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GROWING A BETTER FUTURE

Expanding rights, voices and choices for small-scale farmers in Viet Nam



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Contents

Acknowledgement	ii
List of figure and boxes.....	02
Abbreviations.....	02
Foreword.....	05
1 Introduction	07
2 A system at breaking point.....	11
2.1. The age of uncertainty and the challenges ahead.....	12
2.2. The challenge of sustainable production	14
Depletion of natural resources and unsustainable practices	14
Change the focus of investment	15
Food security and fixed rice production targets	17
Access to markets.....	17
2.3. Equity challenge	19
The scandal of hunger	19
Exclusive prosperity – a threat to pro-poor growth.....	19
2.4. Resilience challenge.....	22
2.5. Time to rebuild	25
3 The new prosperity	27
3.1. Harnessing full potential.....	28
Role of small-scale farmers in the modernization agenda	30
Investing in small-scale farmers	31
3.2. Building a new agricultural future	32
Promoting on-farm and off-farm diversification	32
3.3. Building a new ecological future	34
Grassroots adaptation	36
3.4. Ensuring equitable transition	37
Equitable access and control over land	38
3.5. Raising voices and representation	39
Mechanisms for consultation, monitoring and redress	39
Community-based initiatives and organization..	40
4 Conclusions and recommendations	43
List of references.....	46
Images/photo credit/caption.....	48

List of figure and boxes

Figure 1: Growth in income per capita by income groups, 2004 - 2010.....	21
Box 1: 'Please don't cultivate crops on the back of us farmer'	12
Box 2: Four myths about small-scale farmers.....	29
Box 3: Extending choices for better income generation	30
Box 4: Households gradually accumulating from livestock	33
Box 5: Have support, can do!	34
Box 6: Farmer-led innovation and adaptation – Growing more from less	35
Box 7: Community based disaster risk management (CBDRM)	36
Box 8: Promoting women's economic leadership	37
Box 9: Cash transfer for development	38
Box 10: Community Development Funds	40
Box 11: Voice up	40

Abbreviations

AAV	ActionAid Vietnam
CBDRM	Community-based disaster risk management
CDF	Community Development Fund
CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
EU	European Union
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
GDP	Gross domestic product
GoV	Government of Vietnam
GSO	General Statistics Office
IRC	Indochina Research and Consulting
INGO	International non-government organization
MARD	Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development
MCD	Centre for Marine Conservation and Development
MoLISA	Ministry of Labour – Invalids and Social Affairs
MPI	Ministry of Planning and Investment
NGO	Non-government organization
New Rural Areas	The National Targeted Program on New Rural Areas period 2010 – 2020
PPP	People's purchasing power
SEDP	Socio-Economic Development Plan
SRI	System of rice intensification
Tam-Nong	Resolution No. 26-NQ/TW
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNIFEM	United Nations Development Fund for Women
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
VHLSS	Vietnam Household Living Standard Survey
VINACHEM	Vietnam National Chemical Group
VINAFOOD 1	The Vietnam Northern Food Corporation
VINAFOOD 2	The Vietnam Southern Food Corporation
VND	Vietnamese Dong
WB	World Bank





Foreword

Rooted in real stories and in-depth analysis, 'Growing a better future' looks at both the achievements and constraints of socio-economic development in Viet Nam. It focuses on the importance of safeguarding vulnerable communities, particularly poor people, small-scale farmers, women and ethnic minorities.

The joint efforts of the Vietnamese people, the government and development organizations have achieved remarkable socio-economic growth in Viet Nam. However, this broad-based growth has strongly relied on the exploitation of natural resources and investment in labor and financial incentives. Today, the country has moved into a new phase of growth that requires a shift of approach that incorporates quality, efficiency and sustainability both in terms of the economy and the environment. For this reason, Viet Nam has set itself a goal: to renovate its development model and to restructure the economy.

This report is being published at a critical point, when Viet Nam is in a transitional stage of development. The global economic recession has had a negative impact on the lives of many people who are already vulnerable. This is a time when the country faces many challenges, exacerbated by the global economic recession and an unstable macro-economy.

'Growing a better future' highlights the wide range of difficulties faced by vulnerable people in Viet Nam. These include the depletion of natural resources, limited land, poor access to markets, low family incomes, malnutrition, extreme climate change and price hikes. Ethnic minorities, women and people living in rural areas are at a particular disadvantage. Many of these difficulties are to some degree the result of a period of rapid economic growth in Viet Nam driven by inequitable and unsustainable models that have failed to increase the resilience of the country's people.

In order to take advantage of the opportunities offered by economic growth, Viet Nam has had to deal with the onset of urbanization, industrialization, marketization and globalization. On top of this, poor people, particularly small-scale farmers, have faced an increase in crop and animal diseases; the depletion of forests and natural resources and a decline in ecological diversity. Consequently, any rescue measures and policy adjustments issued by the government have had little impact on the country's most vulnerable people.

Viet Nam's small-scale farmers have the potential to deliver great benefits to the country if they are supported to practice environment-friendly agriculture and if they are given a stronger voice in policy-making. The Tam-Nong Resolution (Resolution No. 26 on agriculture, farmers and rural areas) of the Communist Party and the plans to build the agriculture sector concurs with this aim.

In the past, environment-friendly methods of reducing inputs and increasing yields have been trialed successfully throughout Viet Nam. For example, planting flowers at the edge of paddy fields has been shown to encourage bees and other beneficial insect life and reduce unwelcome pests. Other models that aim to increase the just for small scale farmers, such as "land accumulation" movement, "great rice field" model have created opportunities for small scale farmers to participate in large scale production... those models have been replicated and expanded in many localities. Those successful stories, practical policy recommendations and solutions presented by the report have proved that positive changes can take place by internal strength of Vietnam and its people.

Even during hard times, the government has aimed to increase choices and opportunities that enable vulnerable groups to benefit from Viet Nam's development. This has included protecting small-scale farmers engaged in animal husbandry as well as developing large-scale livestock farms. However, more needs to be done.

Viet Nam has achieved a great deal in terms of development, but there are enormous challenges ahead. This report recommends five key points of focus:

- to fight malnutrition and poverty;
- to make the development process more inclusive to everyone;
- to increase investment in small scale farmers
- to improve land policies; and
- to increase the strength and participation of farmers through collective voluntary associations.

This is in line both with the most effective development models and with the government's aims. To put it into practice will require the greatest joint efforts of everyone involved.

The report reflects how Oxfam and other development partners play a determined and active role in Viet Nam's development processes. The strength and enthusiasm of organizations like Oxfam is key in supporting the successful and sustainable establishment and development of new policies at the grassroots level. These organizations can also help create a bridge to enable communication, information-sharing and feedback between the Vietnamese people, the government and international organizations.

I congratulate Oxfam in the production of 'Growing a better future'. I am honored to present this report.

Đặng Kim Sơn
General Director
Institute for Policy and Strategy of Agriculture and Rural Development



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1

INTRODUCTION

Life has improved over the last decade for Mrs. Hoa's family, who live in Viet Nam's central province of Ha Tinh, because of their efforts to diversify their livelihoods. Hoa and her husband Nghia were almost empty-handed when they migrated to Duc Huong commune in 2003 because their parents were poor. They were the last family to have electricity in Duc Huong as they could not afford to pay for the connection wires. For four months of the year they couldn't grow enough or buy food, so Hoa and her four children used to skip breakfast. However, things started to change. In 2010, new opportunities opened up. Nghia managed to get a job as a builder; the family benefited from the government's housing support program; their investment in orange trees started to return an income and the government's land consolidation policy meant that the size of their rice field increased. Now they live on the combined income from their rice field, orange and lemon grove, cow, dogs and chickens and Nghia's wages (picture below).

Stories like this can be found across Viet Nam. Many people speak of an era of new opportunities and prosperity, albeit achieved through backbreaking labor in the paddy fields; on hot and noisy factory floors; or in small closed rooms or on street corners, trading produce for the local market. At a time when global crises preoccupy societies worldwide, a sense of aspiration is reflected in surveys with Vietnamese people scoring consistently as one of the most optimistic in the region and the world¹.

Viet Nam has had an enviable record of reducing hunger and poverty over the past 20 years. Poverty levels reduced by more than half between 1993 and 2010 according to a proposed General Statistics Office/World Bank poverty line. Viet Nam's historical growth patterns have been remarkably pro-poor: growth averaged 6.1 per cent a year between 1993 and 2008, and poverty fell by an average of 2.9 percentage points a year. This remains a remarkable achievement despite the fact that the poverty reduction rate has slowed down in recent years with one in five people currently living poverty, according to the same poverty line².

¹ LeParisien.fr, Viet Nam is World's most optimistic (3 January 2011)

² Based on the proposed new GSO-WB poverty line of VND 653,000 person/month (\$2.24 person/day 2005 PPP) and the 2010 Viet Nam Household Living Standards Survey (VHLSS), the poverty rate in Viet Nam was 20.7 percent in 2010 – twenty seven percent and six percent in rural and urban areas, respectively; see World Bank, 2012a



Yet, the struggle to overcome poverty, including the fight to end hunger and gender injustice for families like Hoa's, is not complete. In some ways it has become even more challenging.

Like many others, Nghia and Hoa are not convinced that they have come out of poverty. They are currently registered on the 'poor household list' (a list of households that has been selected to benefit from social security and other support policies). If their increased income means they get taken off it, they will lose government benefits like health insurance and subsidized electricity and get plunged back into poverty. The expense that worries them most is the extra payment they are determined to keep up for their children's education. However, their income is not always secure. Orange trees are prone to poor harvests if there is too much rain and animals are always at risk of diseases. Nghia's additional income of 100,000 *dong* a day (approximately \$4.5) means he has to stay away longer. He can only return home every 20-30 days, leaving his wife to take care of the children and everything else.

