</th>
<th>Female Ethnic minority student</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beginning of the year</td>
<td>356</td>
<td>189</td>
<td>349</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the end of the year</td>
<td>322</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>315</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of drop out</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

III: 2004-2005 academic year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Total student</th>
<th>Female students</th>
<th>Ethnic minority student</th>
<th>Female Ethnic minority student</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beginning of the year</td>
<td>438</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>427</td>
<td>236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the end of the year</td>
<td>434</td>
<td>242</td>
<td>423</td>
<td>234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of drop out</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6.3. Changes in culture

Indigenous CTS societies have had contact with the Kinh population in the lowlands for centuries. The interaction with Kinh society increased dramatically in the aftermath of the Vietnam-American War when the new, unified Vietnamese state set itself to incorporate the indigenous populations into mainstream, Kinh-dominated society. Indigenous culture changed concomitantly – and profoundly – both under the influence of policies directly aimed at transforming traditional culture (notably the sedentarisation program and the policy of selective cultural preservation) and indirectly through intensified contact with the majority society. The scope, pace and intensity of these socio-cultural changes vary between districts and communes, depending on historical and geographical circumstances, accessibility and communication with the lowlands. Thus, Tay Giang district (where communications with the lowland areas was very limited before the HCMH), is still the most traditional in cultural terms.

The HCMH has speeded up the process of socio-cultural change across the region – through Kinh immigration, improved formal education and medical health-care institutions, improved access to media (including television) and outreach of all kinds of development and poverty-reduction programs, carrying the values of the rapidly modernising Kinh society. Particularly influential in moulding the traditional indigenous society and promoting new values and practices at district and commune levels are the Department of Ethnic Minorities (replacing the former Department of Fixed Cultivation and Sedentarisation), the Departments of Culture and Information, district party cadres and the district leaders of the Fatherland Front and the many other politicised, voluntary Associations (Youth Association, Women’s Associations, etc.).
Program 134 – the provision of “stable” houses to poor people in the disadvantaged rural, mountainous areas of the country – exemplifies a project aimed at reducing poverty and improving housing standards but which, in the end, has a number of other, unintended socio-cultural consequences. The project is currently being implemented in the study region and we had the opportunity to observe some of these repercussions. The condition to qualify for support from the program is that the households designated as beneficiaries in any particular village build “stable” houses and not traditional-style houses (which, by definition, are deemed “temporary” or “unstable” – because they lack tiled or metal roof and walls by wooden planks or burnt bricks/cement). The support is given in the form of a certain amount of metal roof-sheets and money in order to pay for carpentry work. The designated household is also allowed to take out a certain volume of timber from the natural forest for constructing the new house, something no household is allowed when constructing a “traditional” house. Thus, in one sweep, the program successfully excludes the possibility of maintaining or continuing the vernacular architectural tradition and thereby contributes to the destruction of an invaluable cultural legacy.

The selection of beneficiaries – i.e. “poor households” – in any village is also highly questionable in terms of the original intent of the program, i.e. improving the living conditions of the very poorest households in every village. We had the opportunity to observe the selection process in a certain village. The households eventually selected for support from the program were far from the poorest in terms of subsistence standard and objective living conditions; instead a number of the selected households were young or recently formed nuclear families who had not yet been able (or willing) to establish themselves as independent households with a house of their own – families that continued living under the same roof as their parents according to the traditional pattern of extended families and multi-family houses. With Program 134 they now got the opportunity to leave their parents’ authority and establish their own independent nuclear households, thus breaking up the traditional family pattern (or, more precisely, speeding up the process of splitting up the extended family and customary pattern of residence). As it turned out, several of the families receiving the support for building new house belonged to the most powerful (and wealthier) families of the village; precisely because they were powerful, they could influence the selection process to their advantage.

Thus, not only did the program contribute to the progressive destruction of local ethnic housing traditions, but it also targeted the wrong households and contributed to the erosion of the traditional family organisation (which, however, is in line with the governments social and cultural policies of modernising “traditional” society). What may not be perceived by the authorities is that this intentional destruction of traditional family pattern may also considerably weaken village solidarity and cohesion as well as local institutions for securing social control and security at the village level.

While post-war development policies have largely been directed towards the transformation of indigenous social institutions and cultural traditions in line with the Kinh-dominated society at large, a more sensitive attitude towards ethnic minority cultures has become evident in government policy in recent years. An example of this greater cultural sensibility is the official
encouragement of “traditional” Community Houses in the Central Highland and among the ethnic minorities in the study region.

**Box 11: The Revival of the Community House tradition**

Since the 8th Party Congress 1998, indigenous communities have been encouraged to preserve and revive the tradition of building Community Houses. As a result, in Kontum province alone, the number of traditional Community Houses rose from 265 in 1999 to 420 in 2003. Each village may receive as much as 80,000,000 VND for the construction of a Community House, and most villages eagerly seize on this opportunity. (Note, however, that the amount is usually much smaller; when a village receives a large sum of money to construct a Community House it is often because of the involvement of foreign NGOs/ development agencies.)

The inability of villages, nowadays, to construct Community Houses without government support is an indication of some of the cultural disruptions that have taken place in recent decades, notably the gradual disruption of the traditional authority structure and village cohesion: Today, without external funding, neither the elected village headman nor the village elder/s have enough power or prestige to organise the labour necessary for such an endeavour. Villagers would not be able to agree on how to pool the resources necessary (nor how to provide the necessary sacrificial animal/s for the Community House “inauguration ritual”). Interestingly, the government often provides the input which village elder/s provided in the past – the sacrificial buffalo for the inauguration ceremony. Thus, while trying to reduce the number and size of rituals in general, the government sometimes sponsors rituals when they are in line with the official policy (see below). Moreover, the construction of a Community House requires felling large trees and this can also not be done without official permission.

The tradition to construct communal houses is strongest in communities populated by Katu and Gie-Trieng people, where Community Houses are a supremely important part of the ethnic cultural legacy. In some of the southernmost communes of the study area, however, the knowledge of how to construct traditional communal houses risks being permanently lost. We were told that there were many middle-aged men in these communes who “have never seen a traditional communal house in their life-time”.

The government also encourages the preservation and revival of significant intangible traditions such as gong playing and traditional music and dancing, for example by supporting “village gong groups”.

6.3.1. Changes in village life

*Village authority*

In the past the village “patriarch” or elder (Vietnamese: ong gia lang) was a much more important figure than he is today. In fact, many villages today do not have a single patriarch the way they did in the past. Due to the fact that many of today’s village are mergers of a number of pre-War villages, there are often a number competing lineages within each village, each with its own patriarch. However, in some villages, patriarchs are still selected through a traditional divination ceremony involving a chicken sacrifice. Today’s village patriarchs have much less power than the patriarchs of the past and their main function is largely to preside over important village rituals.
and sacrifices. Their role in directing and coordinating the livelihood activities of the village – in the past, one of their chief functions – has virtually disappeared. Nonetheless, today’s patriarchs remain the chief religious mediators between humans and spirits and, as such, they still have an important role to play in the community.

In today’s village it is the village headman (truuong ban) who wields formal authority. The village headman is one of a whole series of functionaries forming part of the state administration at the local level; thus, in every village, there is also a village police-man, a village culture-and-information officer etc – all elected on an annual basis at village meetings. Most village headmen today are between 20 and 30 years old, indicating that they are primarily elected for their Vietnamese “language and culture skills” (i.e. their understanding of mainstream Vietnamese society and their ability to deal with government officials and cadres. Many of them have finished secondary or high school. Most of them have experience from the army and some of them are the children of retired former cadres). The village headman’s main function is to mediate between the village and the government, much the same way the patriarch in the past mediated between the villagers and the spirits. It is the headman’s job, aided by the other village functionaries and leaders, to explain to the villagers how to carry out the government’s policies.

Young and old
Elders are still important and respected individuals in the indigenous villages, particularly in more remote and traditional villages. This has ensured the survival of indigenous knowledge and many beliefs and rituals until today. It is doubtful, however, to what extent the older generation will manage to pass on this knowledge to the younger generations. Since, the introduction of television sets in almost all villages (TV sets are provided to all villages by the district’s culture and information department as part of the government’s development strategy), all villagers – young and old – spend considerable time watching TV. Nonetheless, older people (not least women) remain firm believers in spirits and ancestors and, as such, guardians of traditions.

Young people, on the other hand, find themselves in a liminal state between the world of “modernity” and that of “tradition”. Many of the young are fully conversant with Kinh culture and society and are losing touch with their proper traditions, their beliefs and values. However, all are fully familiar with the skills necessary for survival in their local environment as shifting cultivators, hunters-and-trappers, fishermen and collectors of forest products as well as with basics of the traditional spirit lore. A major shift in terms of beliefs and values is nonetheless to be expected when the present generation of elders disappears. In towns and urban centres, this process is already greatly precipitated.

Kinship and marriage
We have already commented on the persistent campaigns on the part of the government to break down traditional institutions such as the traditional pattern of large, extended families inhabiting multifamily longhouse – perceived to be vestiges of a primitive way of life and, thus, an obstacle to socialist economic development – and replace them with smaller, economically “efficient” and autonomous domestic units based on the nuclear family.

One element of these policies, aimed at “modernising” indigenous culture and society, is the campaign against the traditional marriage system (see Appendix 2). Traditional indigenous society in the CTS region was largely organised around the clan system and a specific system of marriage, unique in Vietnam, in which families cannot exchange women in marriage but must marry in “circle”, as it were: a family receive/take a woman in marriage from one family (wife-giving family) but must give a sister or daughter to another family (wife-taking family). In this way the entire society is divided into wife-givers and wife takers; this relationship structures
almost every aspect of society and determines behaviour among and between families. Wife
givers have certain responsibilities towards their wife takers and vice versa – particularly in
connection with the major public ritual events in local society, namely weddings and funeral.

An integral part of this marriage system is the normative rule or ideal of cousin marriage: a man
should ideally marry his mother’s brother’s daughter, or a woman classified as such. This norm is
widespread among CTS societies, and its function is simply to uphold the specific relationship
between wife-givers and wife-takers. Or, perhaps better put, cousin marriage is an expression of
the wife-giver/wife-taker relationship which is the very basis of indigenous social organisation;
the two institutions are two sides of the same system. Indeed, this system is the very heart and
core of CTS indigenous culture and society and the key to social cohesion and cultural identity.

However, for decades the government has tried to extinguish the practice of cousin marriage
among CTS societies and continues to brand the practice as “backward” and “unsound”. It is
erroneously believed that cousin marriage leads to inbreeding. In fact, there is nothing
demographically or genetically unsound in cousin marriage; the same type of marriage is
practiced in many societies across the world. The campaign against it is based on prejudice and
poor understanding of its value and cohesive social implications.

Another aspect of the indigenous marriage system is the exchange of ritual goods and values in
connection with marriage. Traditionally, considerable values in the form of livestock, porcelain
jars, gongs and textile were exchanged between the inter-marrying parties. The exchange, which
went both ways between the families, publicly announced the new relationship between the two
families and served both to cement the relationship and ensure its permanence. It has no
connotations of a “purchase”, and past and current campaigns directed towards it on the ground
that it is a form of “bride purchase” – transaction like any other – are totally misguided and
wrong; again these misconceptions rest on insufficient understanding of the social and religious
basis of indigenous marriage customs (cf Appendix 2).

Misguided as they are, both these campaigns – against cousin marriage and the exchange of
livestock and substantial amounts of ritual goods in connection with marriage – have had the
effect of eroding the traditional marriage system. Today, fewer and fewer people marry according
to the traditional norms, and the exchange of traditional goods is increasingly being replaced by
gifts of money and modern consumer goods. Social cohesion is suffering concurrently.

6.3.2. Changes in spiritual culture

Despite the radical changes that have taken place due to sedentarisation and the reduction of
shifting cultivation, as well as the ban on hunting, most villages still hold the same spirit beliefs
as in the past. Most of them believe in (generally benevolent) ancestor spirits, potentially
dangerous forest spirits, water spirits and water “dragons”, the Animal Guardian spirit, the Rice
Mother (the spiritual embodiment of the rice field) etc. However, many of the rituals related to
the agricultural calendar have gone from being centred on the village as a whole to nowadays
being carried out by families and local lineages.

Moreover, the sacrifices involved in these rituals have become smaller (buffaloes are almost
never used for these rituals today). This is related both to the governments policy of discouraging
large and “wasteful” rituals, but also to people’s increased desire to keep livestock for sale (rather
than for sacrifice). People still largely believe, however, that the plethora of spirits which
populate the landscape affect the fertility of fields, and might cause illness or misfortune to the
village if displeased. Many areas are still prohibited for cultivation and/or hunting due to the belief that they are occupied by potent spirits (who make people aware of their presence through dreams or by possessing individuals; see N. Arhem, 2005).

Ever since the Vietnam-American War, however, these “sacred” forests have been steadily reduced. Today, in many places it is unclear whether it is the government’s ban on clearing old forests or the belief in the sacredness of certain areas of forest (or both) that keep villagers from clearing natural forest. We also note above that hunting is increasingly de-ritualised or secularised and, thus, becoming more commercialised as well as individualised. While in the past, a successful hunt was obligatory followed by a public, village-wide feast, it is today increasingly becoming an individual activity in pursuit of profit – all as a result of the general push for commercialisation and economic growth.

**Box 12: Disappearing environmental “taboos”**

Some of the traditional environmental taboos are currently disappearing in the study region (most rapidly in the south).

* They include “taboos” forbidding people to clear extensive tracts of land in the forests for cultivation. Indigenous farmers consider certain dreams as an indication that they are not allowed to clear certain areas for agriculture. Places were people have fallen ill or died “unnatural” deaths are also left untouched for generations. Many villagers also believe that particular hills inhabited by powerful spirits cannot be cleared. A large perimeter of forest is usually left around burial grounds. The Ta Oi in A Roang and the Bnoong in Phuoc Son reported sacred forests which they were not allowed to clear on religious grounds. In many areas people, however, have started infringing on these “tabooed” areas, and previously prohibited areas are currently already being cleared. We may presume that this tendency will continue.

* Similarly, there are forest areas where hunting is prohibited for spiritual reasons. There are also species which are taboo to hunt as well as certain periods of the year when particular species must not be hunted. These taboos are starting to disappear in many localities.

