

RESEARCH

Civilizing Deficient Subjects: The New Rural Development Program and Trajectories of Rural Life in Late Socialist Vietnam

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Abstract

Since 2010, the Vietnamese government has administered the New Rural Development Program to improve the quality of rural people's lives. The program includes a set of 19 criteria for diagnosing problems, devising interventions and measuring changes. Villages must meet these criteria to be recognized as new rural communities. The criteria become not only a tool for authorities to govern rural people's lives, but also a source of reference and meaning for rural people to change their conduct and navigate their futures. In the process of rectifying their perceived deficiencies and constructing new identities, rural people may complain about the excessive demands of the criteria, but still they look for ways to be recognized by the program rather than challenge its core ideas.

Keywords: new rural development, socialist modernity, rural transformation, Vietnam

Acknowledgements

This paper has benefited from constructive comments of Minh Nguyen, Mao Jingyu, Phill Wilcox, Jonathan Rigg and two anonymous reviewers of the *Journal of Political Sociology*. Thanks also go to participants of the panel "Rural Futures in Late Socialist Asia: The Countryside in a Globalising World" at the German Sociology Congress in Bielefeld in September 2022, and the public lecture at Department of Social Anthropology and Cultural Studies, Zurich University, October 2022. The ethnographic fieldwork and writing of the paper were supported by the projects "Giải pháp nâng cao hiệu quả hoạt động văn hóa trong xây dựng nông thôn mới giai đoạn 2021-2025"

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(Funded by the Ministry of Agricultural and Rural Development) and “Cultural restructuring among ethnic minorities of the Northwestern region under implementation of the National Target Program for New Rural Development” (funded by the NAFOSTED, grant no. 602.08-2023.02). I thank our field research team Nguyễn Thị Phương Châu, Đỗ Thị Thu Hà, Phạm Đăng Xuân Hương, Nguyễn Giáo, Nguyễn Thanh Tùng and Trần Hoài for their intellectual exchanges and encouragement.

Introduction

During a field research trip in late fall 2021, Thương,² an ethnic Nùng woman who serves as a local Women’s Union officer in Lạng Sơn Province, told me: “I won’t dare to work as the commune Women’s Union officer next term anymore, because I can’t even get my house done – it’s embarrassing. I’m the Women’s Union officer, my job is to propagate the program and urge people to implement the New Rural program, but if even my own house can’t be done then no one will listen to me.” Anyone present would be surprised to hear these words, as, in reality, it was not that Thương and her husband did not have a house: they lived together with the husband’s mother in a house of decent size. The house in which we sat was a traditional Nùng rammed-earth house (*nhà trính tường*). Although built a long time ago, it was still solid and beautiful. According to local people, these houses’ thick rammed-earth walls ensure that they are “warm in winter and cool in summer”, making them especially suitable to the climate of Vietnam’s northern mountainous region. However, because their main materials are wood and soil, they do not meet the standard of Vietnam’s “National Target Program on New Rural Development” (NRD) that requires houses to be “strong and modern”, following the program’s “three hard” [*ba cứng*] criterion – “hard floor, hard frame, hard roof”. Families that have yet to replace their traditional houses with new “three hard” houses are considered unable to fulfill the NRD’s housing classification and assessment requirements. In addition, the house where Thương’s family lived did not meet the program’s standards for toilet, kitchen and area per person.

Housing – Thương’s aching concern over the past few years – is only one among the NRD’s 19 national criteria and 49 targets. Commenced in 2010, the program has attracted substantial participation from all levels of government, as well as contribution of resources, both material and human, from people throughout the country. In line with observations made of comparable programs in other parts of Asia (Pigg

2 In this paper, I follow the common ethnographic practice of using pseudonyms for all persons and places in order to protect the anonymity of informants.

1992; Li 1999, 2014; Wilcox et al. 2021; Mao et al. 2024), the underlying rationale of Vietnam's NRD is that rural areas are peripheral and marginal regions, lacking in key conditions needed for modernization and development. In essence, even though rural areas have experienced dramatic changes, their identity has been and continues to be represented and imagined as "old", "backward", "poor" and "irrational" – effectively locked into the timeless tyranny of tradition. The goal of the program – its "will to improve" a deficient rural population³ – is expansive, involving a comprehensive transformation of rural areas, including infrastructure, natural environment, economic, social and cultural life, and, most importantly, people's way of thinking, in order to improve the well-being of the rural population overall.