It is an injustice that millions of farmer households continue to live a precarious existence, despite their role as the very drivers of agricultural growth, ensuring Viet Nam's place amongst the top agricultural crop exporters. While increased industrialization and economic integration provides farmers with additional opportunities for jobs and incomes, it also makes them vulnerable to multiple risks and shocks, particularly those who depend on the informal sector. Inequality in incomes and opportunities – some considered illegitimate – is rising. This is exacerbated by continuing disparities in human development between urban and rural areas, as well as widening disparities within rural areas and across different socio-economic groups.

As it becomes a middle-income country Viet Nam requires new approaches in its poverty reduction strategies in order to build a new future. As the government looks at restructuring the agriculture sector, it is critical that poor and marginalized farmers are kept at the heart of the decision-making process to ensure that growth is sustainable, equitable and resilient.

Growing a better future

The challenge for Viet Nam today is to seize the opportunity for change and set the course towards a new prosperity where each and every citizen enjoys the rights and resources needed for leading lives of dignity, opportunity, and fulfillment.

To overcome enduring and emerging development challenges in Viet Nam, a broader knowledge and stronger determination is needed to uproot poverty and pursue social justice. The causes and drivers of poverty and injustice are diverse, but are often linked to people's inability to access and take advantage of opportunities and to shape and benefit from public policy.

To realize the nation's full potential and aspirations, it is critical that the people have a stronger voice and that poverty reduction strategies are carefully considered and targeted. More inclusive relationships and interactions between the state, private sector and people are imperative to break the cycles of chronic poverty.

This report will highlight three fundamental challenges: sustainable production, equity and resilience. Oxfam believes that overcoming these challenges is a vital part of making Viet Nam's new prosperity a lasting reality for all, including those who have so far been excluded from it. We are confident that, together, we can grow a better future.

'We need to address the question of global hunger not as one of production only, but also as one of marginalization, deepening inequalities, and social injustice. We live in a world in which we produce more food than ever before, and in which the hungry have never been as many.'

Olivier de Schutter, Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food at the FAO Conference, November 2009



2

**A SYSTEM AT
BREAKING
POINT**

2.1. The age of uncertainty and the challenges ahead



Despite Viet Nam's impressive announcements of record-breaking production outputs and trade volumes, farmers like Mr. Lam (See Box 1) are anxious and worried about the farming business and their future.

Box 1: 'Please don't cultivate crops on the back of us farmer'

'Farming is unstable. Farmers have to cope with the changes in crop production plans all the time; one time we might dig a fishing pond, another time plant rice and grow corn... but with hardly any good results. The majority of our production costs are spent on credit. We are unable to stock rice and wait to sell until the price rises. We are in chronic debt. Instead of repaying our loans we can only renew the loan to prepare for the next crop. I feel like a child standing in front of a banquet that I am allowed to look at but not touch.'

Extracted from farmer Le Van Lam's letter to Prime Minister³.

Degraded farmland, more pests and diseases, volatile market prices, greater risk of adverse weather due to a changing climate, and loss of land without proper compensation add layers of stress for people whose livelihood is already precarious. Competition for land, water and forests has intensified and the benefits earned from these resources are often not shared in an equitable manner. For many, poverty and even destitution are only one shock away.

Economic growth lately has had less impact on poverty reduction compared to the earlier periods. Many people are near-poor or transient poor living just above the poverty line and dipping in and out of poverty. Official statistics suggest there were some 1.5 million near-poor households in 2010 in addition to the 2.5 million poor households⁴. Many poor people are now harder to reach and face the tough challenges of isolation, social and economic exclusion, limited assets and access to credit and markets, low levels of education and poor health status.

⁴ Poor: 2,580,885 households and near-poor: 1,530,295 households Review of the poor and near-poor household of 2011, MoLISA 2011; Near-poor households are households having monthly income per head from VND 401,000 – VND 520,000 for rural households and VND 501,000 – VND 650,000 for urban households. GoV 2010



Poverty continues to be a predominantly rural phenomenon with 90 per cent of Viet Nam's poor people living in rural areas⁵. In 2010, the poverty level was 27 per cent in rural areas compared to 6 per cent in urban conurbations. It is ironic that in the countryside, people are surrounded by the means to produce food, and yet go without.

*'Agricultural growth is yet sustainable and yet to develop its full potential ... Environment is increasingly polluted. The capacity to adapt and cope with natural disasters is limited. The well-being of rural residents is still low; the poverty rate remains high, especially of ethnic minorities in remote and difficult areas. There remain gaps between rich and poor, between urban and rural areas, between key regions and emerging social tensions...'*⁶

Resolution No. 26 - NQ/TW, p.1

⁵ Nguyen, T.K.N., 2012

⁶ Resolution No.26-NQ/TW or Tam Nong Resolution dated 05/08/2008 of the 7th Conference of the Central Committee of the Communist Party X about agriculture, farmers, rural areas. The Resolution confirmed the important role of agriculture, farmers and rural areas in the industrialization and modernization and sustainable socio-economic development of Vietnam.

2.2. The challenge of sustainable production



Depletion of natural resources and unsustainable practices

Hidden behind Viet Nam's success stories has been the intense exploitation of natural resources through an increase in cropping areas and densities and ever higher use of inputs. In other words, more output has come from more and more inputs⁷. This more is better approach has led to excessive use of seed, fertilizer, agrochemicals and water.

Viet Nam (after India and Brazil) is the third largest phosphate importing country⁸ and national fertilizer consumption has risen sharply in recent years. It used nearly nine million tons of fertilizers in 2010 - almost double the volume used five years ago - of which rice production had the lion's share⁹. The mean fertilizer use for rice in Viet Nam is extremely high in comparison with other South-East Asian countries; for example, it is almost double the use in Indonesia¹⁰.

As a result of this intense exploitation, Viet Nam's land, water and forest resources are coming under increasing strain. This imposes significant costs on society while threatening the sustainability of the economic growth itself. The marine resource base is deteriorating due to overexploitation and excessive fishing, habitat loss, weak coastal planning and pollution. The water supply - the lifeblood of agriculture in the Mekong river delta - is becoming less secure. About half of Viet Nam's 16 major river basins have experienced water shortages¹¹. Almost two decades of reforestation programs have reversed the decline in overall forest cover, but degradation of natural forests continues mainly because of logging and encroachment.

These unsustainable practices have increased the burden on farmers who have been affected by rising material inputs and adverse productivity. Moreover, pressure on the already tiny parcels of land that households farm has risen due to population growth. Land conversion also needs to be addressed. Rapid conversion of agricultural land for industrial purposes and urbanization over the last two decades has led to the loss of around 100,000 hectares every year since 2001. A Communist Review report in 2011 revealed that as many as three million Vietnamese people had been displaced or had their lives disrupted as a result of land conversions in the previous five years¹².

7 MARD, 2012, p. 1

8 The fertilizer institute, statistic

9 VINACHEM 2010

10 Gregory et al., 2010 cited in World Bank 2012b, p.50

11 World Bank 2010b, p. 55

12 Phan, S.M & Ha,H.N., 2011



Change the focus of investment

These issues affect a high proportion of the population, since Vietnamese agriculture is typically small-scale. Over nine million farmer households' average landholding is less than 0.5 hectares spread over a number of plots. It is concentrated in the northern provinces, where some 85 per cent of the country's small-scale farmers live. However, even in the Mekong Delta, which produces more than half of the country's rice output, the majority of farmer households have less than two hectares of land¹³. This fragmentation of the land (particularly in the northern provinces), among other reasons, has been a key factor in keeping farm incomes low. Raising farm incomes in the future may require land consolidation to increase productivity, but this would have to be carefully balanced with equity improvements. The current restrictions especially on landholding, tenure and uses of land types have narrowed the choices for farmers which discourages them from making long-term investments.

Land disputes, which recently became an issue of national public concern, are corrosive to social stability and have called into question the accountability of the government more than any of the other social changes Viet Nam is currently experiencing. Official figures show the extent of the problem: in the first six months of 2012, 90 per cent of the 5,326 complaints received by the government related to land¹⁴. Making the process of 'land conversions' more transparent and fairer is therefore critical. The urgency of this challenge cannot be underestimated.

¹³ Jaffee, 2012

¹⁴ VnEconomy, 2012

Besides natural resource and tenure challenges, government policy at times poses additional limitations on poverty reduction. Investment in agriculture has been insufficient. Of the state budget for investment, the share allocated for agriculture fell from 13.8 per cent in 2000 to only 6.3 per cent in 2010. Furthermore, these minimal funds have been spent largely on building irrigation and drainage instead of increasing farmers' capacity and resilience. Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in agriculture has also been limited and is continuing to diminish. The sector's share of overall national FDI fell from 8 per cent in 2001 to just 1 per cent in 2010¹⁵. Government development plans, policies and budget allocations typically give much more support to larger farmers and commercial enterprises, which are often state-owned. While small-scale farmers are not exactly ignored in government policies, in reality, a strong bias exists in favor of larger, low land-based and input-intensive production models. Local authorities, in a quest for quick results and publicity, also tend to have a bias for large-scale projects. This means small-scale farmer households still have less access to key productive assets such as credit, technology and market information and a continuing ambivalence towards informal farmers' organizations prevails.

¹⁵ MARD, 2012, p. 6-7



Food security and fixed rice production targets

When it comes to food security, access to and affordability of food are critical. In 2011, one in five children suffered from stunted growth caused by malnutrition – a brutal inter-generational poverty trap¹⁶. A priority for Viet Nam needs to be ending malnutrition and food insecurity, and it should pursue this priority with the same vigour and determination that it had at the launch of its Hunger Eradication and Poverty Reduction Program in 1998.