* Hunting was previously surrounded by numerous other taboos and ritual regulations. Thus, today’s hunting for sale indicates in itself a breakdown in customary beliefs and practices since traditionally it was not allowed to take the dead body of an animal outside the boundaries of the village territory, and a ritual had to be performed for ”the Animal Guardian” every time a large game animal was caught. As noted above, commercial hunting has been going on longest in the southernmost districts of the study area.

Nonetheless many taboos still remain, even in roadside villages. In the village of Adinh 3 (Dong Giang district), now located along the HCMH, a number of “prohibited areas” are still respected when it comes to hunting and clearing swidden land. All these religious-ritual taboos and regulations – although based on spiritual beliefs – constitute a form of “environmental protection system” since it leaves certain areas of the forest off-limit for hunting and agriculture. Anthropologists have termed these types of belief systems “coded ecological knowledge”. Part of indigenous people’s ecological knowledge is, thus, embedded or encoded in – and cannot be separated from – their spiritual beliefs.
6.3.3. “Ritual reductions”

One of the fundamental cultural policies that district authorities have been trying to implement during the last 25-30 years is that of “reducing” indigenous peoples’ “wasteful” and “backward” rituals. Thus, although not prohibiting the rituals entirely, cadres have asked villagers to reduce the scale of animal sacrifices (by using smaller and lesser numbers of livestock than was traditionally the case) as well as reducing the time spent on ritual feasting. In other words, if the villagers traditionally used a buffalo for a particular sacrifice, they have now been asked to limit themselves to sacrificing one or a few pigs; if a ritual feast in the past went on for several days or an entire week, it is now limited to one or two days etc.

The justification for these “ritual reductions” is that they are perceived by the authorities as economically wasteful. 18 Thus, local cadres and leaders would argue, f ex, that killing a buffalo for a ritual feast only give each household in the village a couple of kilograms of meat or less (meat from sacrifices is always shared by the entire village) while the kill would entail a huge economic loss for the household procuring the buffalo. However, this argument does not take into account the fact that ritual practises have important socio-economic functions such as re-distributing food (in this case the protein intake) within the village and strengthening village solidarity and cohesion. Both these ritual functions have probably played a pivotal role in allowing indigenous communities to persist for centuries in the region.

As result of the government policy, most public rituals have been substantially reduced. Weddings, for example, could hardly take place at all in the past without a buffalo sacrifice, whereas nowadays pigs are generally used as sacrificial animals instead. But the reduced scale of animal sacrifices have also entailed that rituals are involving progressively smaller kinship groups in the village. Thus, many agricultural rituals (planting, harvest etc) have shifted from originally being village rituals to being individual family rituals.

The completion of the HCMH has played a significant role in this change; before the HCMH many local people failed to see any advantage in following the government’s policy. However, with the increasing availability of consumer goods in the wake of the highway, villagers have gradually started to reduce the scale of animal sacrifices and ritual feasting of their own accord – precisely to save money and/or keep livestock for sale on the market so as to be able to obtain coveted consumer goods. Thus, what the government did not succeed in implementing previous to the HCMH is now becoming the general trend as a result of the increased commoditisation of the economy.

It should be noted in this context, however, that even today villagers virtually never kill large domestic stock for food – except on ritual occasions. In other words, the ritual reductions have also had the less desirable effect of dramatically reducing the number of occasions when villagers are able to feast on and, thus, consume meat. Our survey also shows that only a small minority of the people in the study area are able (or willing) to spend money on buying meat (Appendix 1). We furthermore noted that local ritual life have changed more in the southernmost district and around district centres than in remote villages. Tay Giang appear to be the district which has retained most of its ritual activities to date.

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18 There were indeed, in the past, many ritual practises which are hard to justify from a rational and “naturalistic” point of view (thus, in case of a serious "bad death", for example, a large portion of the village livestock had to be killed and the village permanently abandoned).
6.3.4. “Kinhisation” of cultural and ritual activities

It is not easy to assess the prevalence of traditional spirit beliefs in a particular locality, nor the profundity of belief – especially when time in the field is short – since many villagers are convinced that they “should not believe in spirits”. Often villagers have been told by cadres and teachers that their spirit beliefs are “backward”, irrational and unsound. Nonetheless, it is clear that the traditional culture has undergone more change in the southern communes than in the northern ones (with the possible exception of certain communes in the A Luoi district).

Whereas much of the public rituals observed in Tay Giang were still, in many respect, traditional (although involving smaller sacrifices than in the past), the situation was very different in more “modern” localities such as Thanh My town and Ca Dy commune in Nam Giang. Here many people reported that major animal sacrifices were only carried out at Tet, the Vietnamese New year celebration. In Nam Giang, we were thus told that Tet celebrations ideally involve a buffalo sacrifice. This appears to be the case also in other districts in the region. As opposed to other, traditional buffalo sacrifices – e.g. in connection with wedding and funerals, the Tet sacrifice goes down well with the authorities; indeed it is encouraged and actively promoted as a concession to “ethnic traditions”. Yet this apparent concession to “tradition” is, of course, related to the fact that, as opposed to indigenous rituals proper, Tet is a national (Kinh) celebration and, therefore, not only permissible – but good.

We were also told by cadres that reducing rituals, as well as abolishing many “backward” customs (in particular ritual taboos of different kinds), were necessary, since “excessive” feasting and customary taboos could make the work of government extension workers and teachers more difficult. One problem, we were told, was that the traditional rituals “did not correspond to the official Vietnamese calendar”. “Fortunately”, it was said, the process of reducing or abolishing the most hampering rituals and customs “had been almost completed”. It is important to note, however, that this process of change actually amounts to a process of Kinhisation where indigenous culture and society are progressively streamlined and made to conform to majority – Kinh – cultural norms and values (since the national calendar is based on Kinh culture). The question arises whether imposing the national calendar is necessary or desirable in districts where the ethnic minorities often account for more than 80% of the population – or whether it is, in fact, an expression of ethnic chauvinism.

By and large, the cultural process of “Kinhisation” is most pronounced and advanced in the southernmost study communes. In Ca Dy commune (Nam Giang district), for example, it was reported that (many) people nowadays would hold Kinh weddings rather than traditional (Katu) weddings. The customary transactions of prestige goods between the two kinship groups involved have largely been replaced by money transactions. Rather than slaughtering a buffalo for the event, the people in Ca Dy prefer to invite Kinh keyboardists, Karaoke organisers and photographers/video-makers to the wedding. Moreover, people would bring money to the newly weds (a current Kinh practise). Of course, the cost of this type of wedding is substantial (several million VND) – and probably as costly (in monetary terms) as the traditional wedding. Nonetheless, district officials were positive to the changes in wedding practices and particularly expressed satisfaction over the fact that the customary practise of “buying a wife” was on the decline (but see section 6.3.1, and Appendix 2 for a critical review of this view).

Curiously, many local people referred to their spirits as ma quy (“devils”). This might perhaps also be an indication that, as opposed to the “accepted” ancestor spirits of the Kinh, indigenous people’s spirits are not accepted.
Indigenous funerary traditions are also undergoing profound transformations: instead of making artistically elaborate wooden tomb-houses as was traditionally the practice among some of the indigenous groups in the region (notably the Katu), villagers are now increasingly using bricks and tiles for the purpose – imitating the Kinh custom. The funerary rituals are also becoming more Kinh-like; in fact, sometimes Kinh ritual specialists are invited to preside over the funerals. Buffalo sacrifices in the context of funerary rituals have been strongly discouraged by officials and are today all but abandoned (see below).

6.3.5. Hiding culture

Despite the official policy of “selective cultural preservation” (see Chapter 4) it is often unclear on exactly what grounds some customs are discouraged while others are approved or encouraged. In Tay Giang and Dong Giang districts, for example, district authorities tolerated traditional wedding rituals but strongly discouraged funeral rituals (although villagers often carried them out nonetheless). The reason for this “selective” acceptance of customary rituals was apparently that the authorities saw weddings as (potentially) productive whereas funerary rituals were regarded as merely wasteful. In the cosmology and religion of the indigenous people, both these life-cycle rituals are of equal importance (see Appendix 2). Clearly, when determining which customs are good and which are not, officials -- the majority of which are Kinh, especially those in higher positions -- will naturally use their own (Kinh) cultural framework as the point of reference. Notwithstanding, many ethnic communities have managed to preserve a large part of their culture and religion, primarily due to a strategy of “down-playing” the importance of their ritual and religious life whenever dealing with government officials and party cadres.

Moreover, there is often a clear divide between the district levels and local levels of authority; the district officials often have little understanding of indigenous cultural life, whereas commune and village officials are almost exclusively indigenous people themselves. Therefore, commune and village authorities often disregard (or implement only half-heartedly) cultural policies going against their own beliefs and convictions. It is not uncommon that at the district level, for example, organisations such as the Fatherland Front will set policy goals which will later be contravened by members of the same association at the village level. This situation arises from the fact that many of the elderly people, who participated in the Vietnam-American War and hence are today active members of the Fatherland Front, are also the traditional ritual specialists of the village.

This apparent disparity between district and communal/village authorities should not, in our view, be regarded as a weakness of the political and administrative system; to the contrary, it suggests a certain practical flexibility – a measure of “grass-root democracy” – in the system (at least at the local level). Moreover, the relative local autonomy in cultural matters resulting from this flexibility in implementing national policies has ensured that virtually all indigenous people in the study area appear to have a very positive attitude towards the national government and its policies.

Nonetheless, and despite the fact that the government has been flexible in the implementation of the policy of selective cultural preservation and allowed many “backward” customs to survive, most government officials and civil servants (including teachers and health staff) nevertheless contribute, directly or indirectly, to the devaluation and de-legitimization of indigenous traditions and culture by simply promoting national development policies, modernisation and Kinh values.
in general. In Kontum it appears that the erosion of local traditions has been one of the main factors leading certain villages to convert to Christianity.

6.4. Social evils

The progressive erosion of traditional culture – indigenous social institutions, norms and values and – opens the way for new values and ambitions but also for cultural discontent and social evils often following in the wake of rapid modernisation. The concept of “social evils” refers to a number of social problems such as crime, gambling, prostitution and drug addiction. It is a well-known fact this type of social evils usually expands quickly along major roads, in particular roads connecting two or more nations. However, since the stretch of HCMH covered by this study is recently opened or under construction and therefore, so far, only receiving a trickle of traffic, these "social evils" -- although on the increase -- are not yet a serious problem in the study area. Moreover, since traffic intensity is low, much of the existing social evils cannot be attributed directly to the HCMH but are the result of urbanisation, uncontrolled (mostly Kinh) immigration and the demise of traditional society. These types of social evils appear to have been non-existent before the arrival of Kinh immigrants into the region.

Although no district provided statistics on the spread or prevalence of prostitution, it is clearly a rapidly expanding phenomenon in the urbanised district centres (but elsewhere non-existent). The only district where prostitution has not yet emerged is Tay Giang, because this district was said to be “too poor”. Prostitution is – and was -- rampant in labour camps along the road during its construction phase and in connection with other large-scale construction projects bringing large numbers of temporary male workers into the region such as the hydroelectric dam project in A So (Dong Giang). However, indigenous men (with a few possible exceptions – notably in Thanh My town) are not involved in buying services from female sex workers, and local women engaged in prostitution appear to be extremely rare. The only reported cases of indigenous sex workers were – most notably – a few women in the southern study district of Dak Glei (Kontum). Significantly, in terms of cash-crop production, education and nutrition data, Dak Glei (Da Kroong commune) is better off than most other study districts. It is tempting to conclude that prostitution in this district is, in fact, a consequence of the relatively successful modernisation of the local economy and the concomitant growth of socio-economic differences, surging land conflicts and the loss of village cohesion and solidarity.

HIV/AIDS is, likewise, extremely rare in the study districts, probably thanks to the low level of traffic on the highway. However, interviews revealed that district health staff does not have facilities to diagnose HIV/AIDS so figures for these diseases might be larger than reported. It is known that the influx of migrant labourers (such as road workers) tends to increase the rates of sexually transmitted diseases in any given region and, thus, to spread these diseases to the local indigenous populations. Moreover, most communes along the HCMH could report one or more cases of women made pregnant by migrant road-workers.

Drug use is also on the rise but, as yet, only in the district centres. Drug pushers are all Kinh, and probably most drug users as well. Notwithstanding, indigenous people living in the vicinity of district centres raised concerns about the increasing drug use in the vicinity of their communities (this was particularly the case in Thanh My town).

6.4.1. Excessive alcohol and tobacco consumption
Excessive alcohol consumption is perhaps the most serious problem in the study area, although not necessarily locally perceived as such. Substantial alcohol and tobacco consumption have existed for generations and cannot be attributed to the HCMH; indeed it is part of traditional culture. However, in the past, like so many other aspects of village life, heavy drinking was essentially associated with public ritual events and communal work activities (e.g., house-building). Traditional alcohol was made from cassava or tree sap.

The HCMH has indirectly influenced alcohol consumption by increasing the availability of both (imported) liquor and the cash to buy it with. In many communities, the amount of money spent by households (men) on alcohol and tobacco is substantial – often exceeding the sums spent on all basic food items put together. In some localities it was reported that there were households in which both husband and wife were alcoholics and that there were cases of households selling their land to get money for buying alcohol. In the cases we came across of really hungry households (not only according to statistics), their subsistence problems were often related to alcoholism or excessive alcohol consumption (see Chapter 7 for a discussion about the ”Poverty and Hunger Myth”). A villager in Phuoc Nang explained:

"Since the construction of the HCMH, men drink, quarrel and fight more than before. Some women drink too. In families were both parents drink and quarrel, the children suffer a lot. After the HCMH was completed, only a few women are lucky to have good husbands who work hard and save money. (...) The rest suffer a lot.”

Another villager emphasised how serious the problem was:

"(...) the reason we do not have enough food to eat in this village is not because we lack land. The main reason is because people are lazy and drink too much – even women here drink. People only go to work when they have finished their money or liquor. In the past people drank less because it was hard to get hold of alcohol. Now people think that they should drink as much as they can, because after they die they can’t drink anymore”

Alcohol consumption and other forms of modern entertainment might perhaps also be correlated to an increasing trend of youngsters to engage in commercial hunting and timber logging:

"Young people in the whole commune drink a lot. Before when we just produced rice, we had nothing to exchange for rice. Since 1995, some people started earning money and buying Minsk motorbikes. Others asked them how they could do that [i.e. earn money and buy motorbikes] and then these people showed the others what kind of work they were doing [logging]. After learning how to carry out this work, the new people invited the others for drinking to give thanks. The more motorbikes they have, the more alcohol they drink..."