The imposition of external development models on "underdeveloped" people is not uncommon among development policies and programs around the world (see, for example, Kampe 1997; Escobar 1995; Duncan 2004). The universalizing practice of applying a "central" civilization's supposedly more "advanced model" of development to "peripheral" societies has also been very common in both Western and Eastern societies in pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial contexts (Harrell 1995; Li 1999). In Vietnam, even before the 1986 economic reforms (*Đổi Mới*), the government had already implemented several programs aimed at civilizing rural people in both lowlands and uplands (Hoàng Cầm and Phạm Quỳnh Phương 2015; Hoàng Cầm et al. 2018). This vision of development, of which the NRD that this article discusses is a clear manifestation, continues to be implemented today. In addition to its similarities to other development programs, the NRD's new and important features, in terms of rural socio-cultural transformation, include its synchronicity and expansion, the essentiality of fixed standardized criteria in its execution and assessment, and the multiplicity of social actors involved in its implementation. In comparison with previous rural development programs in Vietnam, the NRD is considered a most important political mission, and its highly autocratic implementation is integrated into the resolutions of the Communist Party's congress at all levels, from national to local. Local governments and communities have no choice but to implement and complete the program according to the plans mapped out at the highest levels.

3 According to Foucault (cited in Li 2014:6), the will to improve is concerned with "men in their relations, their links, their imbrication with . . . wealth, resources, means of subsistence, the territory with all its specific qualities, climate, irrigation, fertility, etc.; men in their relation to . . . customs, habits, ways of acting and thinking, etc.; and lastly, men in their relation to . . . accidents and misfortunes such as famine, epidemics, death, etc."

This paper, based mainly on ethnographic data,⁴ examines the NRD's underlying ideology, implementation and impacts on rural people. I argue that the NRD, like other improvement schemes, is driven and shaped by the kind of objective that Li (2014) terms the "will to improve". In 2010, officials from diverse ministries and their trustees – their responsibility and their qualification to fulfil it "defined by the claim to know how others should live, to know what is best for them, to know what they need" (Li 2014:4) – worked together to establish a concrete set of 19 national criteria and associated targets to be used to diagnose rural problems, devise external interventions and measure outcomes, with the ultimate goal being to improve the quality of life for rural people. The 19 national criteria cover not only economic conditions, infrastructure, landscape, housing, hygiene and environment, but also socio-cultural life, grassroots democracy and, perhaps most importantly, local modes of thinking. Rural people and communities throughout the country, whether ethnic minorities in the highlands or majority *Kinh* in the lowlands, must strive to meet these 19 national criteria and associated targets in order to be recognized as "New Rural" communities. The national criteria and targets have become not only a new tool for state authorities to govern rural people's life, but also a new source of reference and meaning for rural people to draw on in changing their conduct and navigating their futures. Seeking to make up for their perceived deficiencies and reconstruct their identities in order to be recognized as "new", rural communities have abandoned many of their traditional cultural and livelihood practices and other old ways of life. The inducement from the NRD to strive for a "new" life has presented a number of rural populations, especially those whose cultural practices and economic circumstances deviate from the program's criteria, with difficulties and challenges. Yet, while many communities – especially upland ethnic minority communities who are disadvantaged economically in comparison with lowlanders and follow different socio-cultural practices – may complain about the NRD's criteria being too demanding and difficult to achieve, still they seek ways to be recognized under the program rather than challenge its top-down ideas of modernization, civility and beauty.

4 The findings presented in this paper derive from ethnographic data, especially ethnographic interviews conducted in the five provinces of Sơn La, Lạng Sơn, Nam Định, Nghệ An and Quảng Bình in 2021-2022. In-depth interviews conducted in Lạng Sơn and Sơn La were mainly with local ethnic minorities, including Thái, Mường, Hmông, Tày and Nùng, while most of the interviews conducted in Nam Định, Nghệ An and Quảng Bình were with members of *Kinh* majority communities. Conducting research in provinces and among ethnic groups with different socio-cultural and economic conditions has allowed us to gain ethnographic understandings of different experiences and impacts of NRD on different social groups.

The New Rural Development Program and its Ideology

Vietnam is an agricultural, predominantly rural country. Before the economic reforms of 1986, nearly 90 percent of the population lived in rural areas. Today, although drastic changes in demographic composition due to urbanization and migration processes have been taking place, the rural population still accounts for a considerable proportion of the country's total population. According to the 2020 national census, there are nearly 17 million rural households, comprising about 67 million persons, almost 70% of the national population. Administratively, the rural areas are currently divided into over 8,000 communes, with about 66,000 villages. The majority of rural people are subsistence farmers. Historically, during the period of High Socialism (1960s-1980s), the rural areas were subjected to radical intervention, with the central government implementing development programs as part of its socialist state-building project. In pursuit of the goal of building a "new culture and new socialist man", livelihood activities and socio-cultural life were rearranged and reorganized. While livelihood activities were reorganized under collectives, traditional cultural practices, including funerals, weddings, spiritual rituals and ritual spaces, came to be considered vestiges of feudalism and were therefore banned (Malarney 1996). Even after 1986, when for purposes of national reorientation and security after the collapse of long-standing socialist alliances, terrible poverty and events of mass resistance (Kerkvliet 1995, 2005), Vietnam hesitantly began to engage with the liberal capitalist world order, the popular view of the country's rural areas did not significantly change. Ironically, as in China where rural areas have experienced massive transformation in all respects (Nguyen et al. 2024), in Vietnam even after the 1986 economic reforms (Kleinen 1999; Nguyễn Văn Sửu 2018; Wilcox et al. 2021), hegemonic discourses on development still continue to portray rural areas, in both lowland and upland regions, as backward, underdeveloped and in need of radical modernization in all respects in order to improve the people's lives. After almost two decades of government modernization policies and despite ongoing transformations, the rural areas and their populations, both lowland and upland, are still considered to be lacking in basic factors essential for development and modernization.