For many years Viet Nam's expanding rice production contributed to a reduction in hunger and malnutrition within the population, but that trend is no longer evident. In fact, fewer farmers in Mekong Delta are now able to earn a livelihood primarily from producing rice. This calls into question the government's target for paddy rice production of 3.8 million hectares. Research also suggests that the country no longer needs such a target to guarantee a rice surplus and that many rice farmers would shift to other crops if they did not have to grow rice¹⁷.

The focus on modern intensive rice farming to meet fixed targets requires Viet Nam's agricultural sector to run faster and faster just to standstill. Escalating the use of irrigation and fertilizers can only go so far and maximum potential production levels have nearly been reached. The scope for increasing productivity in lowland rice production areas under irrigation is limited while increasing fertilizer use offers ever diminishing returns and serious environmental consequences. Between 40 and 50 per cent of the production costs of exportable rice are already associated with imported inputs¹⁸. At the household level, the cost of some of these inputs has been a constant drain on resources and income, especially in the context of high price volatility in the last five years¹⁹.

In the face of constrained resources and environmental pressures, Viet Nam should consider a shift away from rice production targets and look at achieving food security and improved incomes for individual households by alternative means.

Access to markets

Small-scale farmers have struggled under the state-led, high-input growth model which has enabled state-owned enterprises to dominate input supply, post-harvest processing and marketing in several sub-sectors, while private traders exercise virtual monopolies on the provision of inputs and the sale of outputs in many remote areas. This contributes to high input prices and relatively low farm-gate prices in some regions.

'Certainly I would like to sell when the price is high. However, I need the money to pay off fertilizer and rice loans. Immediately after harvest the village head insists on us paying off fertilizer loans. If we fail to do so, the bank will charge us more...'

Group discussion with poor Thai men in Pa Dong village, Dien Bien²⁰.

During the food price crisis from 2007 to 2008 there were widespread examples of hoarding and speculation. Small-scale rice producers gained little to nothing from the price rise. At the peak of the hike, the international price was about triple the actual price that farmers received. Buyers, traders and exporters (and particularly the two state-owned export companies, Vinafood I & II) benefitted much more²¹.

In recent years agribusiness has expanded rapidly in Viet Nam. The Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI) reported that about 340 FDI projects worth \$2.27 billion invested in agribusiness from 2005 to 2010. This investment was concentrated in the farming, fisheries, animal husbandry and food processing industries. In contrast, the number of agribusinesses has been decreasing which suggests that market concentration is occurring, especially as part of the state-owned enterprise reform process²². There are indications that this has contributed to Viet Nam's boom in export commodities. However, terms and conditions are often set by the agribusinesses which can lead to unfair deals for farmers²³. Contract farming has shown mixed results, depending on various factors including the type of commodity produced. Worse still, the poorest farmers are often excluded from participating in and benefitting from the new opportunities²⁴.

¹⁶ UNICEF, 2011, p. 6

¹⁷ Jaffee, 2011 and Dang Kim Son – the current General Director of the Institute of Policy and Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development (IPSARD) under the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD); Speaking at IPSARD conference, Hanoi, 28 June 2012 on food security policy and prosperity

¹⁸ World Bank, 2012b, p. 17

¹⁹ Hong, 2012; Viet Nam News, 2012; Dao T.A., 2011

²⁰ Oxfam & ActionAid, 2008

²¹ World Bank, 2011c; Vu & Glewwe, 2011, p. 6

²² Oxfam, 2011c, p. 4

²³ Oxfam, 2011c

²⁴ Nham et al., 2012



2.3. Equity challenge

The scandal of hunger

It is a remarkable turnaround that Viet Nam is now in the top league of exporters of agricultural commodities, such as rice and coffee. This is a country that was importing rice during the 1980s and in 1993, half of the nation's children suffered from stunted growth due to malnutrition²⁵. Yet, despite the abundance of rice (40 million tons in 2010) and large exports (7 million tons) – in effect providing food security to other countries – hunger and malnutrition continue to blight the lives of too many Vietnamese people. The statistics are never completely reliable, but in 2010 it was estimated that 8.7 per cent of households in the rural areas were food insecure²⁶. In 2011, UNICEF reported that at least one in five children was malnourished²⁷. Certain sections of the population, such as ethnic minorities, migrant workers, artisanal fishers, landless people and people living in remote or disaster-affected areas remain more vulnerable to food insecurity.

However, reducing malnutrition is not just a matter of producing enough food. Out of the country's eight regions, the Mekong Delta region, known as Viet Nam's rice basket, has had the seventh worst record in reducing child malnutrition over the last decade despite an abundance of rice. In fact, this area enjoyed a 6 per cent growth in rice production over the same period and has the most diversified agricultural product base in the country. Food security therefore has had less to do with food production than a lack of access to food, sharp increases in food prices, temporary loss of income or livelihoods and in some cases, chronic poverty²⁸. In addition, the promotion of specific commercial crops can make farmer households more vulnerable and food-insecure. H'mong farmers in the northern mountainous region, for example, substitute animal feed maize with the traditional, food staple maize, compromising their own food security²⁹.

Exclusive prosperity – a threat to pro-poor growth

Food insecurity is one key indicator of the problem that several sections of society have not benefited from Viet Nam's new opportunities and prosperity. In fact, for various reasons, they are excluded from it. Let's look deeper to the lives of ethnic minorities, women and migrant workers for whom poverty can be chronic and often transfers from generation to generation.

a) Ethnic minority people continue to fall behind. By 2010 ethnic minorities accounted for nearly half of all the poor people in Viet Nam, despite making up only 14.5 per cent of the country's population. At 66.3 per cent, the ethnic minority poverty rate was five times higher than the poverty rate for the Kinh majority people³⁰. This is not simply a story of a region that is lagging behind. The Central Highlands (with its high concentration of ethnic minority communities) has experienced agricultural and overall growth of nearly twice the national average.

It is important to note that ethnic minorities are not a homogeneous group and poverty rates vary significantly among ethnic groups residing in the same region. Ethnicities are also internally heterogeneous and there are frequently significant differences in poverty rates among villages, even within a single commune.

During the last decade, there were obvious improvements in the remote and mountainous areas where most ethnic minorities live. People took charge of their own development and pursued various pathways out of poverty, which were not dissimilar from those of the Kinh-majority people³¹. The production of cash crops and access to markets created opportunities in the Central Highlands. Many ethnic minorities have utilized these opportunities, refuting the idea that they lack initiative or understanding about the market. Nevertheless, the reality is that ethnic minorities have access to poorer quality land and public services. In particular, restrictions on access to forest lands continue to have an enormous impact on some ethnic minority communities. Some government policies in poor areas have also exacerbated inequalities, since many policies and investments appear to offer more benefits for migrant Kinh communities. Furthermore, in their dealings with administration and broader society, ethnic minorities face barriers and discrimination and are often objectified and portrayed as "backward"³².

25 Shenggen, F., 2010, p. 9

26 Dao, T.A. 2010c

27 UNICEF, 2011, p. 6

28 World Bank, 2012b, p. 19

29 Dao, T.A, Trinh, V.T &Hoang, X.T. 2010

30 World Bank, 2012a; IRC, 2011, p. 16-17

31 Well-Dangs, A. 2012

32 World Bank, 2010a; IRC, 2011; Baulch et al., 2010



While there is a reasonably shared view on what ethnic minority poverty looks like, a shared understanding on the causes of that poverty is still lacking. Causes and drivers of deep poverty are diverse and complex and location and context, such as access to quality land and levels of education matter. Yet large differences have been observed in the returns on similar contexts and sets of assets between different ethnic minorities and the Kinh majority³³. A greater understanding of the sources of these inequalities, including patterns of social exclusion, discrimination and stigma, is crucial for public policy and government responses to be effective and impactful.

b) While Viet Nam has made substantial progress in closing some important gender gaps, fundamental challenges remain. Traditional gender roles and differentiation prevail. Women's wages are on average about 75 per cent of men's. Decision-making structures at all levels are male dominated. Domestic violence and gender based violence are still widely spread at all levels of society and both are underreported in government statistics³⁴.

Sixty-four per cent of working women in rural areas work in agriculture, compared to 53 per cent of working men. However, women have less access than men to training, and on-farm and off-farm employment³⁵ and they are less likely to get access to credit and loans³⁶. Similar patterns of gender segregation by sector are found in urban areas. Women tend to hold more vulnerable, casual and informal jobs with lower wages and worse working conditions.

Migrant women, widows, older women, ethnic minorities and women with disabilities are particularly disadvantaged³⁷. For example, although working hours are very similar, women migrants earn about 45 per cent less than their male counterparts. These differences remain even after factors such as age, education and occupation are taken into account³⁸.

Overcoming the systemic and corrosive discrimination against women persists as a key development challenge.