6.5. Diverging views on the HCMH

"The road is only good for people with motorbikes"
Villager, A Roang commune

One important conclusion from our survey is that the resident Kinh population (traders, entrepreneurs, urban residents, social servants and government officials) and local indigenous people have very different perceptions of the HCMH. Our Kinh interlocutors paint an overwhelmingly positive picture of the road and its consequences, while the indigenous residents have a more varied and often ambivalent view with a number of qualifications and reservations.
Government officials thus stressed the positive effect of the HCMH on the region: “the urban centres have become much larger and more developed and it is now much easier for the local minority people to exchange their goods at markets and for a better price than before” etc. People now have more money and can buy more goods, and are thus (according to the officials) much better off than before. Moreover, the Ho Chi Minh Highway has also raised the level of education and “improved people’s perceptions” (meaning that indigenous people have become more modern in their thinking and, presumably, more Kinh-like).

Most of all, however, it appears that the HCMH have improved the lives of the government workers themselves; although they are not rich, their lives have become much more “interesting” after the HCMH. To most government staff (including teachers) – who are mainly Kinh from lowland areas – working in the highlands had clearly been a plight before the HCMH. After the HCMH, however, their lives have improved considerably and many government officials are therefore now inclined to settle permanently in the study districts. They also hoped that the districts where they now resided would become even more similar to the more developed and industrialised lowland areas – less “dark” and “dull”, as some formulated it.

The HCMH has indeed had many positive effects on the lives of the minorities: many more minority farmers are now able to sell their products at markets in town or along the road than was the case before the highway. Since poverty tends to be measured in monetary terms (see Chapter 7 for a discussion on the poverty concept), the progressive monetarisation of the local economies, by definition, makes the study communes less poor. In the general opinion of officials and Kinh lowlanders, the simple fact that more local people now owned modern prestige objects such as motorbikes and TV sets was itself a proof that they were not only richer but that their lives (and “perceptions”) in a more general sense had improved.

The indigenous interlocutors themselves, when asked about their opinion about the HCMH and its impact on their lives, maintained (somewhat surprisingly) that the road had not changed their lives very much. Several informants said that the road was good for those who had money (or motorbikes – as in the quotation at the beginning of this section) but that, since most of them had neither, the road did not mean much to them. Others would reiterate the same positive views as the government officials (as if they had heard the message many times): the road provides better market access and better process for agricultural products; it provides better access to hospitals and health stations – particularly in case of emergency.

But indigenous interlocutors as well as district officials also mentioned negative side-effects of the road: escalating environmental degradation – particularly a dramatic loss of fish resources and a decrease in game animals along the road. Indigenous interviewees readily admitted that the road has facilitated illegal, commercial hunting (though they did not deliberately mention it as a negative effect of the road). Some mentioned an increasing number of accidents along the road, and others commented that “bad people” are entering the area as manifested in a notable increase in the incidence of theft (attributed to “outsiders”). Nevertheless most young people, men and women, were positive to the road though they also maintained it had not changed their lives to a significant extent.

On the whole, the indigenous perception of the HCMH was pointedly summarised by one informant thus: “the new road is for the Kinh, not for us”. The following comments illustrate the various and disparate indigenous views of the HCMH:
“Besides making travelling easy, the road hasn’t had any impact on our lives. Peoples’ lives still remain the same like before. Some families have motorbikes, but cheap ones. The road is only useful for people who do trading. We do not do any trading so we don’t get much benefits from it.” (A Viet Moi, male, 25 years old, A Roang commune)

“The only benefit we have received [from the road] is that we now have a more “distant vision” [meaning that they now know more things about the outside world]. Except for that, we have gained nothing. We even feel shy to go to the road [town] since we do not want to see the people in town living in luxury. Moreover, we have nothing to do there…” (A Rieng Ta Hieu, female, 30 years old, Dung village, Thanh My town)

“Before we could eat more meat and fish but the poor lacked rice. They had to eat cassava. Now we can make money to buy rice. Even though lacking in meat and fish we are happy about the road. Before we only saw mountains and climbed up and down the hills. Now the traffic on the road makes us happier. We can also travel to other areas.”

(group discussion with women in Huc Nghi commune)

“We like this modern life, we like to have more money. We want to get rich by working on our land.” (Ho Van Deo, male, 20 years old, Phuoc Nang commune)

Although we heard no outright negative opinions about the HCMH, the ambivalence, the reservations and the occasional indifference towards the road on the part of the indigenous population raise important questions which call for careful reflection: is the road mainly benefiting the immigrant Kinh population – or, indeed, the majority population living away from the road itself? Is it a project propelling economic growth at the expense of ethnic culture – even at the expense of the material conditions and physical wellbeing of the indigenous population living along the road in the sense that the road increases competition for scarce agricultural land and sharpens socio-economic differences within and between communities, between rich and poor, and between the Kinh and the indigenous population…? Our survey does not give definite answers to these questions but indicates that they are warranted. These issues deserve further and close study.
7.
Discussion

7.1. Perceptions and prejudices

A problem with Vietnamese development policies – evident, for example, in the Comprehensive poverty reduction and growth strategy (CPRGS) – is their strong centralisation and top-down character. They also display a considerable degree of ethnocentrism (Kinhcentrism) and a pejorative view of ethnic minorities. Development policies directed towards ethnic minorities are to a large extent based on unfounded and highly questionable premises about indigenous peoples and permeated with stereotypical prejudices against the latter.

Ethnic minorities are depicted as poor, disadvantaged and backward. A few passages from the CPRGS suffice to make the point:

[the] poverty rate is extremely high among ethnic minority groups. […] ethnic minority people … are geographically and culturally isolated, and lack favourable conditions for developing infrastructure and basic social services (p 22).

[…] a majority of the poor choose the strategy of self-sufficiency, and stick to traditional modes of production that generate low value, because they lack opportunities to employ more profitable production strategies. […] poor people tend to be less educated and have few opportunities to find good and stable jobs. Their level of income is barely enough to meet their nutritional requirements (p 23).

Mountainous, remote, isolated areas […] are negatively affected by backward customs and practices, social evils, such as drug trafficking, haphazard exploitation of mineral resources, migration etc. (p 33)

[The CPRGS aims to] provide guidance on how to … gradually move towards eliminating autarchic economy in ethnic minority and mountainous areas (p 112). [our italics]

It is immediately clear from these passages that “development” and poverty reduction is equated with a transition from the traditional, “autarchic” subsistence economy towards a modern market economy and an increasingly urbanised and industrialised society. The goal and model for development is a socialist-oriented market economy and an industrialised and modern society (CPGRS: 6).

Though many of the statements quoted above may be valid for poor rural and urban Kinh populations (and many modernised and modernising indigenous populations as well), where income from agriculture and salaried work form the backbone of the local/household economy, they are patently invalid in the context of an indigenous subsistence economy founded on an entirely different socio-cultural logic and a domestic mode of production (cf Chapter 3). The notion of development is clearly biased towards the social, economic and cultural conditions of the Kinh majority population. There is little or no understanding of, or sensitivity towards, the “otherness” of the indigenous socio-cultural context.
We have in the preceding pages (see also below) challenged these negative concepts and perceptions of the indigenous condition; traditional modes of production can be said to generate low value only if measured in the context of a narrowly defined commercial market economy; subsistence-based local economies are perfectly capable of meeting nutritional requirements; indigenous customs are only backward from an ethnocentric or “modernistic” point of view etc.

The modernisation bias and Kinh-centrism implied in national development policies and practices are even more conspicuous in the selection criteria for communes under Program 135, one of the priority programs under CPRGS, targeting “communes faced with extreme difficulties”. These criteria include: communes located more than 20 km from a developing centre (township or urban centre); which do not have access by car; where shifting cultivation is practiced; characterised by backward customs, and where more than 60% of the population are poor by the MOLISA income threshold (MOLISA-UNDP, 2004:38). Clearly, by these criteria, no relatively autonomous, indigenous society – certainly not one based on shifting cultivation and a domestic mode of production – escapes being singled out as “extremely poor and disadvantaged”, however healthy and prosperous it is on its own terms. In this policy framework, there is no room for distinctively “other” -- non-modern and non-Kinh -- ways of life. Welfare and wellbeing are equated with (Vietnamese/Kinh) “modernity”.

These pejorative stereotypes of the indigenous population are reproduced by government officials at all administrative levels and by most Kinh residents and civil servants we met during our survey. Our interviews suggest that, among government officials and the resident Kinh population, there is generally little understanding of indigenous society and culture, and that Kinh people of all categories generally have a condescending attitude towards ethnic minority people (who, of course, are in the majority in the region). More disturbing still, from a democratic point of view, is the fact that the plans to develop and modernise local communities (referred to as “master plans”) have not been conceived with the active participation of the indigenous population, nor do the plans and policies seem to be adapted to the particular needs and concerns of the indigenous people. On the whole, plans and policies are highly centralised and imposed from above with little regard for local customs and beliefs.

However, there are signs that the situation is changing, and national policies – not least the CPRGS – contain a number of constructive clauses and measures with regard to ethnic minority populations. Thus, in recent years, a growing number of ethnic minority cadres in the study districts have reached senior positions within the district administration. Three districts in the study area had ethnic minority chairmen. However, in all districts, the Kinh still dominate the administration. A higher percentage of ethnic minority cadres can be expected to make the entire district administration more sensitive to the specific problems and needs of these populations. In the field of education, however, there are still very few indigenous employees.

And yet, the problem of ethnic prejudice and Kinh-centrism is deeply rooted in Vietnam – so deep, in fact, that the devaluation of ethnic minority culture has taken firm roots among the minority peoples themselves. Thus, indigenous people often see themselves as poor, disadvantaged and culturally inferior to the Kinh majority population. As a result, indigenous cadres who reach senior positions in the administration may be the ones most ardently trying to eradicate “backward” customs and most actively promoting Kinh values and the modernisation of traditional society – at the cost of indigenous social institutions and cultural traditions.
7.2. The Poverty Concept in Question

7.2.1. Ethnic minority poverty in a national and regional context

It is generally assumed that ethnic minorities are the poorest people in Vietnam and are in dire need of assistance. This message is trumpeted out on a daily basis in the national media but it is also frequently mentioned in many development reports, both by national and international development agencies. In the national media the poverty of the ethnic minorities is often used to highlight the government’s (and the nation’s) heroic efforts to achieve higher living standards for all its citizens. The international development community present in Vietnam basically shares this view.

Despite the poverty of the ethnic minorities, Vietnam is internationally hailed for its remarkable success in poverty reduction. Therefore, there is nowhere really any doubt that the poverty reduction strategies that have been successful elsewhere in the country should also be applied in the ethnic minority areas; it is just a matter of intensifying the efforts. The general view is that reducing the poverty of the ethnic minorities is “very hard” due to their “extreme and disadvantaged conditions”. There is also consensus that the way forward is by improving basic infrastructure, social services, and by introducing market economy and modern production techniques – in other words, applying the universal modernisation recipe.

But is this really the best way forward? In fact, poverty statistics for ethnic minorities hardly show any improvement at all in recent years; “food poverty” statistics for ethnic minorities show that their food poverty was only reduced by 0.3% between 1998 and 2002. For Kinh people the same figure was reduced from 10.6% to 6.5% (note, in this context, that in 2002 food poverty among urban residents was 1.9%). In the Central Highlands (overall) poverty during the same period was reduced only with 0.6% while during the same period, for the Red River Delta, it was reduced by 7% (all figures above from VDR 2004).

It should be noted, however, that the Central Highlands region – which is populated by a high percentage of ethnic minorities and therefore tops the national poverty statistics – has one of the fastest growing economies in the whole of Vietnam. The average economic growth rate of, f ex, Gia Lai province between 1996 and 2000 was 12.65 % -- much higher than the national average for the same period and also higher than the economic growth rate of the coastal city of Danang (10.33%). Kontum also displayed considerable GDP growth during the same period (9.85%). Most of this growth can be attributed to the agro-forestry sector – in particular timber logging and timber processing. For Gia Lai, the average growth rate of the same sector was 15.7 % during this time-period and for Kontum 10.7%.

It can thus be observed that fast economic growth has not lead to reduced poverty in this region. No equivalent statistics are available for the CTS region but it is clear from interviews with authorities that district and provincial authorities in the study area hope to follow in the footsteps of the Central Highlands – especially as concerns “developing” the agro-forestry sector. However, the economic growth of the agro-forestry sector in the Central Highlands has

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21 Ibid.
22 Ibid. P. 10.
24 Ibid.
considerably altered the subsistence economies of the local minority people without significantly raising their household income (translated as a very small reduction of “poverty” figures for the minority population). We thus question the assumption that “developing/modernising” the agro-forestry of the CTS region will be in the interest of the local people – although it will increase the production figures for the districts at large (GDP).

In sum, Vietnamese officials, policymakers (and, indeed, international donors as well) generally seem to assume that the ethnic minorities are – and always have been – poor due to the intrinsic (deficient) nature of their society and economy, and that what is needed is more of the same development and modernisation package that has been delivered to the rest of the country. We question these assumptions on a number of grounds (some of which have been outlined earlier; see Chapter 3):

- In areas where ethnic minorities are able to continue with shifting cultivation, hunting and fishing more or less along traditional lines, their diet is generally adequate although they appear in the poverty statistics as “hungry” (because, as we have seen, “food poverty” is calculated in monetary terms, and does not take into account the “domestic” subsistence oriented local economy). The fact that the majority of the indigenous population is neither starving nor “hungry” is amply substantiated by in-depth studies carried out by the Katuic Ethnographic Project; it is further corroborated by extensive data from other indigenous shifting cultivators in Southeast Asia (Chamberlain 2001, Krahn 2005).

- In other areas, where indigenous subsistence economies have been significantly disrupted and where people no longer have access to traditional forest and river resources (game animals, fish and a large number of “forest foods”), low household income and a poorly developed market economy may signify considerable poverty and hardship, including hunger. In ethnic minority areas, such impoverished conditions are as likely to come about as a result of modernisation as being alleviated by it.

- In the study districts, most indigenous people are self-subsistent shifting cultivators who mainly use cash to buy non-essential consumer goods (including tobacco, alcohol, TV sets etc.). In the Central Highlands (southern and central Kontum, Gia Lai and Dak Lak), ethnic peoples’ traditional livelihood systems have been considerably more disrupted than in the CTS region (northern Kontum, Quang Tri, TT Huế, Quang Nam), and they are thus more dependent on the market economy for their subsistence. Therefore, the fact that “food-poverty” figures in the Central Highlands has not improved in recent years, is more worrying than the figures from the study area. The problem, however, is that the government is trying to implement similar development programmes in the CTS districts as it has in the Central Highlands.

Highlighting some of the problems lying ahead, the Vietnam Development Report from 2004 points out that:

“(…) poverty has increased among the ethnic minority population living in the Central Highlands. More than 80 % were living in poverty in 2002. The PPA in Dak Lak discusses many reasons why this has happened, but one of the most dominant is the fall in coffee prices, which has been associated with indebtedness and distress sales of land for some…” (p. 26)
The above quotation also shows that the transition from “traditional” to “modern” forms of agro-forestry is far from a painless process. It also highlights the danger of over-relying on cash-crop production (thus reducing food security). Although this lesson should have been learnt by now, especially by the international development agencies which back-up government schemes (and which have already seen this scenario played out in other countries), it clearly has not yet sunk in. To planners, policymakers and administrators, seeing no alternative ways of rapidly modernising their districts, cash-crop production and industrial agro-forestry appear to be the only way “forward” (c.f. CPRGS).

The alleged (and, no doubt sometimes very real) hardships suffered by certain ethnic minority populations in the country are apparently confirmed by malnutrition statistics which show that malnutrition is vastly over-represented among ethnic minorities nationwide; thus, approximately 23% of all ethnic minority children (under 5 years of age) are underweight for their age. Among ethnic minority children in the Central Coast and Central Highlands, this figure rises to 45.3% (VDR 2004, p. 28). It would appear, then, that malnutrition is particularly high in the study area and the Central Highlands.

However, these figures can be questioned on a number of grounds (see, f ex, section 6.1). First, since there are no figures available from before 2000, it is unclear whether the nutritional situation (according to the standard measurements) has improved at all. Secondly, and more importantly, one may question whether the relatively high current and recent malnutrition figures are not the result of the dramatic economic transformation in the recent years. Kahn (2005) has shown, from a related minority population in Laos, that the indigenous diets are becoming less rich in vital nutrients as a result of ongoing rapid modernisation processes (see 7.2.2 below). In other words, considering the disruptions of the traditional livelihood system in the study area over the past decades (decrease of agricultural land, fish and wild game resources), it is reasonable to raise the question whether the poverty-reduction measures are not causing (some of) the problems they were meant to solve?

7.2.2. Conceptions about poverty

When asked, villagers often claimed that they were richer today than in the past. Further questioning, however, revealed that the issue of poverty – around which so much of today’s development discourse revolves – is much more complex than it first appears to be. One result of the intensive and massive poverty-reduction efforts in Vietnam is that indigenous people – and other designated poor populations – have adopted and interiorised the mainstream view of poverty and that they themselves (the indigenous people) are among the “poorest of the poor”.

This process – and the change in self perception it has entailed – is due to the growing and pervasive contacts with Kinh people, government extension workers and cadres, health staff, village teachers, traders, and Kinh townspeople in general. In one village, for example, we were told how a group of poverty reduction cadres had come to the village and – after a few hours of work – had designated the “poorest households” in the village. Through such contacts with “outsiders”, gradually, the traditional ideas about wealth and poverty have thus been replaced with the mainstream idea that poverty can and should be measured primarily in consumer goods and money.

When, during the course of this consultancy, we asked more specifically in which ways they (the indigenous people) were richer now than in the past the people interviewed would answer, f ex, that whereas in the past they only had one set of clothes they now had several (or because in the
distant past they did not even have clothes, only bark kilts). Another typical answer was that they were now richer because “more villagers had TVs, radios, and motorbikes etc.”. However, when asked about if they had more **food to eat** now than in the past, most elderly villagers in fact claimed that in the past they ate more meat, fish and even rice. 25 This is not at all inconceivable since – as we have shown – the traditional livelihood system has been severely circumscribed as a result of post-war government policies, principally the fixed cultivation and sedentarisation program and recent land policies.

The affirmation is also supported by the fact that, as we have also seen, food is often more abundant in remote villagers surviving along more traditional subsistence lines than in modernised roadside villages. Some of the problems facing the indigenous populations today is the rapidly decreasing fertility of agricultural land, the decrease of game meat in the local diet and rapidly diminishing river-fish resources. Despite the negative impact that these factors in combination have on people’s livelihood, statistically speaking, and in the opinion of government officials, they have become wealthier. The main reason for this incongruence is, as we have shown, the way poverty is measured: households with an income of less than 200,000 VND per month fall below the poverty line, those with higher incomes – above. TV sets, motorbikes, radios, “permanent houses”, savings etc are also used in local assessments of the poverty situation in villages.

What we are observing here is a trend where the values of majority society are being imposed on the indigenous populations, sometimes with clear detrimental consequences: the alleged poverty serves as justification for changing their livelihood patterns – the perceived inefficiency of their traditional agriculture (shifting cultivation) justifies the virtual confiscation of swidden land and turning it into natural forest land (production or protection forest). However, the circumscription of their subsistence activities (reduced agricultural land, hunting prohibitions, the loss of fish and game resources due to over-exploitation on the part of commercial fishermen and hunters/traders from outside the region) actually constitutes a greater loss to local economies than the benefits gained in the form of closer access to markets and more consumer goods.

In sum, the conventional measurements of living standards in terms of income, housing, access to social services and the possession of consumer goods are based on standards entirely alien to the indigenous society, and are strongly biased towards majority (Kinh) values and conditions. As observed earlier, conventional poverty indicators do not measure wellbeing in any objective or absolute sense, nor in a way sensitive to local conditions and perceptions; rather, they measure the degree of modernisation and Kinhisation – the extent to which indigenous society have adopted the values, perceptions and practices of the Kinh majority population.

One striking and illustrative example of this process of Kinhisation intrinsic in the national poverty-reduction strategy is Program 134 aimed at improving housing conditions for the poorest households in communes faced with “extreme difficulties” (see Box 10 above). In the course of the implementation of this programme, houses constructed according to traditional indigenous architecture are categorically (and erroneously) defined as “cottages” or “temporary” houses. 26 Although local people know that their houses are far from “temporary”, they have in some

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25 We must take the period before the Vietnam War as our "baseline" period since the conditions during the War were horrendous to the local populations. Not only were they bombed and their fields and forests destroyed by American toxins. They were also attacked by American special forces and, on top of everything had to feed the Vietnamese army with rice.

26 The concept of “temporary houses” originates in the widely held Kinh idea that the local indigenous people are nomads. Before the Vietnam-American War they did move their villages periodically (every 7-10 years) but this hardly makes them nomads in a conventional or technical sense.
localities started to use this term for their traditional houses. Increasingly, the current
development process is imposing such alien concepts on the indigenous populations. This
imposition of outside values also touches other spheres of daily life: as we noted above with
regard to local food and eating customs, villagers generally claim that they had more to eat in the
past but that the food they eat today is “more civilised and hygienic”. (Significantly, neither of the
two words in italics have any equivalent in the indigenous language).

Poverty reduction is, practically and effectively, equated with monetarisation and
commercialisation. There are no means of – nor, it seems, any interest in – determining wellbeing
in local, indigenous terms. Accordingly, poverty reduction programs are propelled to the
detriment not only of indigenous culture and ethnic identity but, at worst, also of local wellbeing.
Little attention is paid to wellbeing in this local sense since there are no easy or conventional
ways of measuring it. This failure to take account of local notions of wellbeing, is in our view
one of the most serious shortcomings of national development and poverty reduction policies.
The issue requires urgent attention: how can one sensibly measure “wellbeing” in
local/indigenous terms, in the context of indigenous cultural values and social institutions? And
how are we to re-design the poverty concept so as to take into account such local/indigenous
conceptions of wellbeing?

7.2.3. Poverty and hunger: the “starvation” myth

In many of the development reports concerning ethnic minorities in Vietnam they are described
as utterly poor and “disadvantaged”. The indigenous groups in the present study are no exception.
Indeed, they are often described as “hungry” and “starving”. Tay Giang district with its 84 %
“poor households” has been rated the poorest district in all of Vietnam. Previous WWF reports
have followed this trend: For example, in the WWF report “Economic Benefits of the A’Vuong
Watershed in Vietnam to Indigenous Katu People” (2005) the authors claim (page 6) that

“(H)unger is a recurring theme for up to three months of the year in the majority of communes
[in A’vuong commune].”

Another WWF report (People, land and resources in the CTS landscape) from 2003 claims (on
page 18) that

“(...) Poverty is more pronounced within the surveyed indigenous ethnic minority communities
due to the lack of agricultural land and low productivity. In Khe Tran village, there is
absolutely no land area for wet rice cultivation. Ta Vai villagers suffer from hunger for four to
five months a year and 100% of households are classified as poor or hungry households.”

The list can be made even longer; another report in the same series (“Socio-economic issues in
the CTS landscape”, [2003]) states that

“The rate of poor households has been reduced in many areas in the [CTS] provinces.
However, these positive developments only affect people who have the opportunity to access
such support and live in areas that are convenient, such as close to roads or on the edge of
towns [sic]. Many other inhabitants, especially the ethnic minorities, remain in poverty and on
the brink of starvation, regardless of the government’s support and investment.” (p 25; our
italics)

There is an official definition of “hungry households”, used in the official poverty statistics, as
those households which fall below the “food-poverty line” (expressed as the minimum monthly
income needed to meet the household’s daily food needs; see section 5.4.2). The ratio of
households falling below the food-poverty line in any area defines the level of “food poverty”
which constitutes a fraction of the poverty ratio. (Up to 2004, the income threshold used by
MOLISA to identify “hungry” households in mountainous areas was 50,000 VND as compared to
80,000 VND as the threshold for identifying “poor” households). However, local assessments of
poor and hungry households appear to be based on rather subjective criteria (as described above,
section 5.4.2); households are qualified as “hungry” when they have less money, possession and
rice than those designated as “poor”. None of these measurements does however measure hunger
or starvation in any conventional or clinical sense.

Our own assessment is that hunger and starvation is not widespread among these communities –
neither in an objective sense nor as an experienced condition. Extensive field studies carried out
between 2003-5 by the Katuic Ethnography Project team in Tay Giang and Dong Giang districts
(the most disadvantaged in the region), covering several communes and spanning several months
at different periods of the year, does not support the claims made in the above cited reports. Nor
did villagers themselves agree with those statements when confronted with them during
conversations. Moreover, no health worker at any of the communal health stations visited during
our survey raised concerns about hunger or starvation. To the contrary, several district officials
claimed that indigenous people living in remote communities, despite being ”poorer”, often had
more food than those living in roadside villages or near district centres.

Finally, it should be noted that the only serious scientific attempt so far to quantify the nutritional
intake of the indigenous population in the CTS region was carried out in 2005 by Jutta Krahn
who did in-depth research about the nutritional (and health) status of Katu villagers in Laos (Se
Kong province). Her conclusion is that, in a sample of villages, people in the more remote and
traditional communities (relying on a relatively traditional livelihood system) had a considerably
higher nutritional status than those in the more modernised communities near roads and market
towns. Krahn writes:

“It was shown [in her study] that the traditional Katu diet was nutritionally adequate but is
shifting towards inadequacy, which appears to be related to a higher intake of rice (adversely
processed) and a concomitant lower intake of a variety of other staples, meats, wild fruits,
and wild vegetables. (…) It is instructive that negative dietary change can be ascribed in
particular to the two villages which are apparently more “modern”.”

Jutta Krahn identifies two important reasons for the decreasing nutritional status of the more
“modern” villages:

“[t]he negative dietary change has shown to be mainly the result of two direct causes. The
first cause is the disruption of the agro-ecosystem (most severely hunting). The second – and
less acknowledged - cause is the vanishing of interrelated culinary principles, including
kinship solidarity and concomitant culinary monotony.”

She also identifies the efforts on the part of the government to make the Katu more market-
oriented and integrated into the national economy as underlying causes of negative dietary
changes:

“The Katu’s food system was also found to be strongly affected by underlying forces which
are slipping out of the Katu’s control. As such, forces for the national integration together with
the interaction of regional systems and evolving market commodities appear to suppress the
Katu’s own potential for cultural innovation and occur at the expense of the local
environment.”
Finally, she concludes that the Katu were prone to be defined as malnourished and as lacking food security partly because of unsuitable (mainstream Lao) conceptions about the issue

“(…) the current Lao food security concept is neither based on a comprehensive understanding of the changing dynamics of upland food systems, nor does it attempt to draw on the full potential of traditional food chains, cuisines, and diets. [There are] four major fallacies: Firstly, it was proposed that the [current Lao food security] concept makes many uplanders food insecure by ill-definition [our italics]. Secondly, it was shown that the goal of reaching food security via market integration becomes illusive. Thirdly, until now, most of the food security activities are localized at the food chain level and do not appear to sufficiently respond to culinary principles. Fourthly, it was [shown] that the food security concept is completely detached from the underlying causes of nutritional problems. It became evident that the concept of food security for ethnic minorities living in tropical forest areas rich in biodiversity urgently needs to be restructured and be made more polyvalent. It is proposed that the need for external and high input interventions is far less than anticipated as local self-help potentials are not yet optimized.”

Where, then, does the idea about the alleged hunger and starvation among the ethnic minorities come from? It appears, in our view, to derive from the fact that some indigenous households lack rice during certain periods of the year. However, periodic lack of rice is a normal condition for the indigenous population in the region, and should be understood in the context of a livelihood system making use of a wide range of crops and forest plants. It appears that, in rapid food and poverty assessment surveys, the periodical dependency on cassava has become equated with “hunger” and even “starvation”. In other words, the number of households who had to mix their rice with cassava for a certain number of months of the year would be considered hungry or “lacking in food”. As we have tried to show, however, this qualification of the local food situation is highly questionable, to say the least. The indigenous population, although poor in monetary terms (and classified as such in poverty statistics), by and large, sustains an adequate diet – and more so in the more traditional villages than in the more modernised ones.