33 World Bank, 2012a

34 World Bank, 2011, p. 9-10 and p.38-40

35 Hoang, 2009

36 UNIFEM&CIDA, 2009

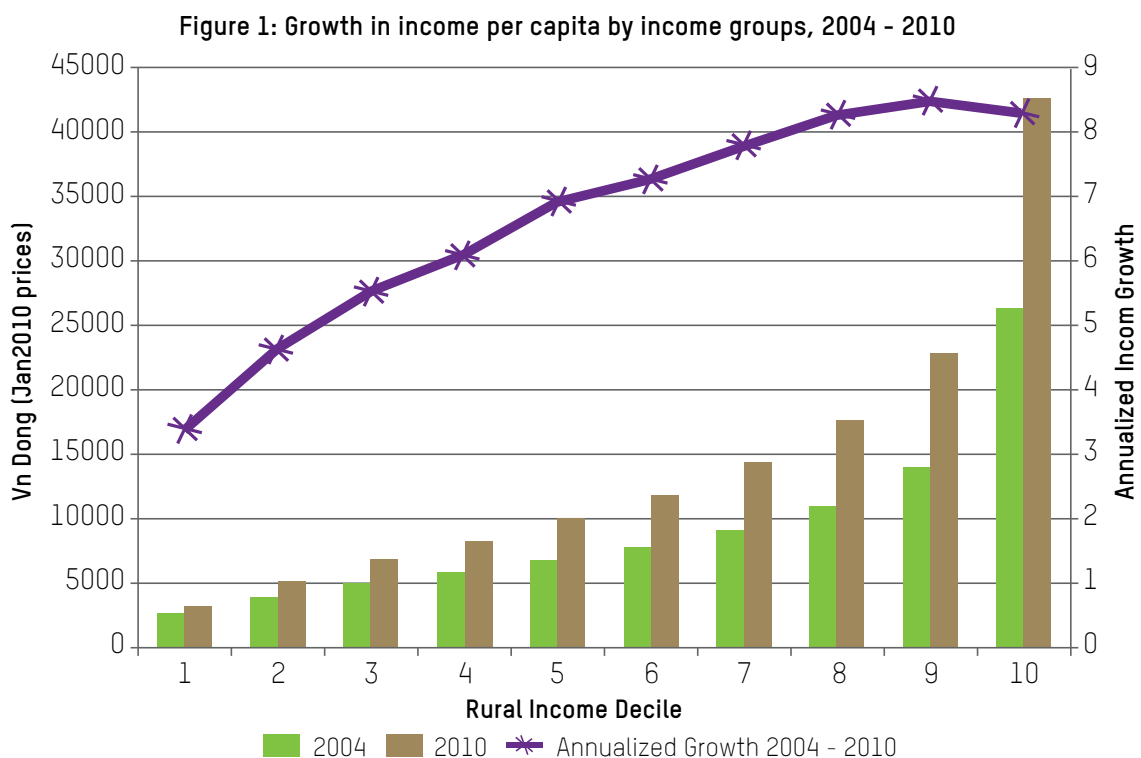
37 World Bank, 2011, p. 10-11

38 World Bank, 2011, p. 69

c) Viet Nam is rapidly urbanizing. Each year some one million new urban residents are reported. By 2020, it is estimated that 40 per cent of Viet Nam's population will live in urban areas³⁹. Results of the 2009 census identified 6.6 million people (7.7 per cent of the population) as migrants. This excluded many types of migration, such as short-term migration⁴⁰. Even the thousands of farmers who manage to join the wave of migrants to urban areas every year, still face an uncertain future. Their rich farming skills and knowledge are not enough to survive. Their access to basic services, stable shelter and local residence registration are limited and insecure. Migrants are seen and treated by policy makers and administrators as a burden rather than one of the most innovative, enduring and entrepreneurial workforces in the economy. There is a social stigma about being a migrant. They are often viewed by local residents with mistrust and unease. Considering the contribution that they make to society - in the factories, underserved, cleaning and childcare sectors - this is an underserved exclusion and discrimination.

A great challenge is looming. *Tam Nong Resolution* has set a target to halve the nation's farming population by 2030. Effectively, some five million farmer households will have to move out of agriculture. What will the future be like for former farmers who are unable to join the migration waves? To manage this change in a sustainable way will require a significant departure from the current approaches, practices and institutional arrangements underlying the government's migration and social protection policies⁴¹.

Viet Nam has often been praised for its inclusive growth, but in reality, income growth has favored better-off households⁴². Since 2004, the richest households' incomes have increased twice as much as those of the poorest households - nine per cent and four per cent respectively. From 2004 to 2010, the richest five per cent of the population took 20.5 per cent of the national income and spent 21.3 per cent of the national expenditure⁴³. In other words, income growth has favored better-off households (See figure 1).



Source: World Bank (2012a). Well begun, Not Yet Done: Vietnam's Remarkable Progress on Poverty Reduction and the Emerging Challenges. Hanoi: World Bank, June 2012. p22

There is also a concern about the increased vulnerability of the poorest households, despite an overall decrease in food shortages. An Oxfam/ActionAid monitor of rural poverty in nine provinces from 2007 to 2011 found that while there was a reduction in the number of families experiencing regular food shortages, there was a

worrying trend that the families who were still going hungry, were doing so for longer periods of time. In 2007, 23 per cent of families were suffering food shortages for 3.3 months of the year, while in 2011, 16 per cent of families were suffering from food shortages, but for 4.9 months of the year.

39 World Bank, 2009
40 MPI, 2011

41 Duong et al. 2011
42 World Bank, 2012a
43 World Bank, 2012a, p.122

2.4. Resilience challenge



Our changing climate adds to the uncertainty faced by farmers as it brings a greater risk of adverse weather. Viet Nam ranks sixth in the world among countries that have been most affected by such climate-related disasters and shocks over the last two decades⁴⁴.

Besides ecological degradation, population growth, volatile market prices and competition for land from agribusiness expansion, industry and urbanization add further layers of risks and shocks for farmers. And these are all set to intensify over the coming decades. Poor and small-scale farmers will be hardest hit, especially those who depend on environmental assets like clean water, fertile soils, forests and rich biodiversity.

Extreme climate, extreme fragility

At least seven out of every ten Vietnamese people are estimated to be exposed to risks from natural hazards such as typhoons, floods and droughts⁴⁵. It is estimated to cost the country some \$1.8 billion annually⁴⁶. Different types of climate-related risks such as rising sea levels, floods and droughts affect different regions of Viet Nam with varying degrees of intensity.

Climate change poses a grave threat to yield growth. Scientists project that rice yields may decline by 7 to 10 per cent for each 1°C rise. If the sea level rises by one meter, over 7 per cent of the rice paddy land will be flooded and total rice production will reduce by 12 per cent. This could wipe out about five million tons of paddy rice – sufficient to feed approximately 22 million Asian people for one year.

Secondly, climate change means an increase in the frequency and severity of extreme weather events such as heat waves, droughts and floods which can wipe out harvests in a single stroke. Food shortage is just a flood away, as experienced by farmers in provinces of Thanh Hoa and Ha Tinh in 2011. Meanwhile, creeping, insidious changes in the seasons, such as longer and hotter dry periods, shorter growing seasons, and unpredictable rainfall patterns are bewildering farmers, making it harder and harder for them to know when best to sow, cultivate, and harvest their crops⁴⁷.

The climate chaos will disproportionately affect poorer households in rural they rely more on natural resources and climate-sensitive activities to generate an income and have fewer assets to cushion the effects.

44 Khac, K., 2012

45 UNDP, 2011a

46 Harmeling, 2012, p. 6

47 FAO, 2004



For all people without stable incomes, savings, access to healthcare or social insurance, shocks from natural disasters or shifting seasons often force them to go without food, sell off assets critical to their livelihoods, or take their children out of school. Short-term coping strategies can have long-term consequences, causing a downward spiral of deeper poverty and greater vulnerability⁴⁸.

Extreme prices

Extreme weather endangers food security. Heavy monsoon rains in October 2011 drove Viet Nam's rice prices up by 30 per cent due to harvest losses, disruption of the markets and higher transport costs⁴⁹. Worse, the full impact of climate change on future food prices is being underestimated. Food price spikes will get worse as extreme weather caused by climate change devastates food production⁵⁰.

In 2008, as the price of rice increased, majority parts of population were net buyers of rice – 55 per cent of rural households and 92 per cent of urban households – so the price increase had a detrimental effect on incomes⁵¹. Even rice farmers experienced a sharp

48 Oxfam, 2008

49 FAO, 2011

50 Oxfam, 2012c

51 Oxfam & ActionAid, 2008

reduction in purchasing power because increased input costs offset any potential income gain. When inflation peaked in 2011, similar observations were found.

Price increases decreased purchasing power, quality of life and exacerbated the inherent difficulties of poor, low and fixed income groups. For the poor, price increases mean no other choice but less and lower-quality food which affects health, labor productivity and income security⁵². The current economic slowdown in Viet Nam is making life even harder.

'Each of us suffers in our own way...As things become more expensive we have no choice but to cut down on everything. There is no way to get any extra income...'

Discussion with poor women group in Lam Ha ward, Hai Phong, June/2008⁵³.

52 Oxfam & ActionAid, 2008, 2011b; United Nations, 2008

53 Oxfam & ActionAid, 2008, p.59





2.5. Time to rebuild

As a result of all these increased pressures, Viet Nam's agricultural sector needs to generate 'more from less'. That is to say, it needs to produce safer and higher quality agricultural commodities and products, while improving farmer and consumer welfare using fewer physical, human and other resources. Happily, most of the solutions are known, and some necessary changes are already under way, led by growing numbers of producers, consumers, responsible businesses and civil society organizations. Scaling up these pilots and best practices, introducing and reinvigorating relevant public policies and sometimes overcoming vested interests will be the greatest challenge.

A system at breaking point is a terrible threat but also presents a tremendous opportunity to change course. It is time to rebuild and generate a new prosperity in which everyone can have a fair share for now and in the future.



3

**THE NEW
PROSPERITY**



3.1. Harnessing full potential

Agriculture has been an engine of economic growth and the main source of poverty reduction in Viet Nam. Supported by enabling policies and favorable international market opportunities, farmers' ingenuity, industriousness and productivity has turned Viet Nam from a food deficit country into a major exporter of agricultural commodities. In the last decade, when Viet Nam experienced a deteriorating balance of trade and struggling industry, the agriculture sector was the economy's savior.