In sum, the indigenous communities in the study area have erroneously been classified as “hungry” due to a biased and ethnocentric system of defining and identifying poverty (and food poverty in particular). It is important to question such claims about “hunger” and “starvation” since – by conveying the impression that the indigenous people are, so to speak, victims of their own incapacity to sustain themselves – such claims will, in fact, further diminish the local people’s possibilities of ever being able determine their own future and of pursuing their own way of life. Indeed, such allegations about “starvation” disqualify their entire culture and stigmatise their societies as “backward”.

7.3. Rural-urban inequality and other emerging economic trends

Most of Vietnam’s poor live in rural areas (only 6.6% of the urban population were considered below the poverty line in 2002). It is also a fact that many of the poorest provinces in Vietnam are those which have a comparatively large percentage of ethnic minority people and that ethnic minorities (in general) are much poorer than Kinh people. In the study area, however, most

districts did not have statistics which disaggregated poverty between ethnic minorities and Kinh. What we can see from the statistics, however, is that Thanh My town – the only urban centre in the sample of communes – is by far the richest commune in the study area. This is obviously because of the much larger concentration here of businessmen, entrepreneurs and employees. The majority of these individuals (and their households) are Kinh. Thus, one may attribute Thanh My’s better poverty ranking to the large number of Kinh people usually present in urban centres.

The point to emphasise here is that, as a rule, it is the growing urban centres that contribute to the reduction of poverty statistics at the district and province levels, but this does not entail at all that living conditions for indigenous people living in or near urban centres are being significantly improved, nor for that matter that there is any tendency of ethnic minorities of moving to the urban centres (where the wealth is concentrated). In fact, to put it more bluntly, the more Kinh that live in the district (centres), the richer the district as a whole will appear in statistics. Furthermore, a comparison with the Central Highland provinces (Kontum, Gia Lai, Pleiku) shows that the bigger the urban centre, the higher the percentage of Kinh. Pleiku, e.g., in Gia Lai province has 88% Kinh people (Nguyen Lam Thanh, p. 11).

Another, interesting fact worth considering – especially in light of certain claims that ethnic minorities suffer from “over-population” – is the fact that the ethnic minority populations in the study area are extremely small by national standards; the Katu, (the largest group), for example, number only ca 50,000. The total number of ethnic minority people living in the study area in 2004 was 133,688. Although, they still outnumber the Kinh (the Kinh only constitute about 20% in the region), the total number of ethnic minority people should be compared to the 123,000 inhabitants (of which 88% are Kinh) in the town of Pleiku (Gia Lai province). In Kontum province, taken as a whole, the Kinh already outnumber the ethnic minorities (56%). In fact, Kontum province has one of the highest provincial urban/rural ratios in the whole of Vietnam (with ca 30% of the population concentrated in the urban areas); this situation is due to the concentration of mainly Kinh people in the urban areas (and the very thinly populated ethnic minority communes surrounding them).

Despite the massive immigration of Kinh into the Central Highland region, the food poverty situation in the region as a whole (of which Kontum forms part) virtually did not change at all during the period 1998-2002. Given, these facts and figures, we must conclude that as districts “develop” and “modernise” (especially in the agro-forestry sector), this does not entail any substantial migration of ethnic minorities to the urban centres (where wealth and capital are concentrated), nor does it substantially improve the living standards of the ethnic minorities. Rather, as we have seen, the ethnic minorities continue living as subsistence farmers in rural areas and continue to be poor (in monetary terms). Considering the development trends in the Central Highlands, it is thus highly questionable, to say the least, whether interventions and increased investments along the lines taking place at present will improve living standards in any meaningful sense for the indigenous population.

However, the fact that little or no rural-urban migration by ethnic minorities in the study area has taken place should in fact be regarded as an indication that the rural living conditions are still decent and that the indigenous population is in fact able to support itself with their current livelihood activities. As can be seen from examples from other parts of Vietnam, people do migrate when economic conditions are bad. For instance, “bad economic conditions” is usually

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28 The only salaried profession which a fair number of ethnic minority individuals in the study area have taken up is the cadre profession (but even in this profession they are mostly outnumbered by Kinh). They rarely (i.e. almost never) work as teachers, shopkeepers, traders etc.
the explanation given for the great number of ethnic minority people who have migrated from the Northern Highlands to the Central Highlands, and – in recent years (though fewer of them) – from the Central Highlands to the Central Truong Son region (the study area).

The (largely urban) Kinh population in the study area not only dominates the business sector of the regional economy, but also (the profitable part of) the agro-forestry sector. Even when they do not legally own land themselves, they often act as capitalists/entrepreneurs in the newly introduced agro-forestry activities such as, the industrial-tree plantations and reap the lion share of the profits. Ironically, it is exactly these new agro-forestry models that the government is encouraging and supporting. The ethnic minorities profit considerably less than the Kinh from these new activities. The new schemes thus clearly contribute to deepen economic cleavages between the Kinh and the indigenous populations. This emerging and increasing economic inequality can be read from national statistics (see Table 19, below). As can be seen from the table, economic inequality in the Northern and Central Highlands (as indicated by their gini-coefficients) – although still not as high as in the North Central Coast and the South East – is increasing much faster than in any other region (in particular in the Northern Highlands were it grew from 0.26 to 0.34, thus growing four times faster than the gini coefficient for Vietnam as a whole).

Table 19: Gini index for expenditures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Index ranges from 0 to 1</th>
<th>1993</th>
<th>1998</th>
<th>2002</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>0.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Highlands (or Northern Mountains)</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Central Coast</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South East</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mekong Delta</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>0.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Highlands</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The fact, that ethnic minorities do not (or cannot) take advantage of the emerging economic activities suggest that -- as concerns the indigenous people – the schemes are structurally and fundamentally misconceived. Ethnic minorities feel naturally compelled to continue carrying out the activities in which they are skilled and in which they have traditionally engaged – shifting cultivation (be it for the market or for subsistence), hunting and gathering (etc.). They lack the inclination (or skill) to engage in the more profitable commercial activities which are usually alien to them, or in which they simply cannot compete with the more skilled Kinh. This generalisation applies for most of the salaried profession in the urban centres, as well as for many of the emerging agro-forestry activities (including, as note above, commercial livestock raising).

\[29\] In total, ca 90,000 people belonging to ethnic minorities from the north of Vietnam have migrated to the Central Highlands region (Nguyen Tham Lam, p. 11).
This situation should be taken into account from the outset in all development planning since it is
not very likely to change in the foreseeable future. To apply the same policies that have been
applied elsewhere in Vietnam and among rural (Kinh) people living in the lowlands, is thus not
the correct approach to improve the living conditions of the ethnic minorities. Instead, radical
new approaches – adapted to local environmental, socio-economic and cultural conditions – are
necessary. We outline some general suggestions in section 7.4.3 below, and in the
Recommendations (Chapter 9) at the end of the report.

3.4.  The issue of shifting cultivation

Everywhere in the Southeast Asian region, national land-use legislation and development policies
work against shifting cultivation which is not only considered backward and primitive but also
believed to be environmentally wasteful and destructive. Accordingly, all countries in the region
attempt to eliminate shifting cultivation by banning it, declaring an area forest reserve, population
relocation and resettlement, and promoting permanent and commercial agriculture. National land
policies consistently refuse to recognize customary use rights to swidden fields and, in particular,
do not recognize swidden fallows. As a result, permanent, commercial agriculture (and silvi-
culture) is promoted at the expense of shifting cultivation.

This trend notwithstanding, there is today ample evidence (see, f ex, Rambo et al 1995, Guerin et
al 2003, and Fox 2000) that the opposition to shifting cultivation is mainly based on
misconceptions about how the system really works, especially as regards its effect on soil as
compared to that of permanent agriculture. In fact, it is increasingly evident that shifting
cultivation has a significant advantage over permanent agriculture: “the fallow periods allow soil
to stabilize and give forest vegetation an opportunity to regrow, providing a home for a variety of
life forms. Because of its fallow period, swidden agriculture promotes both greater carbon
sequestration and biodiversity conservation than permanent agriculture” (Fox, ibid).

Contrary to the popular belief that swidden fallows are impoverished environments, fallow have a
richness of plant and animal species, many of which are not found elsewhere, and are not
dominated by any single species. Secondary forests consist of up to three canopy layers including
older trees from the previous fallow forest, younger trees that have sprouted from trees cut earlier,
and trees that have developed from seeds. The swiddening environment as a whole is complex,
dynamic, of uneven age and structurally diverse (Fox, ibid).

“The real threat to the Southeast Asian forest ecosystems is settled agriculture, which
permanently eliminates complex forests and replaces them with crops of a single species, such as
rubber, palm oil, coffee, or bamboo, or by annuals, such as maize, cassava, and ginger. National
policies favouring permanent fields (including introduced exotic crops) over shifting cultivation,
combined with both an increasing need for cash and increasing opportunities to earn it, are
pushing farmers away from traditional shifting practices and toward permanent agriculture, with
potentially devastating ecological consequences” (Fox, ibid: 2).

Box 13:
Abandoning shifting cultivation for wet-rice cultivation: a flawed idea
Vietnamese development policy towards the minorities in the CTS region, the Central Highland
Provinces and the northern uplands has been focussed on “sedentarisation” and the abolishment
of “slash and burn agriculture”. The rationale behind these policies has never been thoroughly
revised by the government nor by international donor organisations which have contributed to the
funding of fixed-cultivation and sedentarisation programs – despite the evident lack of viable alternatives for many of Vietnam’s indigenous shifting. The process of sedentarising the ethnic minorities has now been all but completed but shifting cultivation still continues. The latest efforts to eradicate shifting cultivation now fall under the umbrella of “poverty reduction”.

The government’s inflexible stance on this issue appears, in fact, to have lead to a deterioration of the indigenous food situation in many districts and communes: the population is growing in the communes without any corresponding expansion of the land available for cultivation (since shifting cultivation is not allowed to expand) – with a decreasing fertility of the existing agricultural land as a result. The ambition is to compensate the loss of swidden land with intensified cash-crop production, wet-rice cultivation and agro-forestry projects – an ambition which is, as yet, far from fulfilled.

Vietnamese authorities usually give two reasons why it is necessary to abandon shifting cultivation: the first is that it is said to be environmentally destructive, the second reason is that it is regarded as “inefficient” and “unproductive”. However, Guerin et al (2003, p190) has shown that rotational shifting agriculture in the uplands of Central Vietnam and eastern Cambodia is as productive as wet rice cultivation (at least under upland conditions):

“The red forest soils, for example those of high plateau of Ratanakiri, Mondolkiri or Dak Lak, allow harvests of between 1.5 tons to 3.5 tons of dry rice/ha allowing for yearly variations, whereas harvests for wet rice in the same area yield approximately 2 tons/ha.”

Moreover, swidden fields invariably contain a great variety of different crop types besides rice which substantially augments their total productivity (ibid. p 191). Guerin et al also claim that in the uplands of Cambodia harvest yields are in fact higher than on wet rice fields that are not fertilised. However, as we have seen above, dry rice is much more susceptible to harvest failures. Guerin et al explain that in certain delta areas (when using a highly advanced irrigation system and fertilisers), wet rice cultivation tend to be more productive than upland shifting cultivation (with yields ranging between 4-6 tons/ha). However, and this is the important point, since such favourable conditions do not obtain in the highlands (and not in our study communes), it is misconceived to compare the productivity of upland shifting cultivation with that of advanced forms of wet rice farming (ibid.).

However, the official Vietnamese standpoint on shifting agriculture is, as noted, far from unique: governments all over South East Asia (Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia etc.) have relentlessly pursued similar policies for decades. Outside observers (Salemink, Rambo, Guerin et al) have commented on this “obsession” with shifting cultivation as responding to a need on the part of these relatively young nation-states to effectively assert control over their territories and populations, something which is rendered more difficult with mobile shifting cultivators who do not remain fixed in one location. Others have commented that the pejorative view on shifting cultivation derives from the fact that virtually all powerful civilisations in this region have been based on wet rice agriculture. Thus in the “evolutionary” interpretations of historical developments in some South East Asian countries, shifting cultivation is associated with a primitive stage in the cultural evolution of societies. Since economic growth, modernisation and industrialisation are the primary development goals of all Southeast Asian states, they make every effort to abolish such “backward” forms of agriculture and eliminate the social institutions and cultural traditions with which they are associated (i.e. indigenous culture).
7.4.1. The decline of shifting cultivation

To the indigenous peoples in the CTS region, shifting cultivation is not only a mode of livelihood and a life-style – as, for example, livestock herding is a life-style for pastoral peoples around the world – but also a socio-cultural practice invested with profound religious meaning. Shifting cultivation and its accompanying livelihood activities – such as hunting, fishing and the gathering of forest products – are the foundation and cornerstone of indigenous religion and spiritual life. Without shifting cultivation, the agricultural rituals which largely constitute the indigenous spiritual life will gradually disappear, and with them many of the beliefs making up the foundation of indigenous religion, thus leaving the local populations in a cultural and spiritual vacuum (all too easily filled with new and alien forms of religion, or resulting in deepening “cultural poverty”, the crumbling of social integration and cohesion, and the emergence of social evils…).

As noted, the official justifications for abolishing shifting cultivation mainly rest on two assumptions which none of them holds up for close scrutiny: first, that shifting cultivation is unproductive and, therefore, must be replaced by more productive and sustainable forms of agricultural production; secondly, that shifting cultivation is environmentally destructive and, therefore, must be stopped on environmental grounds. We have already addressed both these issues; under traditional circumstances (low population density and abundant forest land), rotational shifting cultivation is both environmentally sustainable and remarkably productive, capable of supporting substantial populations in a harsh environment which is not suitable for – or, indeed, capable of – sustaining more intensive forms of cultivation.

However, as we have also observed in the course of this report, optimal conditions for shifting cultivation no longer obtain in the region (nor in Vietnam as a whole); populations are today concentrated in larger and permanent settlements, and people are no longer allowed to “cultivate” the forest in the manner required by a well-functioning, rotational system of shifting cultivation. By and large, the indigenous population in the study area today practices an atrophied form of shifting cultivation, one that is not sustainable, nor sufficiently productive to meet local household demands.

Our study indicates that this situation is basically a result of government policies – principally the fixed cultivation and sedentarisation program and the concomitant circumscription of swidden cultivation – and not a result of natural population growth or any intrinsic properties of the indigenous cultivation system per se. Because of these policy measures, agricultural land is today increasingly scarce and, because of the strong push towards cash-crop production on previous swidden land, increasingly exhausted. At the same time, wet-rice cultivation and cash crop production do not compensate for the demise of shifting cultivation of upland rice. These conclusions sum up the principal predicament of the indigenous population in the study area with respect to local livelihood and food security.

7.4.2. Ecological knowledge embedded in customs and traditions

In traditional societies like those of the Katu, Ta Oi, Bru and Gie Trieng, ecological knowledge has two forms. One form of knowledge is similar to our scientific knowledge; indigenous people know the habits of animals, when and how to plant and harvest crops etc. This knowledge has evolved through close observation and experimentation over the centuries, and is passed on from generation to generation. The other form of ecological knowledge, however, is implicit, deeply
embedded in cultural beliefs and practices. The customary taboos, for example, (the prohibition to
hunt in, or clear, certain areas in the forest), while appearing to be at odds with scientific
knowledge, may nonetheless be environmentally sound in their consequences by decreasing
hunting pressure and preserving specific patches of primary forest, thus allowing indigenous
populations to sustain themselves in their natural habitat for centuries without destroying the
forest or depleting its resources. In this sense, such behavioural restrictions exemplify what I have
referred to as “coded ecological knowledge” (see above).

It would thus be of great value not only to understand what types of conventional ecological
knowledge these groups possess, but also to determine the environmental implications of their
cultural system, their beliefs and practices – in short, their entire resource management system.
Policy makers and development practitioners should recognise, respect and seek to develop this
subtle source but little understood form of traditional knowledge, especially since most past and
current efforts to develop alternatives to shifting cultivation have failed. Similarly, current
experiments in commercial livestock rearing have not been successful among indigenous people
in the region, and virtually no households in the study communes have profited from fish
breeding.

Box 14:
Loss of indigenous “eco-religion”

Very few in-depth studies, based on long fieldwork, exist on indigenous cultures and societies in
the study area, and no single work, as far as we know, has attempted to specifically assess the
integral environmental impact of indigenous livelihood systems. The changes that have so far
taken place in these livelihood systems have already had profound consequences not only on local
economy and food security but also on the environment. It should also be taken into account that
much of the indigenous people’s spiritual life is grounded in, and expressed through, their
(traditional) livelihood activities. The government-induced dismantling of traditional
environmental taboos (see Box 12) which existed among all the indigenous minorities in the
study area is an example of how a subtle, indigenous resource-management system crumbles
under the pressure from government policies, development programs and increasing contacts with
the majority society.

7.4.3. The challenge ahead

There are, in our view, prospects for improving the wellbeing and living conditions of the
indigenous population in the CTS region on a sustainable basis but, as opposed to current
development efforts, these options must be based on local conditions and concerns, and start from
indigenous cultural concepts and practices, and the practical knowledge embedded in these
concepts and practices. An alternative indigenous development strategy should thus:

- recognise rotational shifting cultivation as a legitimate form of agriculture under upland
  conditions, and accommodate land-use and forest legislation to this fact; accordingly it
  should
- legally recognise traditional forms of land tenure, including rights over fallow land and,
  on this basis,
- explore ways of developing and intensifying shifting cultivation on a sustainable basis (cf
  existing research on this topic, ex, de Jong 1997) and, in particular,
• promote *composite swidden systems*, such as those practised among certain Tay groups in northern Vietnam, which combine rotational swidden cultivation with intensive wet-rice cultivation (Rambo 1998); finally, it should also

• pay careful attention to local resource-management systems – integrating agriculture, hunting, fishing and the gathering of forest products – and how these articulate with new, market-oriented economic activities and indigenous culture at large.

Although there is still disagreement among scholars about the full implications of various forms of shifting cultivation and their economic and environmental costs and benefits, most agree that *shifting cultivation systems must be understood in the larger context of culturally integrated livelihood and resource-management systems*, and that there is a conspicuous lack of precisely such integral and contextual understanding. *This whole field cries out for further interdisciplinary research.*

### 7.5. Cultural erosion

The concept of culture advanced by the Vietnamese state – the concept which underlies cultural policies, notably the policy of selective preservation, and which figure in official policy documents in general – is an aesthetic concept of culture suitable for what is conventionally referred to as the cultural sector in a modern socio-economic and political context: creative arts, media, entertainment, and the “cultural industry” in a broad sense. Such a narrowly aesthetic concept of culture – focussing on fine arts, literature, music and creative performances and the like – is singularly ill suited in the context of Vietnam’s indigenous societies; indeed, we would argue that it is essentially inapplicable to the indigenous context and fails to grasp the integral nature of ethnic minority culture.

When applied to the indigenous situation it is taken to refer to customary artistic genres and expressive activities such as ethnic art, music, song and dances torn from their context; they are presented as commodities on the cultural market, for consumption in the form of art objects or public performances – in media or for an anonymous audience. Culture has here lost its original significance as an integral part of a particular socio-cultural and often religious context. It is given entirely new connotations, proper to a modern, market-based, society. This process of commodifying cultural phenomena is usually referred to as the folklorisation of culture; like the rest of the modernising indigenous society – including land, the forest and its animal and plant resources – culture is being converted into a product for the market.

Whatever its economic (and possibly other) merits, this process of folklorisation and cultural commodification is profoundly destructive to indigenous culture as an integral system of norms, values and practices – a dynamic and open-ended system which is still at the heart of ethnic identity and collective self-definition of most of the indigenous groups in the CTS region. Thus, among the indigenous groups in the study area, as indeed among most indigenous groups worldwide, art and aesthetics are an inseparable aspect of all social practice, a meaning-creating dimension of social life in general. In particular, visual art forms, sculpture, song and dances among the CTS peoples, tend to be intimately associated with ritual and religious events. And, as we have repeatedly stressed in the foregoing, ritual and religion is but an aspect of the most practical activities; local livelihood practices are invested with profound religious and existential meaning and significance.
In this perspective, art and aesthetics is an aspect of material survival or, more in line with indigenous thinking: living the local, socially sanctioned way – according to tradition and with the proper rituals – means living well, and guarantees wellbeing and survival. We suggest that culture, and cultural identity, can best be understood in this broad and integral way, as a way of life – “living the proper way”, surviving according to the customs, traditions and norms specific to each ethnic group or people. Culture, in this sense, is the very basis for ethnic identity and the sense of a meaningful life.

In the case of the indigenous groups of the CTS region, ethnic identity is, thus, inextricably associated with: upland-rice cultivation (shifting cultivation) and hunting – with associated religious rituals; the complex system of marriage and associated exchange of ritual goods which forms the basis of social cohesion and community solidarity (Appendix 2); collective animal sacrifices and the proper performance of funerary rituals – constituting the supreme expressions of indigenous religious life; the construction of Community Houses and tomb houses (in the majority of groups) and the public rituals and functions associated with these. All these practical activities, ritual practices and material expressions are significantly inter-related into a cultural whole which forms the basis for ethnic identity and which subtly but significantly vary from one ethnic group to another.

Granted this understanding of indigenous culture which, we think, is as close as one can come to the local conceptualisation of culture, the ethnic groups of the CTS region are experiencing a process of rapid and dramatic cultural erosion; a process driven and propelled fundamentally by government policies such as the national poverty-reduction strategy, the unconditional promotion of market economy and the policy of selective cultural preservation which all combine to tear apart the finely woven cultural fabric of indigenous society. Indigenous culture is increasingly becoming modelled on Kinh culture, both as a direct consequence of the active promulgation of these policies and and the values on which they are based, and as an indirect, implicit consequence of the spontaneous interaction with Kinh people and society – an interaction in which indigenous people invariably experience themselves as inferior and subordinate to the Kinh population.

The HCMH, as we have observed in the course of this report, is an important vehicle of Kinh values and perceptions, and a spearhead of national development policies. As such, the highway contributes substantially to this process of cultural erosion and, by implication, to the progressive reduction of the nation’s rich cultural diversity. In our view, a cultural policy that takes indigenous culture and Vietnam’s rich and diverse cultural legacy seriously must be based on a broad and integral concept of culture such as the one sketched above, thus recognising indigenous cultures as integral ways of life in which art, music, ritual and livelihood are inseparably interconnected – not decontextualised commodities for media or market consumption.
8. Conclusions

This report has described and analysed major development trends among the ethnic minority (indigenous) population along the Central Truong Son (CTS) section of the Ho Chi Minh Highway (HCMH). Specifically, the report has attempted to identify the socio-economic and cultural changes that can be attributed – directly or indirectly – to the HCMH in this region. Since the CTS section of the highway is recently opened for traffic, our task has also been to forecast possible and likely trends and long-term consequences of the road.

A fundamental aim of the HCMH has been to economically open up the inaccessible and mountainous western part of the national territory (along the Laos and Cambodia borders), and to contribute to the integration of the ethnic minority populations inhabiting this territory into mainstream Vietnamese economy and society. Thus, the HCMH project is part and parcel of Vietnam’s ambitious development program at large. It is officially and generally regarded as a key-project in the economic renovation efforts and a spearhead in the country’s ambitious poverty-reduction strategy.

For this reason, we have, in this report, adopted a broad and inclusive perspective on the socio-cultural impact of the HCMH in the CTS region. Accordingly, we have examined both the direct (immediate) effects of the HCMH – those directly associated with the highway \textit{per se} – and indirect effects caused by the general policies of which the highway project is a part and prominent expression. Whenever possible or relevant, we have tried to present the indigenous point of view on development and impact trends, or a view that places indigenous culture and society at the centre. Our general conclusions are listed in the following:

1. The HCMH fundamentally facilitates the implementation of Vietnam’s national development policies and programs and significantly speeds up processes of change which started already during and immediately after the America-Vietnam War, and which were later intensified with the economic renovation (\textit{doi moi}) policies. The most important of these process are: a) the transformation of the traditional – mobile and dispersed – settlement and livelihood system, based on extensive shifting cultivation, into a system of fixed, permanent villages and an agricultural system centred on intensive rice-cultivation (the sedentarisation program), and b) the general transformation of local economies from subsistence-oriented and forest based economies to market-oriented monetary economies, as formalised in the Comprehensive Poverty Reduction and Growth strategy (CPRGS) from 2002 and onwards.

2. \textit{On the positive side}, the HCMH greatly facilitates commerce, trade and transport. Access to schools, shops, markets and hospitals has increased considerable. Significant achievements in health care, education, housing and other social services and infrastructural developments can be registered in the study area over the past years, partly coinciding with the completion of the HCMH. Local economies are increasingly monetarised with a concomitant gross economic growth and falling poverty rates as a result (but see paragraph 9 below).

3. The HCMH also facilitates the penetration of the Kinh majority population into areas previously closed to them or of difficult access and little interest to them. Today the road is seen by Kinh entrepreneurs as an economic resource for exploitation (in the form of roadside shops and other business establishment, itinerant trading, land investment etc). This Kinh penetration
into ethnic minority areas contributes to an increased social, economic and cultural interaction between the indigenous and the Kinh populations. The indigenous population largely sees this interaction as beneficial to them but also feels that it has not substantially improved their economic or material conditions. The study data suggests strongly that, in economic terms, the HCMH essentially (primarily) favours the Kinh population along the road.

4. All these developments which have been facilitated by the HCMH – the transformation of local economies into monetary, market-dependent economies, the facilitation of government development and poverty-reduction programs, the penetration of Kinh entrepreneurs etc – are in many respects beneficial to the local population and in line with the country’s overall development strategy. However, these policies and programs also have serious negative—socio-economic, cultural and environmental – consequences. Since the public discourse in Vietnam is generally rather uncritically positive to the HCMH project and to national development policies in general, we have chosen, in the report, to highlight a number of – in our opinion – negative aspects of the highway project and its larger policy context. We have particularly focused on the cultural aspects of policies and interventions since they are generally neglected in national and international development discourse.

5. As regards socio-economic and environmental impact trends, it is clear that the commercialisation of the local economy has lead to a growing dependence on, and demand for, money and consumer goods. As a result, (illegal) commercial hunting and logging have increased in the past few years, particularly since the completion of the HCMH, and in some communes constitute the major source of household income. The intensified cash-crop production – also a product of current development policies – has generally adversely affected soil fertility and, in some communes, land is visibly deteriorated. These trends, in combination with the sedentarisation of the indigenous population in nucleated villages, have lead to serious depletion of game and fish resources as well as certain commercially important plants (notably rattan, in certain localities). Fish appear to be particularly over-exploited in recent years.

6. The sedentarisation policy and current land legislation have severely circumscribed and debilitated, though not abolished, shifting cultivation practices in the region. Intensive wet rice cultivation and cash-crop production, introduced in recent decades as alternatives to shifting cultivation practices, have not succeeded (and will not succeed) in replacing the latter, basically because the environment is not suitable for wet-rice cultivation nor for cash-crop production of any scale. As a result shifting cultivation of upland (dry) rice remains the staple in the region, supplemented by cassava. However, owing to the ban on extensive (long-cycle) rotational shifting cultivation and a land legislation which denies ownership of fallow land, the current form of shifting cultivation is an atrophied (short-cycle) and environmentally unsustainable version of the traditional system of shifting cultivation. The productivity of this aborted form of shifting cultivation is, furthermore, considerably lower than the traditional system. With increasing pressure to put land under cash-crop production, swidden cultivation tends to intensify proportionally, with soil exhaustion and falling yields as a result – in a vicious cycle of land-use intensification, decreasing fertility and falling yields.

7. Decreasing game and fish resources, and the falling productivity of the prevailing form of shifting cultivation, in combination with the fact that wet-rice cultivation and cash-crop production fall short of compensating the failure of the current system of shifting cultivation, seriously debilitate the local livelihood system and food-security situation. In local perception, the food situation has decreased over the past decades. The great majority of interviewed villagers sees the circumscription of the traditional form rotational (long-cycle) shifting cultivation as a
major problem, and would like to see a relaxation in current land legislation in favour of a (regulated) use of forest land for shifting cultivation.

8. When it comes to cultural aspects, our study indicates that current development policies and programs, and their concomitant socio-economic achievements among the indigenous groups, take place at the cost of a process of cultural erosion – the debilitating of traditional social institutions, norms and values. Government policies and programs are implemented with little regard and sensitivity to local culture. Official cultural policies, notably the policy of selective cultural preservation, represents a narrow and “aesthetic” notion of culture which is inapplicable to indigenous condition and tend to accelerate cultural erosion.