The agriculture sector is still the key to sustaining growth and reducing poverty because it accounts for such a sizeable part of the Vietnamese economy and workforce. It is the largest employer of the poorest people in the country. In 2010 it represented 21 per cent of GDP; quarter of all exports and accounted for the employment of 70 per cent of the working population, most of whom are poor small-scale farmers. Focusing on these farming communities is therefore vital.

Box 2: Four myths about small-scale farmers

The case against small-scale farms often relies on four key misconceptions, born of a lack of familiarity with the lives of poor and small-scale farmers.

1. Low productivity

Selected data shows that the average yields from small farms are as little as half of the world average. These figures fail to present the full picture. Small-scale farms often have low yields because farmers use the factors of production more sparingly. For example, small farms in Africa only use about one-eighteenth of the fertilizer that is used in India, they use labor rather than capital, and less than five per cent of the cultivated area is irrigated. Furthermore, small farmers don't benefit from the subsidies that many large-scale farms get. Taking these factors into account in the productivity calculation significantly narrows the gap. So if small farmers had the inputs, irrigation, and subsidies enjoyed by large farms, things would look very different. This is why surveys often find that when the focus is shifted from yields to total productivity, small farms are more efficient.

2. Aversion to technology and innovation

Farmers living in poverty often use simple technologies and old-fashioned practices simply because appropriate technologies for small producers have not been a priority for government or the private sector. When given the opportunities and resources, small-scale farmers have proved to be capable of adopting new technologies and improving their resilience to various shocks. (See Box 6).

3. Aversion to risk

Some argue that small producers are insufficiently entrepreneurial and unwilling to take risks. Of course, surviving on less than \$1.20 a day, without recourse to savings or insurance, narrows the scope for taking risk. The solution is to help poor farmers to better manage risk. For example by providing better weather information and data, storage infrastructure or access to insurance. Such interventions can help spur innovation and unlock productive potential – especially as climate change rapidly multiplies the risks poor and small-scale farmers face.

4. Aversion to markets

A final myth about small-scale farmers is that they do not respond to market opportunities. This is a misconception. While their priority is feeding their families, this does not mean poor farmers are unwilling to produce and provide market surpluses. Furthermore, engagement with markets is low because of poor infrastructure and reluctance on the part of private sector actors to accommodate small-scale farmers in value chains. (See Box 8).

These four myths do not constitute a case against investing in small-scale agriculture. They are not evidence of inherent failings or inevitabilities. The real problem is that small-scale farmers have always lacked access to resources and have not been given relevant and adequate support or been provided with the policy environment they need to flourish. These are not reasons to not invest. They are reasons to invest.

Role of small-scale farmers in the modernization agenda

Small-scale farmers have been and should remain a crucial part of Viet Nam's rural development strategy. Giving them a central place on the modernization agenda would achieve major gains in poverty reduction and create a new agriculture sector with resilience, productivity and sustainability.

In the late 1980s Vietnamese farmer households were given the freedom to organize their own production and it sparked a massive increase in production and productivity. Market incentives, the partial lifting of restrictions on land use and diversification into commercial and industrial crops all helped to boost agricultural production and resulted in improved food security and large-scale poverty reduction. Viet Nam confirmed the historical and international experiences of successfully achieving pro-poor growth by placing farmers at the core of the development process. Growth originating in agriculture, in particular the small-scale farming sector is at least twice as effective in benefiting the poorest people as growth from non-agricultural sectors⁵⁴.

Whatever mix of policies is chosen, in Oxfam's view, both small-scale and industrial farming are needed to feed the world's growing population without depleting the earth's resources. This is particularly true for Viet Nam where nine million farmer households are small-scale. In many instances, small-scale farming has proven to be as productive and often more sustainable than large-scale, highly mechanized, and high external input agricultural models. In developing new strategies for restructuring the agricultural sector, the polarized debates about large versus small agriculture are unhelpful and false. Each system serves to benefit different population and market segments and to function sustainably, both need to co-exist and complement each other.

Restructuring Viet Nam's agriculture sector requires changes in the policy environment. Any modernization strategy must be people-centered, considering the needs, priorities, interests, and challenges faced by the men, women, boys and girls involved. It needs to formally recognize and adequately support Viet Nam's small-scale agricultural practices and systems. As such, it needs to start with, recognize and deploy the people's active involvement and ability to make decisions concerning any plans that will affect their futures.

Box 3: Extending choices for better income generation

A success story of diversifying income is unfolding in the buffer zone around the Xuan Thuy National Park, Nam Dinh province, where local organization - The Center for Marine Conservation and Development (MCD) - has been working with support from the EU, Oxfam and others.

The MCD model offers families living in the villages a variety of options for diversifying their livelihoods depending on their particular conditions and personal or household economic situation. Among the environment-friendly options on offer are new methods of more sustainable clam cultivation, mixed gardening, earth worm rearing and organic composting. There are also community-based ecotourism services, including home stay, tourist guiding and a café, Ecolife, which is a space for environmental education and community-led business activities.

Commune leader Trinh The Thong said that the model had successfully combined the backing from the commune leadership, support from an NGO, and individual choice on the part of the producers.

Raising earthworm helps farmers to improve incomes.



⁵⁴ FAO, 2010, p. 2; Chang, 2009



Investing in small-scale farmers

While Viet Nam's agricultural sector needs to create greater added value, quality and sustainable production models, it has great economic potential. In many sub-sectors, it has important competitive advantages, both current and potential. Equally, agriculture continues to play a role in preserving traditional cultures and social stability. In other words, agriculture should not be seen as a shrinking sector, but rather as a lasting source of pro-poor growth and a sector with ample potential to unlock. To do this, it is imperative to increase public and private investments in small-scale farming. At least 10 per cent of public expenditure should go to agriculture and small-scale farmers must be a critical part of the ongoing growth strategy.

If Viet Nam is to meet the three challenges of sustainability, equity and resilience, described in Chapter 2, then investing in sustainable models of small-scale production is critical. While low-input, more environment-friendly agricultural practices are not exclusive to small-scale farmers, they are often well suited to sustainable models of production, and can easily adopt these practices. Investing in small-scale agriculture will build resilience and boost incomes, especially if investment is sensitive to gender inequalities. In turn, this will provide scope for farming communities to diversify, either in full or selectively, and move into off-farm livelihoods if they so choose.

Government policies and investment, in partnership with the private sector and civil society, can create the enabling environment that extends people's choices to lead them out of poverty and towards a new prosperity.

A modernization strategy that ignores the contribution of small-scale farmers and denies their potential and aspirations will result in cohorts of landless, jobless and hungry people. This reality must not be forgotten as Viet Nam aims high in the pursuit of its modernization agenda. It would be more beneficial to help small-scale farmers to join forces and resources rather than merely focus on large-scale concentrated and intensified farming. 'New Rural Areas'⁵⁵ should be built with and by small-scale farmers.

In particular, expanding the choices for ethnic minority communities requires a diverse set of approaches, including improving maternal health and access to quality education (especially for girls); promoting and expanding pro-poor market opportunities, and ensuring better access and sustainable use of natural resources, especially forests. More coherent and innovative public policies, based on a respect for cultural diversity, could induce transformative changes. To achieve this, the voices of ethnic minority communities need to be heard, resulting in better participation and governance.

⁵⁵ This is popular name of "the National Targeted Programme on New rural areas for the period 2010 – 2020" approved by the Prime Minister on 4/6/2010. This is a further step to bring the Resolution No. 26 on agriculture, farmers and rural area to life.



3.2. Building a new agricultural future

But change is needed not only in agriculture, but also in the way small-scale farmers are able to produce and participate in the local, national and international markets. Importantly, change is needed in the way the state interacts with farmers. In the way it provides services, the way it invests and the way it creates and enforces policy. As agriculture becomes more driven by the market, it will inevitably drive changes in public investments and all of this must be informed by lessons—both good and bad—from past experiences⁵⁶.

Promoting on-farm and off-farm diversification

Development in the 1990s was driven by on-farm diversification, for instance into cash crops and livestock. In recent years, progress has been driven by off-farm diversification into business and trading, and even more importantly by salaried employment in manufacturing and service sectors. In other words, what differentiates the incomes of poor households from wealthier households is dependent on whether they have successfully diversified into off-farm activities. Rural development strategies must therefore enable pathways out of poverty by offering men and women choices to diversify their income both on and off-farm. Households, like Mrs. L.T.X (see Box 4) must be enabled and entitled to make choices on the basis of their individual circumstances and capabilities. For this to happen, it is critical that public policy makes access to credit, vocational training and risk management instruments available to all.

Strengthening small-scale farmers' power in the markets

Access to local, domestic and even international markets benefits farmers. Selling a surplus allows poor farmers to earn an income. Over time, it extends their choices of livelihood diversification, including moving out of the agricultural sector. However, poor small-scale farmers rarely exercise any power in markets where middlemen and processors call the shots. Price margins taken by private dealers in remote areas can be between 20 and 50 per cent. Most households have no choice but to rely on private dealers for inputs such as seeds, livestock feed, fertilizers and for selling their output⁵⁷.

Building physical markets is important, especially in poor and remote communes, but it is not sufficient. Institutional changes are also needed in promoting market linkages and strengthening farmers' access to information and increasing their negotiation power, often through forming associations. Reducing the monopoly held by traders and input providers can also assist small-scale food producers. Some 6,000 agriculture and forestry state-owned enterprises manage 4.9 million hectares of Viet Nam's land⁵⁸. They also dominate both the input supply and the post-harvest processing and marketing of much of Viet Nam's agricultural produce, but they are highly inefficient. Well-structured and sequenced reforms of agricultural state farms and companies could really benefit farmers⁵⁹.