9. The standardised, income-based indicators of poverty, and the poverty-reduction interventions they propel, by definition disfavour and devaluates ethnic minority societies and cultures, since indigenous livelihood strategies are fundamentally organised on a non-monetary, subsistence basis. Similarly, all economic development programs and policies are, as noted above, essentially geared towards promoting market-oriented economic production at the expense of local culture and regional cultural diversity.

10. The promotion of education, health, improved housing and infrastructural developments forms part of the same development-and-modernisation package in which local cultural values have no place or role. The proliferation of government-backed projects and programs, furthermore, tends to create mentality of "project dependence" and "government dependence" – people expect the government to help them with ever new projects and programs. This tendency, and the mentality it fosters, discourage local initiatives and "pacify" local, ethnic communities. In short, as far as the indigenous population is concerned, development policies and poverty-reduction strategies tend to accelerate cultural disintegration, the loss of social cohesion and a sense of ethnic identity, and increase dependency on the market and on government programs and agencies.

11. The attitudes towards, and perceptions of, minorities on the part of the Kinh majority population and government agencies are patronizing, paternalistic and pejorative -- minorities are depicted as backward, uneducated and incapable, on their own accord, to “catch up” with the modernized majority population. Such attitudes and perceptions on the part of the powerful majority tend to lead to self-depreciation among the minority population, and a devaluation of their own cultural traditions. Emerging social evils – excessive alcohol consumption, but also incipient prostitution – may be related to this progressive cultural erosion and deepening cultural poverty.

12. Finally, given the rapid move towards market dependency and the monetarisation of local economies, there is another disconcerting scenario for the future: increasing economic inequalities within ethnic communities. While some households are likely to be able to substantially improve their material living conditions, our data – supplemented by evidence from other ethnic minority areas in Vietnam – strongly suggest that a considerable number of households will increasingly be unable to benefit from current economic changes and, thus, descend into deepening poverty (as measured by conventional poverty indicators).
9. Recommendations

9.1. Premises

Any recommendation to mitigate the negative impact of the HCMH must start from the following premises:

- that the HCMH is part of a development “package” – including infrastructural, socioeconomic and cultural development programs – promoted by the national government in collaboration with international donors;
- that it is effectively impossible to distinguish direct (immediate) effects of the HCMH – effects directly associated with the highway project per se – from indirect effects caused by the general policies of which the highway project is an integral part and, therefore,
- that any actions or interventions to mitigate the negative consequences of the highway must be directed both to the immediate and the indirect causes, including current national policies regarding rural development, the poverty-reduction strategy and cultural policies.

9.2. Identified weaknesses in the policy process

Our analysis has identified a series of high-level weaknesses in national development planning and policy-making which must be addressed in order to improve the results of rural development programs in general and programs directed towards the ethnic minorities in particular. These weaknesses include:

- a heavy top-down and strongly centralised system of development planning and administration, with insufficient capacity to adapt and attend to specific local environmental and socio-cultural conditions;
- a one-sided and overly narrow focus on economic growth (the promotion of market economy and the commercialisation of agriculture) in rural development policies, with little or no regard to cultural diversity and, in particular, to the significant socio-cultural differences between ethnic minority groups and the Kinh majority population;
- a general disregard for culture – as an existentially important aspect of human life and wellbeing – in socio-economic development and poverty-reduction programs;
- a series of prejudices against, and misconceptions about, ethnic minorities on the part of the Kinh majority population (reflected in general policy documents and the attitudes of government agents at all administrative levels towards ethnic minorities) which are rooted in a poor understanding of ethnic minority conditions and which largely pre-empt new and constructive solutions to the development problems and predicaments of the indigenous population in the study area and in the country at large.

9.3. Proposed remedies
To improve the policy process and its results, particularly with respect to ethnic minority populations, development policies and practices should be reoriented in the direction of:

- *decentralising planning and policy making*; this is particularly important with regard to ethnic minorities whose cultures and life-ways differ considerably from Vietnam’s majority population;
- *strengthening local governance*, allowing greater voice and influence on the part of local villagers – in particular, local leaders, traditional authorities, village elders and ritual experts (including female ritual specialists) who are highly respected in local culture – in decision making and in the formulation and implementation of development plans and policies at commune, district and provincial levels;
- *greater sensitivity towards culture* – the cultural values and life-ways – and the needs and concerns of the indigenous population, thus respecting customs and beliefs which are different and may seem incompatible with national policies but which, on closer scrutiny, are fundamental for ethnic identity, social cohesion and people’s sense of self-respect and, accordingly, essential for preventing cultural erosion, social disintegration and the spread of social evils (“cultural poverty”);
- *improved understanding of indigenous culture* and society, and the significance of indigenous traditions and social institutions – and the value of the nations cultural diversity at large.

### 9.4. Recommendations

More specifically, with particular regard to improving the situation of the indigenous population in the CTS region, we suggest a series of policy adjustments/changes and practical measures in the fields of (1) poverty reduction, livelihood and resource use, and (2) cultural policies:

#### 9.4.1. Poverty reduction, livelihood and resource use

- Readjust development and *poverty-reduction policies* so as to pay greater attention to local conditions and local/indigenous cultural values and practices;
- Rethink and redesign the *poverty concept* so as to better capture indigenous socio-cultural and economic realities;

  - Such a concept should take account of the fact that indigenous people perceive life and make rational choices according to their own cultural values and premises which should be respected;
  - We believe that an amplified poverty concept, redesigned so as to better apply to indigenous situations, should build on *local perceptions of wellbeing* in a broad and integral sense (and on concomitant notions about the lack of wellbeing) rather than on fixed standard indicators based on premises and presuppositions alien to the indigenous condition;
  - In order to develop a poverty-reduction strategy appropriate to indigenous conditions, development interventions must thus be preceded by careful and in-depth *socio-cultural studies* to assess local notions of wellbeing in their proper cultural and ethno-economic context.
• Readjust land legislation and forest policies so as to allow indigenous peoples to continue traditional and sustainable forms of livelihood and resource use practices essential to their life-ways, identity and wellbeing

• In particular, legally recognise sustainable forms of rotational shifting cultivation and customary rights in/over fallow land
  
  o We thus suggest that rotational shifting cultivation is recognised as a legitimate form of agriculture (or agro-forestry);
  
  o That relevant authorities consider the possibility of expanding the area of land for potential shifting cultivation (including land currently classified as production/protection forest) under carefully regulated and monitored forms;
  
  o Such a departure from current practice (which could be experimentally tested in certain localities) should involve extensive local consultation by a team of socio-cultural and agronomy-forestry experts

• Explore new ways of developing sustainable forms of shifting cultivation suitable for upland conditions

• Promote composite swiddening agro-economic systems (which involve a combination of intensive wet-rice cultivation and more extensive, rotational shifting cultivation of upland rice suitable to local conditions)

• Recognise small-scale hunting-and-trapping as a traditional and legitimate livelihood activity among indigenous groups, and an essential part of their cultural legacy; concomitantly, look into new ways of monitoring such domestic hunting-and-trapping

• Recognise shifting cultivation, household hunting, fishing and gathering of forest resources as integral parts of indigenous livelihood systems which, in turn, are invested with profound cultural and religious value and, therefore, essential for cultural identity and survival

  o Since such integral resource-use systems are poorly understood we recommend a coordinated series of interdisciplinary studies of the cultural integration, economic potential and environmental consequences of indigenous resource-use systems, and how new economic activities are/can be fitted into these systems;

  o We also propose further in-depth studies to assess the combined economic, cultural and environmental implications (costs and benefits) of current economic development policies (particularly the push towards cash-crop production and industrial tree plantation) in indigenous communities;

  o These parallel or joint studies should be carefully coordinated with a view to develop new and alternative economic strategies adapted to local cultural and environmental conditions, and building on local knowledge and the competitive advantages of indigenous people.

9.4.2. Cultural policies

• Readjust cultural policies with respect to ethnic minorities so as to take proper account of indigenous cultural values and practices;

• Reformulate the notion of culture currently in vogue in the national policy discourse in the direction of a broader concept of culture as a total way of life where all aspects of life – aesthetic, religious, social and economic – form integral parts of culture and ethnic identity;
• The current policy of selective preservation is misconceived (as well as highly normative and ethnocentric) and should be thoroughly revised in favour of an integral view of culture which takes account of the systemic nature of cultural phenomena and, in particular, respects the nature and character of indigenous culture;
  o Allow greater lenience towards local and indigenous cultural expressions – religious rituals and beliefs (including animal sacrifice), material objects and constructions (including, particularly, local architecture and housing), social customs (marriage, ritual exchange of valuables, funerals) – precisely because they form part of integrated life-ways which are at the basis of ethnic identity and collective self-dignity;
  o Continue the laudable promotion of certain cultural-policy initiatives such as the promotion of the Community House tradition, gong-musical traditions and the like, but also take into account the specific cultural contexts in which these traditions are situated (so as not to turn them into de-contextualised and exclusively aesthetic or political or entertainment activities and phenomena).

• Every effort should be made to amend and reduce prejudices and pejorative misconceptions about indigenous people and culture which are widespread among the Kinh majority population and, not least, among government officials and civil servants
  o As a measure in this direction we propose the initiation, on province and/or district level of regular workshops on indigenous culture and society, directed by trained socio-cultural experts (anthropologists, ethnologists) with extensive knowledge of indigenous people, and aimed at tackling prevalent prejudices and pejorative attitudes towards indigenous peoples and their culture and society. These workshops should be compulsory and target government officials at all levels.

9.4.3. Overall recommendations

In order to facilitate the implementation of these policy measures and improve the socio-economic and cultural conditions of indigenous people in the CTS region (and in Vietnam at large) we propose:

• The creation of “special cultural zones” in particular indigenous areas along the HCMH where special considerations will be shown for customary practices and local cultural institutions; where national policies will be carefully readjusted to local conditions and particular lenience shown indigenous norms and beliefs; where new, innovative and alternative development initiatives may be tested out on the basis of careful studies, and where carefully monitored experiments of cultural tourism may be tried out – possibly coordinated with proposed eco-tourism facilities and existing conservation areas – and where incomes from such enterprises are devolved to the local communities involved. Such special cultural zones are justified on the grounds that ethnic groups in the CTS region (and in many other parts of the country) have a particularly rich and varied cultural legacy which in certain localities is conspicuously well preserved, and that this cultural legacy is seriously threatened by the full-scale operation of the HCMH.

• The establishment of a separate department at provincial and/or district level designated especially to adapt, integrate and coordinate all policies concerning indigenous
communities and populations; such a department should be given considerable authority and autonomy with respect to other administrative departments and sections so as to be able to carry out its mandate to ensure that national policies are adjusted to local conditions, needs and concerns, and that different policies are carefully integrated into a coherent approach vis-à-vis the indigenous target population; the personnel of this department should include an interdisciplinary, professional team, covering the fields of anthropology/ethnology, agronomy/forestry, biology/ecology and rural economy as well as administrative functionaries of various kinds according to needs and circumstances, and work in close cooperation with district, commune and village leaders.
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Appendices

Appendix 1: Data on household consumption and expenditure

The following gross figures give an idea of household consumption and expenditure patterns in the study communes (percentage of N; N = 75)

Consumption

Rice and cassava
58.7 % of the households state that they eat rice every day
41.3 % state that they consume rice mixed with cassava on a daily basis

Meat from the domestic livestock herd
54.7 % state that they eat meat once/year
20.3 % state that they eat meat twice/year

Large game meat
57.7 % state that they eat some large-game meat during the year; of these
-34.6 % eat game meat 1-4 times/year
-10.7 % eat 5-10 times/year
-54.7 % eat >10 times/year

In addition, 62.7 % state that they kill/catch and eat small game from the forest (rats, mice, birds, snakes etc) on a regular basis

Meat bought in shops or at the market
33.3 % state that they buy meat once/month
10.7 % state that they buy meat twice/month
9.3 % state that they buy meat once/week

River fish
69.3 % state that they eat river fish 2-4 times/month

In addition, 86.7 % collect other river-food such as snails, frogs, turtles etc for consumption on an occasional/regular basis

Fish bought from the market
30.7 % state that they buy fish 2-3 times/month

Expenditures

Amount of money spent on food per month
35.9 % state that they spend from 10,000 to 50,000 VND/month
25.3 % state that they spend from 55,000 to 100,000 VND/month
20 % state that they spend from 100,000 to 200,000 VND/month

Possessions

52.0 % state that they own a TV set
33.3 % state that they own a VCD/DVD player
18.7 % state that they own a radio/cassette player
34.3 % state that they own a bicycle
37.3 % state that they own a motorbike
69.3 % state that they own a bed
41.3 % state that they own a cabinet
40.0 % state that they own one or more chairs

Appendix 2: Supplementary data on indigenous CTS culture

Marriage Exchange
The wedding is perhaps the major ritual event among the ethnic groups of the CTS region – matched in religious importance only by the funerary rituals. It celebrates the union not only between two individuals but between two families and between two lineages. This fundamental importance of the indigenous marriage institution derives from the fact that the marriage forms part of a much wider system of exchange binding families and lineages together and structuring the whole of indigenous society.

The Katuic groups (perhaps also the Gie-Trieng groups; ethnographic information is still scarce on this topic), have a unique marriage system (often referred to, in Vietnamese ethnographic literature, as the “three-clan system”). This marriage system establishes a particular relationship between intermarrying families (lineages) which become bride-givers and bride-takers to each other. In this system, women move between lineages (A, B, C) in one direction:

A ------------→ B ------------→ C

An important characteristic of this system is that it prescribes marriage with one kind of cousin and prohibits marriage with other kinds; thus (assuming a male ego) it encourages marriage with a female cousin on the mother’s side (Mother’s Brother’s Daughter) while prohibiting marriage with one on the father’s side (Father’s Sister’s Daughter). The distinction between the two categories of cousins corresponds to that between bride-givers and bride-takers. Allowing cousin marriage is thus crucial to the functioning of the system.

Marriage is obligatory accompanied by an institutionalised exchange of wealth (ritually valued goods) between the two parties of the marriage. Indeed, the marriage itself can be seen as part of such a wider exchange of valuables (including the bride as the supreme value) between bride-givers ad bride-takers. Thus, the bride-takers (the groom’s family) “pay” what anthropologists call bride-wealth to the bride-giving group. This bride-wealth is strictly specified in kind by custom: it should include one or several heads of livestock (ideally a buffalo, but in practice often pigs or a cow), jars (preferably old ones) and gongs of various kinds – the more valuable, the better. The bride-takers should also offer large quantities of smoked game meat (in bamboo tubes) to the bride’s family. The bride-wealth can include a variety of other goods as well, and the quantities involved are negotiated between the parties from case to case. All items, however, are strongly associated with men and male activities in Katu society; symbolically they are “male” goods.

Thus, any marriage implies that bride-takers give away livestock, jars, gongs and game meat (“male goods”) while bride-givers reciprocally transfer “female goods” (the dowry) such as cloth,
mats, pillows and fish along with the bride. The bride-wealth received for a daughter may, in turn, be used as bride-wealth in order to obtain a wife for a son, and so on. Thus, bride-wealth “flows” in one direction, and dowry in the opposite direction. These opposite and complementary flows may form complex networks or chains connecting many families and groups in several villages. The strong spiritual connotations of this exchange make the marriage a supremely strong and binding institution. Traditionally, divorce was rare.

The exchange between bride-givers and bride-takers is not limited to the marriage occasion; a whole series of subsequent exchanges tie the two groups together as long as the marriage lasts and even after the death of one of the spouses. Very often the exchange relationship between bride-givers and bride-takers both precedes and succeeds the actual marriage, since the custom strongly encourages repeated and systematic inter-marriage, generation after generation, between the two groups.

All these ritualised exchanges between bride-givers and bride-takers serve to cement and maintain the relationships between them. Taken together, such intermarriages and exchanges are the “stuff” from which indigenous society is constructed; they form the substance of social relations and social interaction, and integrate individuals and families in wider communities. In this sense, the marriage system provides both the form and the substance of local society; it defines the specific structure of indigenous society as well as its particular cultural content.

**Animism and “sacred ecology”**

The indigenous groups of the CTS region share a fundamentally similar outlook on the world – a shared view of the world as inhabited by numerous spirits and spiritual forces. Among the Katuic groups, from which information is available, the spirit pantheon is basically divided between, on the one hand, potentially harmful nature spirits inhabiting the non-human realm (forests, rivers, mountains, animals and plants – outside the socialised domain of the village) and basically benevolent and protective ancestor spirits, inhabiting the house and the village. Among the Katu, the former are generically referred to as *abuy*, and the latter *yang*. This belief that the entire world is animated by spiritual forces is usually referred to as animism.

In addition, there are a number of more ambiguous spiritual forces, including the spirits of rice and domestic animals, which straddle, as it were, the two main cosmic domains of the forest (of un-predictive and menacing nature spirits) and the village – the domain of humans and protective ancestors. The spirits of the game animals also form an intermediate category between village and forest in the sense that animals are constantly brought into the village to serve as food for human beings; during the hunting rituals in the Community House, the souls of the killed animals are sent back into the forest in order to replenish the stock of game animals and, thus, ensure future hunting luck whilst, at the same time, the skulls are kept in the Community House as a sort of grave or vessel for the animal souls whenever they want to visit the village or are called to participate in community wide offering-rituals.

All spirits, including the ancestors and the spirits of recently dead humans are believed to crave “food” from humans; the food of the spirits consist of the (smell or “essence” emanating from the) blood of sacrificial animals (domestic animals) as well as ritually offered rice, game meat, fish and wine. Therefore, ritual food offerings including animal sacrifice are regularly performed to nourish the spirits and to demonstrate allegiance and deference towards them. Sacrifices and offerings are also given every time villagers believe the spirits are hungry or discontent – for example, when humans have committed offences towards the spirits, broken religious taboos or
customary rules. Thus blood sacrifice is a constant and characteristic feature of the CTS ethnic groups, and the buffalo sacrifice is their major religious manifestation, displaying an explosive abundance of artistic and intellectual creativity.

The relationship between spirits and humans is of a truly religious nature; humans perceive themselves to be dependent on the superior powers of the spirits. The spirits, properly appeased and treated through rituals, offerings and sacrifices, are the protectors and guardians of the living humans. The conscientious conduct of religious rituals gives people a sense of existential security, trust and purpose in their lives. To humans, the spirits are the givers of life as well as the dealers in death. Indeed, it may be maintained that the relation between spirits and humans is analogous to the relation between bride-givers and bride-takers in the social realm: just as the life-generating powers of fertile women flow from bride givers to bride takers in the marriage system, life itself flows from the spirits to the humans – in the form of children, rice and game animals. And just as bride-givers confer their most valuable objects on their bride givers in order to secure the life-giving powers of women, the human beings present the spirits with an unceasing stream of food offerings and animal sacrifices – the principal of which is the buffalo sacrifice.

In this way the social and the religious life are closely interwoven in the cultural logic of the indigenous societies of the CTS region. One more point should be stressed; though animism is usually seen as a simple (and “backward”) form of religion, careful study reveals a subtle and complex religious and spiritual culture. Indeed, the attribution of a soul and intelligence to non-human living beings, including plants and animals, not only suggests a respectful attitude towards nature based on reciprocity between humanity and nature but is also in keeping with a growing body of ecological knowledge implying an inclusive notion of ecosystems as a kind of communicative system, in which humans and non-human living beings interact and communicate on an inter-subjective basis… On this account animism is, in effect, a form of profound and practically based ecological wisdom – a body of indigenous ecological knowledge.

**The funerary ritual complex**

Burial and the subsequent funerary rites are important religious events among the indigenous groups in the region. They are absolutely essential for the working of the indigenous social and religious system. The native religious system, particularly the belief in protective ancestors (*yang*), supplies individuals with basic existential security and trust.

When a person dies, he (she) is almost immediately buried in a simple, individual grave in the forest. This is the traditional custom, still commonly practiced – although the custom has changed in some communities. A public ceremony is performed in the village where relatives mourn the dead and visitors come to pay him their last respect. A domestic animal (today usually pig) is sacrificed and later consumed by the attending villagers.

One or several years later, a second funeral (secondary burial) is held; the bones of the deceased are exhumed from the initial grave and taken to a family or lineage grave – an elaborately decorated tomb house (the practice may vary among the groups in the region). This tomb house may either already exist (having been built in connection with an earlier funeral) or is actually constructed for the occasion. At this occasion, a grander public ritual is held in the village of the deceased. Ideally, a buffalo is sacrificed for the dead. The ritual is celebrated to transfer the soul of the dead from its temporary, isolated abode in the forest to its final resting place in the family tomb in the vicinity of the village.
The two-stage funerary ritual can be interpreted as implying an extremely important process of transformation by which the deceased’s soul is transformed from a potentially harmful ghost, roaming in the forest, into a potentially benevolent and protective ancestral spirit (yang) on which the living family members rely and draw for protection, support and “advise” at almost every turn in their life. The ancestors are thus an absolutely vital part of the everyday reality; without their protection and spiritual support, people consider their life dangerous and difficult.

In this way, the indigenous groups in the region practice a discrete form of ancestor cult. They continually address the ancestors, asking them for their advice and support by means of offerings, divination and animal sacrifices. The supreme importance of the funerary ritual is that it accomplishes the transformation of the dead into an ancestor spirit: the ritual literally makes – produces – ancestral spirits. Without proper funerary rites, the dead remains a menacing, wandering and harmful ghost, ever threatening its living relatives with misfortune, disease and death.


Article 5:
The Socialist Republic of Viet Nam is the unified state of all nationalities living together in Viet Nam. The state carries out a policy of equality, solidarity, and mutual assistance among all nationalities and prohibits all acts of discrimination and division. Nationalities have the right to use their own language and system of writing, to preserve their national identity, and to express their good customs, habits, traditions, and culture. The State carries out a policy of comprehensive development, and step by step will raise the material and spiritual living conditions of the ethnic minorities. (HDDT-QH 2000 [1992]:255-56)

However, Article 30 states:
“The government and society protect and develop the cultural foundation of Vietnam…. The reunified government will manage cultural work. It is prohibited to disseminate ideology and culture that is reactionary and depraved; superstition and outdated customs should be abolished” (ibid: 256) [quoted from McElwee 2004; our italics]
Appendix 4: Supplementary diagram


Dry rice yields/hh 2003-2005 (kgs)

% hhs in each commune

Year

1,200-4,000
650-1,000
300-600
50-250
0

Huc Nghi
A Roang
Thanh My
Phuoc Nang
Dak Kroong

2003
2004
2005
Appendix 5: Household Survey Sheet

HCMH Household Survey (HHS)
March-May 2006

Interviewer……………. Village………………….       Date………………

1. Respondent and spouse(s)

Name……………………………………...

Sex: M   F         Age…….       HH head: Yes     No

Ethnic group……………………………… (Clan)…………………………

Village of origin (commune, district)………………………………………………

Vietnamese-speaking      Y    N       Education……………………….

Occupation/s: Nr o years……….. Type of job………………………….
(note: both wage labour and other)

Name of spouse (1) ............................... Age……

Ethnic group……………………………… (Clan)…………………………

Village of origin (commune, district)………………………………………………

Vietnamese-speaking Y N Education……………….

Wage labour experience: Nr of years……….. Type of job………………………….

Name of spouse (2) ............................... Age……

Ethnic group……………………………… (Clan)…………………………

Village of origin (commune, district)………………………………………………

Vietnamese-speaking Y N Education……………….

Wage labour experience: Nr of years……….. Type of job………………………….
2. Information on respondent’s family/household

Total nr of individuals in house/hh………………..  

                   Adults (married)  Children (unmarried)       
                   …………….      …………….                     

Respondent’s own children:  
How many born…………..   How many alive…………..  

                   Name, age & marital status of children (draw in diagram form)       
                   ……………..      ……………..                     

Residence of married children (list according to name of child):  
In parents’ house  in parents’ compound  separate hh in village  other village  
…………………………  ………………………  ………………………  …………………       
…………………………  ………………………  ………………………  …………………       
…………………………  ………………………  ………………………  …………………       

3. Living standard indicators

Type of house (traditional, Kinh-style, hybrid):……………………………….  
Material……………………….. Relative size………………………….  

Types of furniture (quick assessment)………………………………………….  

Consumer goods in in house/hh:  

      TV      VCD/DVD player    Radio/Casette player    Bicycle    Motorbike  
      Y  N    Y  N    Y  N    Y  N  Y  N  Y  N  
      Owned by……………..  Owned by……………..  

Other……………………………………………………………………………………

Traditional wealth in house

Jars (types, how many)…………………………………………………………

Gongs (types, how many)…………………………………………………

Other (types, how many)…………………………………………………..

Cash savings (approximation/total for hh)……………………………………

4. Livestock

Buffaloes………..

Cows………………

Pigs………………

Poultry…………..

5. Fish pond Y N

Size of fish population…………………. Average yield/month? …………………

6. Agriculture

a) Home garden Y N

Crops……………………………………………………………………………………

b) Swidden (dry-rice) fields

Nr of fields under cultivation (2006)…………………………………

Total area under cultivation (approx)………………………………

Walking distance to fields (details for different fields, both in time and km) …………

Length of fallow period (when cleared) – details for current fields………………..
Crops (under cultiv).................................................................................................................................
...............................................................................................................................................................

c) Wet-rice fields  Y    N

How many...........  Total area.............  Average nr of crops/year........

**Productivity**: annual input/output (rice sown/rice harvested – in *ang*?):

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dry rice</td>
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<td>......</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wet rice</td>
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7. Hunting/Trapping and gathering

Principal animals hunted/trapped...........................................................................................................

Principal animals sold..........................................................................................................................

Approximately how many animals caught 2005 (in hh; acc to species)..................................................

...............................................................................................................................................................

Approx. how many sold 2005 (acc to species) .....................................................................................

...............................................................................................................................................................

Gathering of wild forest food: list principal items ...............................................................................

.............................................................................................................................................................
8. Food consumption

Approx how many meals/week (per month?) include:
- Wild game meat; (give details on seasonal variation) ..........................................................

- Small "game" (rats, bamboo rats, weasels etc) .................................................................

- Meat of domestic animals: 1) bought .................................................................
  2) slaughtered ................................................................
    (give details when the families usually slaughter their own
    animals for eating) ..............................................................................

- Fish: (1) river/stream ........................................ (2) fishpond .................................

- Other "river-foods" (snails, frogs, turtles etc) .........................................................

- Food bought in market/shop; give details on type (e.g. noodles, canned beef/ham etc),
in order of importance, and seasonal variation:

...........................................................................................................................................

...........................................................................................................................................

Estimate the relative proportions of various food items in daily diet (percentage?); if possible
give details on seasonal variation

  Rice/cassava ...........................................................................................

  Garden plants/wild forest plants ...........................................................................

  Game meat/”domestic” meat ..................................................................................

  Meat/fish .................................................................................................................

  River fish/pond fish .............................................................................................

9. Income

Regular salary (monthly) ............ Kind of job .................

Estimated Income from sale (yearly):

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<tr>
<td>Wet rice</td>
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who sells & who keeps/spends money (H/W)\(^{30}\)

\(^{30}\) Husband/ Wife
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Commodity</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>(H/W)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dry rice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cassava</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cash crops</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Firewood</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rattan</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timber (illegal)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Other non-timber products</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honey</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wild animals (or parts of)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic animals (specify)</td>
<td></td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Economic Activity</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>(H/W)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shop-keeping or other small enterprise (wine-selling, rice-husking etc; specify)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Part-time wage labour (specify)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Loans, credits, government subsidy, pensions etc; (specify)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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**10. Household economy:**
- Who sells (husband [H] or wife [W]) and is in charge of the money earned from the economic activities? Try to get some general information about the division of the hh economy. Is the woman in charge of any money at all? Is the woman in charge of the distributing the rice in the family etc? ..........................................................
Cash expenditure

*Estimated monthly cash expenditure on* (and who buys/pays; *is it the Husband or the Wife?):

1. Food .......................... (H/W) Specify kind, in order of importance ................

2. Clothing (VND/year) ......................... (H/W)
3. Medicine/health care (VND/year) ............... (H/W)
4. Education (VND/year) ...........................(H/W)
5. Alcohol (VND/month) .............................. (H/W)
6. Cigarettes (VND/month) ........................... (H/W)
7. Other (e.g. entertainment, cafés, karaoke etc) .............................. (H/W)

*Did you have some especially large expenses/purchases* (specify amount and what kind):

2006

2005

2004

Any additional information