By promoting pro-poor market approaches, commodities can be identified that generate better incomes for small-scale producers. Through the formation of producer organizations, farmers obtain economies of scale and thus stronger negotiation and bargaining

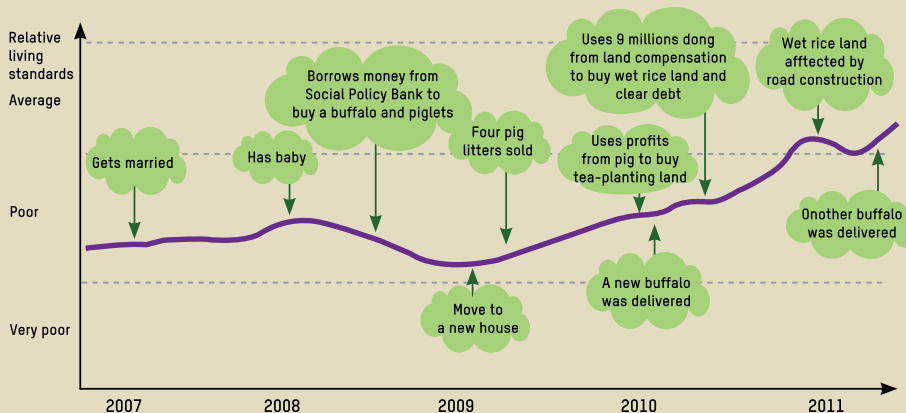
power with traders, resulting in better prices. As a group they are also able to demand better extension services. Moving up the value chain can generate better and more diversified livelihoods. Livestock and cattle raising, for example, often have good market potential in remote and upland areas, and could build on the traditional knowledge and practices of the ethnic minorities.

Collective voluntary association can advance the interests of individuals. Associations can assume various roles, both formal and informal, such as taking joint action for natural resources management. They can also provide community groups with local social functions; community savings and credit societies; farmer groups/cooperatives involved in input supply and/or specific commodity fields and also set up industry associations applying codes of practice and supporting both technical improvements and social capital. The association of H'mong beef producers⁶⁰; Nep Cai Hoa Vang rice farmers' association⁶¹ and Khe Sanh Arabica coffee farmers' group⁶² are examples of associations that have brought benefits to their members. The multiple impacts on poverty reduction of such initiatives are not yet fully recognised. However they are constrained by a lack of appropriate policy frameworks and require a change of perception about their advantages to reach their full potential.

There is scope for strengthening the collective action and voice of farmers, including a reformed, more proactive and more representative Farmers' Union. The government can create better enabling conditions for such farmers' initiatives particularly as they are currently working on revising the Cooperative Laws and Enterprise Law as well as the execution of Decree 151 on rural collaborative groups.

Box 4: Households gradually accumulating from livestock

Key events showing the changes in the last five years of Tay ethnic family of Mrs. L.T.X., from Doi 1 Village, Ban Lien Commune (Bac Ha, Lao Cai), who escaped from poverty with buffalo and pig farming.



Source: Oxfam and ActionAid (2011a). Participatory poverty monitoring in rural communities in Vietnam: Five - year synthesis report, 2011, p.32

57 IRC, 2011, p. 59

58 Dang, H.V, 2012

59 Coxhead et al., 2010, p. 20-21

60 Dao, T.A, Trinh, V.T & Hoang, X.T., 2010

61 Dao, T.A, Hannah, J & Pham, C.N, 2010

62 Oxfam, 2011c

3.3. Building a new ecological future

To overcome the challenge of resilience, agriculture will have to become less input-intensive and wasteful. Guidance on this can be found in a toolkit of practices known as ‘sustainable intensification’. For example, using animal and green manure reduces dependency on expensive inorganic fertilizers, the price of which is linked to oil. Agro-forestry and intercropping helps improve soils and diversify income. Integrated pest management techniques reduce the need for expensive chemical pesticides. The most comprehensive study examined 286 sustainable agriculture projects in 57 countries and found an average yield increase of 79 per cent⁶³.

Investing in small-scale sustainable agriculture

To benefit small-scale farmers, public and private investments need to be encouraged and need to prioritize investment in pro-poor, sustainable and resilient production techniques, such as water-conservation, water harvesting, low or zero-till agriculture, agroforestry, intercropping, and the use of organic manures. Besides the financial benefits, these would significantly reduce the carbon footprint of agriculture. The government should enable and invest more in community-led initiatives where immediate gains tend to reach farmers more quickly and encourage them to keep moving ahead (see Box 5 & 6).

Box 5: Have support, can do!

Frustrated with the increasing price and dependence on the input-hungry hybrid rice seeds, small-scale farmers in Hoa Binh wanted to revive the centuries-old tradition to grow their own seeds. Thus, a project on the farmer’s seed system, with support from Oxfam and the Farmers’ Union, started four years ago and continues to expand.

A group of enthusiastic small-scale farmers took part in both technical and hands-on trainings that the project offered, and practiced what they learnt in their own fields. After a few trial crops, the seeds they produced have gained a reputation beyond their community. These seeds are often five to eight times cheaper than hybrid seeds while giving higher yields and are proving to grow better in local conditions. Furthermore, farmers become capable to carry out specific improvements such as resistance to drought which is critical to cope with extreme weather and to secure a resilient livelihood.

‘Since I started to participate in the project, I understand more and feel more confident.. Moreover, I’ve started to produce my own seeds so I am saving money from not having to buy seeds anymore. And if we manage to produce new variety of seeds with higher yields, I will be among the first to try and have the technique to do so’.

Rice farmer and community nurse Bui Thi Thiet, 40, Qui Hau commune, Hoa Binh province.

⁶³ Jules, P et al, 2006, p 1114-9



Box 6: Farmer-led innovation and adaptation – Growing more from less

The System of Rice Intensification (SRI) is a comprehensive method that improves rice plant health, soil nutrition and reduces fertilizer and water consumption in wet rice cultivation. The Government of Viet Nam recognizes the significant contribution of SRI to climate adaptation in its report Technology Needs Assessment for Climate Change Adaptation in July 2012.

Oxfam has been supporting farmer training with the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) to promote the adoption of community-based SRI since 2006, as it helps vulnerable farmers on the smallest farms to grow more rice using less seed, less water, and fewer expensive inputs like fertilizer and pesticides.

Compared to conventional rice growing techniques, SRI farmers can increase rice production by as much as 500 kilos per hectare. This typically increases income by about \$130 per hectare. On average, farmers see a 50 - 70 per cent drop in the costs of seeds, use 20 - 40 per cent as much urea fertilizer and reduce pesticide use by 80 - 100 per cent.

In 2011, MARD reported over one million farmers - about 70 per cent of whom are women - applying SRI, on 185,065 hectares of the rice fields. In the spring crop season of 2011 alone, based on results of farmer field schools in six Oxfam-supported provinces, it is estimated that SRI farmers have increased their income by VND 370 billion approximately \$17.7 million⁶⁴.

'With SRI, the productivity per sao (or 360 square meters) is more stable... Each year I harvest more than two tons of rice. I keep a small amount for home consumption, and the rest I use for making rice cakes. Cultivating rice and making rice cakes go together well. I can maintain a good income for my family...When you do have enough, you can spend your time doing other things...'

Rice farmer Nguyen Thi Huong, who has adopted SRI technique since 2006, Dai Nghia, My Duc, Ha Noi

'What really motivates me is that we have introduced something new [SRI] that benefits the farmer economically, improves the environment and has changed the mindset of our farmers to make them more open to new suggestions.'

SRI pioneer, Le Ngoc Thach, 54, the head of Dai Nghia's agriculture cooperative, Ha Noi



⁶⁴ Oxfam, 2011d and <http://oxfamblogs.org/vietnam/2011/10/19/system-of-rice-intensification-helps-more-than-1-million-small-scale-farmers-in-vietnam-embracing-innovative-approaches-to-producing-more-rice>

Grassroots adaptation

Besides promoting diversified and resilient livelihoods, Oxfam is also helping those communities throughout Viet Nam that are most vulnerable to disasters and climate change impacts (See Box 7). They have been providing training in disaster preparedness awareness, skills and practices. This includes planning for before, during, and after a disaster from the provincial level through to the, district, commune and village levels and to individual households. Oxfam's training ranges from early warning message dissemination, swimming training, public health training and integrating disaster risk reduction with the livelihood initiatives.

Box 7: Community based disaster risk management (CBDRM)

The CBDRM approach was first introduced in Viet Nam in the late 1990's by the Red Cross and a number of INGOs working on disaster risk management, including Oxfam, World Vision, CECI and others. It soon became the main approach applied to disaster preparedness, response and recovery initiatives in various parts of the country. The success of the various CBDRM projects has translated into a 12-year national program to reach 6,000 frequently disaster-affected communes and villages by 2020. The total investment is expected at VND988.7 billion of which 55 per cent comes from the state budget, five per cent is contributed by communities and the remaining 40 per cent comes from international sources. By safeguarding those communities vulnerable to natural disaster, the CBDRM program increases the resilience of individual households which ultimately helps to secure the economic stability of the nation.

'Previously, I was aware of the danger but I would not do anything about it. However, it is a different story now, I understand the risks better and know what to do before, during and after a flood to protect my family and that is why I pay more attention to it.'

'I feel much less anxious now knowing that all my grandchildren can now swim. While at work I feel less worried about them going to school, especially during the flood season.'

Mrs Tran Thi Giau, born in 1956, Long Hoa B village, Tien Giang province.



Viet Nam is at the frontline of climate change. The Government of Viet Nam and development partners have worked hard to mobilize resources to curb emissions and to help vulnerable people and communities adapt to a changing climate. As international climate change finance begins to flow it is essential that the strategies, action plans, governance and implementation mechanisms are shaped to meet the needs of the most vulnerable. Strong leadership is needed to enhance accountability and transparency and promote learning and innovation. Civil society and vulnerable communities must be able to have a say in how climate finance is used⁶⁵.

65 Oxfam, 2012b (forthcoming)

3.4. Ensuring equitable transition

Viet Nam is in the midst of rapid economic and social transformation. It is changing from a low-income to a more diversified middle-income country with strong links to the global economy. From being a traditional agrarian society with most families dependent on small-scale rice production, it is now rapidly urbanizing, industrializing and becoming more socially diversified. It is understood that development processes involved in transitions can be difficult, with winners and losers. The distributional effects of this process are therefore critical. The ability to fairly distribute opportunities, risks, costs and benefits between people is a central concern for a society, and indeed essential for sustainable development and social stability.

Promoting women's rights

For prosperity to benefit everyone, it is vital that the most marginalized are empowered and included. Oxfam's experience shows that the position of women within their households and communities is improved when women have the knowledge and skills to actively participate in economic development and contribute to their household income. When they are empowered in this way, women tend to have a stronger voice in decision-making within their communities as well more power when faced with domestic violence. For these reasons, Oxfam works with women across Viet Nam to increase their economic leadership, solidarity and empowerment (See Box 8).

'We gained recognition from our family members. With the project, we have more chances to meet and talk to people. Before, my idea was just that I would buy and then resell. Now, I know how to get more customers and negotiate prices. If I am more active, my family will recognize that. I feel that they will value my work.'

Feedback from women who took part in Oxfam's Rural Enterprise Expansion Project in Thanh Hoa province

Box 8: Promoting women's economic leadership

Oxfam is working with Raglai women in Ninh Thuan province to enhance their economic leadership skills. This is one of the most disadvantaged groups and locations in Viet Nam. Despite the small-scale production level and low productivity here, there is market potential in local products such as cows, black pigs, chickens and corn. Through the creation of producer groups, where women make up at least 50 per cent of the members, the project is changing the unbalanced relationship between producers and the traders - who tend to hold the power as they are often the sole provider of credit and inputs. The producer groups promote production and business techniques and facilitate training on extension, veterinary and marketing skills. The project is creating a more balanced division of labor within Raglai families and is also addressing some of the barriers women experience in relation to language, lack of social exchange, fear of travelling far, and lack of transport.

'At first I was very shy but now I have become more confident in selling my products, and I know how to negotiate with my customers'

Thuy, 22, one of the Raglai ethnic women who takes part in Oxfam's Promoting Women Economic Leadership.



Equitable access and control over land

The old proverb 'An inch of land is worth an inch of gold' (*Tấc đất tấc vàng*), highlights how land has always been valued as a precious commodity in Viet Nam. In the process of development land has become an asset that is even more crucial and increasingly contested.

Under the current land laws and policies, farmers carry a disproportionate burden of the costs of Viet Nam's modernization and urbanization compared to domestic and foreign investors, urban residents and bureaucrats. Land is the critical source of livelihoods for poor farmers. When land-use is changed, or lost, without due process and adequate compensation, their lives and livelihoods are at risk. Meanwhile land developers and authorities reap massive, sometimes illegitimate, gains⁶⁶. Although the 2003 Law on Land stipulates that compensation has to be paid, what farmers actually receive is usually below market prices and does not make up for the farmers' foregone income. In some cases investors are only able to provide employment to 3 to 5 per cent of the people whose land has been appropriated, so poverty can loom large⁶⁷.

Land deals are seen as one of the main sources of (illegitimate) procedural inequality⁶⁸. This is an injustice that needs to be redressed as it lacks farmers' participation and provides no alternatives. Many have called for the need to better protect the farmer's rights to agricultural and forestry land. Making the process of 'land conversions' more transparent and fairer is therefore critical. The urgency of the challenge cannot be underestimated.

The government is currently revising the law on land. Ultimately, the manner in which a nation manages the use of land, a most symbolic asset, serves as a litmus test for how it can manage all development processes in a resource-constrained world.

Improved targeting of poverty reduction strategies

In overcoming poverty and inequality, improved targeting of poverty reduction strategies is critical. In the 1990s, poverty was widespread and location-based poverty reduction interventions were very successful. Today, poverty is more concentrated so targeting becomes even more important. However, current targeting mechanisms are imperfect and incomplete⁶⁹. Various schemes use overlapping and sometimes incoherent criteria and definitions. The 'list of poor households', one of the basic mechanisms for selecting which households benefit from social security and other support policies has been shown

to have limitations. Improved and innovative targeting mechanisms, including self-targeting, should be explored. Community-led development initiatives should be encouraged and supported – from planning to implementation. The government's New Target Program on Sustainable Poverty Reduction offers opportunities for such innovations.

Social protection

Viet Nam's social protection is considered complex and rather fragmented. As a result, management and implementation costs are high, with an increased risk of mis-targeting and leakage. There are significant coverage gaps, such as unregistered migrants and informal workers. Proportionately higher income groups benefit more than the poorest income groups. A more coherent system of benefits to support universal access to social services is required, and more innovative ways of ensuring access are needed. The financing, delivery and governance of social services, including the so-called socialization policies, are contributing to inequities in access to social services and in health and education outcomes⁷⁰. Innovative social protection programs, such as cash transfer, could consider specific approaches towards the chronic poor and transient poor, based on an understanding of their characteristics, common causes and drivers, as well as the barriers, constraints and vulnerabilities faced by those groups (See Box 9).

Box 9: Cash transfer for development

Oxfam's experiment in providing unconditional cash transfers in non-emergency situations to a poor community in Central province Ha Tinh has proved to be a good way to support and empower poor people. In 2006, Oxfam directly disbursed one-off cash grants to 550 poor and near poor households in An Loc commune. The injection of VND6.5 million to 422 households (while near-poor families got about half of that amount) who have an average monthly per capita income of VND179,834 was significant. Impressive results include boosted productive assets (many invested in cows), improved community infrastructure, new opportunities for the youth and unemployed, increased community/social activities and increased female participation. Although there were tensions between those who received the grants and those who did not, overall, the money made significant impacts on people's lives according to the commune committee, helping to reduce the number of poor households by a third, from 65.1 per cent in 2006 to 40.2 per cent in 2008.

66 Pham et al, 2010

67 Nguyen, 2009, p. 32

68 World Bank, 2012a

69 Oxfam and Action Aid, 2011a

70 UNDP, 2011b



3.5. Raising voices and representation

Mechanisms for consultation, monitoring and redress

‘People know, people discuss, people do, people monitor.’ (Grassroots Democracy Decree)

As Viet Nam becomes a middle income country, access to and control over natural resources grows ever more valuable and contested, meaning risks and opportunities increase. It is now more vital than ever that all opportunities, resources, risks, costs and

benefits are shared in an equitable manner. When concentration of power and influence shift, barriers can become more entrenched and in the scramble, people living in poverty are all too often exploited or marginalized by the large and increasing power imbalances. Corruption can counteract the benefits of growth. Therefore the empowerment of poor and marginalized communities plays a vital role in ensuring that those in power are held to account.

Because the emergence of new, powerful and wealthy groups in Viet Nam has been so fast and often closely linked with state-owned actors and driven by state-led development strategies, the risk of rent-seeking and collusion is more significant. Viet Nam ranks 112 out of 178 countries in Transparency International’s 2011 Corruption perception index, with a 2.9 index on a scale ranging from 0 to 10⁷¹. There is a broad consensus that corruption is endemic and systemic in Viet Nam⁷². A Grassroots Democracy Decree was issued in 1998 which aims to provide the mechanisms for public consultation, monitoring and if needed re-dress, and has sound principles and vision. But its implementation has been mixed⁷³.

71 Transparency International, 2012

72 UNDP, 2009

73 UNDP, 2006

Community-based initiatives and organization

Community-based initiatives and organizations play a critical role in empowering those who live in poverty or face problems trying to make their voices heard both within their community and with the local authorities. Through local-level groups with shared interests, people's capacity can be increased and collaboration between the local government and the villagers can be improved.

When given the opportunity and resources, communities and people take charge of the implementation of development priorities. Through community-based organizations, people can engage in the government planning process such as socio-economic development plan (SEDP) by formulating their needs and aspirations. Guided by the Grassroots Democracy Decree, communities can assume a stronger role in monitoring public investments (See Box 10).

Box 10: Community Development Funds

The Community Development Fund (CDF), a block grant, aims to help communes to implement small development projects, such as infrastructure, capacity building, and livelihood initiatives based on their needs and management. In Quang Tri villagers and their representatives participate in a revised SEDP planning process based on the local investment priorities. The aim is to better identify the needs and aspirations of people, in order to improve the prioritization of government investments. Through this approach, participation, the sense of ownership and, in turn, the quality of plans and implementation has improved.

The CDF acts also as a catalyst to secure additional resources, such as community members and national poverty reduction programs. While the size of CDF is modest, it does contribute to people's empowerment as well as enhanced government accountability.

Significant public resources have gone into developing infrastructure in the poorest areas. Sadly, water-supply or irrigation systems often break down after one or two years only, in part because of lack of maintenance support. Local participation is much needed, both to ensure that the support is in line with community priorities and to ensure the quality. Oxfam has been supporting communities throughout the country to form community-based groups such as Village Development Boards, Community Supervision Management Boards and Community Investment Monitoring Boards to help with the process.

Examples include the Participatory Irrigation Management of 22 water supply and irrigation projects in Ky Son and Tuong Duong districts in Nghe An province. These projects were funded through Program 135⁷⁴. Oxfam provided support in community consultation, planning implementation and monitoring. This was organized through a Community Supervision Management Board.

Through this approach, the community voice has been strengthened and enhanced. The Community Supervision Management Board held the duty bearers to account at all stages of planning and implementation, while it increased the understanding of local authorities of participatory infrastructure management approaches (See Box 11).

Box 11: Voice up

Pinăng Thi He and her husband, from Phuoc Tan commune, received support from their Community Investment Monitoring Group when building their house. This is one of four groups set up in Bac Ai district of Ninh Thuan province, under the support of Oxfam, to monitor government supported housing and small infrastructure programs. She and her husband were given a printout of the house design and explanations about how their house would be built, how much material was needed and a materials monitoring form to keep track of it. They were encouraged by the Monitoring Group to help the builders as well as to check their work. 'We knew that our house needed 38 bags of cement but when they only brought 34, we told them to bring the missing bags,' says Pinăng Thi He.



⁷⁴ The 'Socio-Economic Development Program for extreme difficulties communes and villages in the remote and mountainous areas throughout Viet Nam'. The name Program 135 popularly was called after the Decision No. 135/1998/QĐ-TTg of the Prime Minister to approve this above program

There has to be an enabling environment to increase people's ability to make their voices heard. New mechanisms and spaces must be created for such a dialogue. The role of people's associations and organizations should gain recognition and strength in order to effectively monitor the implementation of government policy, and government planning processes, such as SEDP or poverty reduction programs. While individual pilots and projects have shown the benefit of such partnerships, they remain rather isolated.





4

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



Viet Nam has been a success story with two decades of remarkable poverty alleviation and socio-economic development. But the fight against poverty is not won. With eight million people going to bed hungry, one in five people living in poverty and a very sizeable cohort of near-poor households, life remains difficult for too many people. Many people still have their choices constrained, capabilities frustrated and aspirations reduced. While progress has been made, the potential of women remains underutilized and still too often unrecognized, while other groups are excluded from the wealth creation. Moreover, in recent years, resources have been shared less equally than before. As Viet Nam becomes a middle-income country, the drivers of exclusion and inequality have gained strength, while poverty reduction strategies are losing their impact.

To overcome enduring and emerging forms of poverty and injustice, a broader understanding of poverty is needed. Poverty is multi-dimensional and the causes and drivers of poverty are diverse and complex. Chronic, vulnerable, temporary and near-poor groups all need different kinds of support. Targeting is critical to make public policies and investments effective. Exclusion from the opportunities of wealth creation together with a lack of voice to make better choices and claim rights, are important contributing factors. To achieve sustainable development and well-being for all, the aspirations and needs of diverse communities, such as the different ethnic minorities, need to be better understood and appreciated.

People require expanded choices to make their way out of poverty. For rural households and communities, crop and livelihood diversification, access to quality and affordable agricultural services, education and vocational training, labor mobility and migration are critical pathways out of poverty. Society and government need to make new and informed choices in which the people's voices are heard so that a development strategy is designed based on sustainability, equity and inclusive growth. Ultimately, expanding people's choices and strengthening the voice of vulnerable and marginalized people must be a central component of public policy. This requires important transformations, not least in the relationship and accountability between people and state.

Small-scale farmers and the rural economy will remain critical to Viet Nam's development process, while recognizing that the consolidation of landholdings and shifts towards other economic sectors is an inevitable part of agricultural modernization. Realities and communities in low, upland and remote areas differ and therefore require different approaches. This process will not be easy, but Viet Nam can tap into ample economic potential in its agricultural sector during its transformation. Structural change creates both winners and losers; and this should be taken into account in public policy to ensure that poor and vulnerable people, especially small-scale farmers, can take advantage of opportunities. Farmers should continue to play a role in pursuing inclusive growth.

Viet Nam needs to look beyond a narrow notion of economic growth. It needs to strive to utilize its stock of human, social and natural assets, including its diverse communities, to its full potential.

Viet Nam's people are the wealth of the nation. New mechanisms and spaces need to develop in support of people's initiatives. The past two decades have shown that the people's drive for well-being is a powerful and creative engine for poverty reduction and sustainable development. People's initiatives will generate further advances if given a more encouraging and enabling environment.

Any growth must benefit both men and women farmers equally. Women in Viet Nam are among the most economically active in world, while also assuming their multiple roles in their families and communities. Securing their access to land, credit, inputs and markets, as well as decent employment and services, would have a strong and immediate effect on productivity, poverty reduction and development.

To grow a better future, Oxfam proposes five big shifts for policy makers in Viet Nam:

1. End hunger and malnutrition, and confront the causes of food insecurity with renewed urgency and vigor:

This will require changes to the food security strategy and delivery of social assistance programs. Innovations in social protection, such as direct cash transfers, should be introduced and scaled up, with a particular focus on food insecure households and ethnic minority communities.

2. End all forms of exclusion: The ability for a people and nation to reflect and question itself about the various forms and causes of exclusion is one of the biggest challenges in creating a prosperous and just society. It is through this that ultimately the fight against poverty and injustices is won. Viet Nam should in particular consider the various forms of exclusion of ethnic minorities, women and migrant workers. This requires confronting all forms of discrimination and stigma, and giving voice to the voiceless. Changes in policies and societal attitudes will be required.

3. Increase public and private investment in small-scale farmers: This will increase the productivity, resilience, and sustainability of small-scale farmers and will require radical shifts away from the intensive high-input production models currently promoted. At least 10 per cent of public expenditure should go to agriculture, with small-scale farmers at the heart of the growth strategy. Ensure that agribusiness sectors adopt responsible investment policies and practices. Introduce adaptation strategies and agricultural development policies and frameworks that promote sustainable, resilient and inclusive agriculture. In particular, invest in improved and more effective early

warning systems, disaster risk reduction and climate adaptation.

4. Guarantee land rights: Land is an increasingly scarce and contested asset. Given its importance for poor people in terms of securing and improving livelihoods, making optimal use of land is critical for poverty reduction, development and social justice. Farmers need to have more stable property rights, with better protection and more voice in cases of land-use changes. Communities need to have a bigger role in land planning processes. Access to information and independent support is needed for poor farmers in considering land-use changes. The government needs to stop irresponsible and unjust land-use changes and guarantee fair processes for all.

5. Support people's initiatives, collaborative groups and voices: Mechanisms and space need to be promoted so that more groups emerge in which people can articulate their aspirations and claim their social and economic rights. Encourage cooperation between government, private sector and other actors within the society. In particular, the space for poor and vulnerable individuals and groups with common interests needs to be opened. Civil society can make large contributions in supporting policy making and monitoring implementation.

Growing a better future will take all the energy, ingenuity and political will from many actors in the society. But it is a future within reach.

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Front cover: Villagers in Cham village in Binh Thuan province organize cooking ceremony where prepare food and talk about their onw legends. This is part of Oxfam's photo contest "A Vietnamese Meal" in 2011. Nguyen Tan Phat/Oxfam.

p4 the joy at bountiful rice harvest. Chau Doan/Oxfam.

p6 rice is one of the most strategic agricultural products for Viet Nam. Le Nguyet Minh/Oxfam.

p8 new home of Hoa and Nghia. Truong Xuan Ltd./Oxfam.

p10 Oxfam's project community-based coastal resources management in Tra Vinh help the local communities to improve income through aquaculture. Chau Doan/Oxfam

p12-13 tending baby fish – one of activities in the coastal biodiversity conservation area in Hai Thu hamlet, Tra Vinh, a project funded by Oxfam..

p14-15 SRI (System of Rice Intensification) helps farmers to save costs and increase profits. The rice plants become healthier and more resilient to pests and extreme weathers. Plant Protection Department/Oxfam.

p16 seafood market. Tineke D'haeese/Oxfam.

p18 the lunch at the kindergarden Sa Sa Ho. This is part of Oxfam's photo contest "A Vietnamese Meal" in 2011. Nguyen Bien Thuy/Oxfam.

p20 a joy at a bountiful harvest. Tineke D'haeese/Oxfam

p22-23 a meal in the flood season. This is part of Oxfam's photo contest "A Vietnamese Meal" in 2011. Phan Van Hien/Oxfam.

p24-25 communities in Oxfam's project participate in post-disaster recovery activities. Tim van der Veer/Oxfam.

p26 seafood market. Tineke D'haeese/Oxfam.

p28 many beneficiaries from Oxfam's project on biodiversity conservation in Tra Vinh province. Chau Doan/Oxfam.

p30 raising earthworm helps farmers to improve incomes in Oxfam's project. Dang Bao Nguyet/Oxfam.

p31 woman farmers are (in) visible forces in the agriculture modernization agenda. Chau Doan/Oxfam.

p32 The harvest of minimum tillage potatoes. Plant Protection Department/Oxfam.

p35a Mrs Huong. Dang Bao Nguyet/Oxfam.

p35a Mr Thach. Chau Doan/Oxfam.

p36 Oxfam project in community-based disaster risk reduction management. Tim van der Veer/Oxfam.

p37 Ms.Thuy, 22, a Raglai ethnic women who takes part in Oxfam's Promoting Women Economic Leadership project. Oxfam.

p39 raising voices of communities is one of the leading priorities for Oxfam in Vietnam. Oxfam.

p40 Ms. Pinang Thi He. Oxfam.

p41 communities in Lao Cai, Oxfam's project site, together prepare for the next crop season. Tim van der Veer/Oxfam.

p42 Grow a better future. Oxfam.

p44 the minimum tillage potatoes initiative in Oxfam's project. Viet Hung Community Development Center/Oxfam.

Back cover: System of Rice Intensification: contributes to improvement of food security, adaptability of farmers to climate change and environmental sustainability. Chau Doan/Oxfam.



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