From this perspective, Resolution No. 26-NQ/TW on August 5, 2008 on "Agriculture, farmers, and rural areas" took as its goal the modernization of rural areas in all respects in order to secure the well-being of the population at large.⁵ The implementation of NRP is intended to concretize the spirit of this Resolution. Immediately

5 The Resolution was issued by the Seventh Congress of the Communist Party Central Committee (term X) in 2008.

after the Seventh National Congress at the end of 2008, 11 communes representing different regions of the country were selected to be the pilot subjects of the program. After almost two years of implementation of the pilot program, in June 2010, the Prime Minister issued Decision No. 800/QĐ-TTg to officially kick off the NRP on a national scale. Up to the present, the program has completed two phases (Phase I: 2010-2015 and Phase II: 2016-2020) and started to implement Phase 3 (2021-2025). Officially specified as the most important national target program in the field of rural development, the NRD is structured and managed by committees at all levels, from central government to local villages. At the program's highest level is the Central Steering Committee, whose leader is a Deputy Prime Minister. Counselling and assisting this committee is the Central Coordinating Office, located in the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, the presiding institution of the program. Beneath the central level are steering committees at province, district and commune levels, and, finally, the "village development committee" [*Ban phát triển thôn – bản*]. Leaders of the steering committees of the programs at all levels, from province to village, are heads of the local Party chapters, or the Party committee secretaries. The all-encompassing scale of the program means that its steering committees include officials and experts in all relevant institutions and fields, including cultural, economic, public health, environmental, land, agricultural, and press and communication.

The core of the program, also the most manifest expression of its development ideology, is the set of 19 criteria and 49 national targets, which were issued by the Prime Minister in Decision No. 491/QĐ-TTg in April 2009. In terms of quantity, during the implementation period from 2010 until now, the program's Central Steering Committee has made an adjustment to the original targets set in 2009, but up to now, when Phase III is beginning, the number of criteria has essentially remained the same. In terms of content, these 19 criteria are divided into 4 groups of domain, covering every aspect of rural residents' lives.⁶ Besides the criteria set for meeting the program's standards, in February 2018, the government issued the "Advanced new rural village" [*Nông thôn mới bậc cao*] criteria set, and four months later, the

6 These are: Group I) Planning: 1 criterion (1- Planning); Group II) Socio-economic infrastructure: 8 criteria (2- Transportation and traffic; 3- Irrigation and natural disaster prevention; 4- Electricity; 5- Schools; 6- Cultural facilities; 7- Rural commercial infrastructure; 8- Information and communication; 9- Residential housing); Group III) Economy and production organization: 4 criteria (10- Income; 11- Multi-layered poverty; 12- Labor; 13- Production organization and rural economy development); and Group IV) Culture - Society - Environment: 6 criteria (14- Education and training; 15- Public health; 16- Culture; 17- Environment and food safety; 18- Political system and legal access; 19- National defense and security) (Official dispatch no. 1345/BNN-VPDP on February 8, 2018).

“Model new rural village” criteria set [*Nông thôn mới kiểu mẫu*]⁷ in order to actualize the viewpoint of the Prime Minister on the rural modernization process as “having a starting point but no ending point”.⁸

As an essential part of a “will to improve” project implemented in a country where evolutionary and universalist notions of progress and modernity dominate (Evans 1985), the NRD’s criteria are aimed at replacing or complementing “inadequate” economic, cultural, social and environmental practices, as well as current infrastructure and facilities, with new factors that are considered more “modern” and “progressive”. For example, according to the criterion of residential housing, which belongs to Group II (Socio-economic infrastructure), a house that meets NRD standards, as mentioned at the beginning of the article, not only has to fulfil the “three hard” criterion and ensure the minimum area of 14 square meters per person, but also has to have a standard kitchen and a toilet. What is considered “hard”, according to the program’s definition, are “modern” materials, such as concrete, brick and cement. Traditional materials, such as wood and clay, from which Thương’s house was made, are excluded from the category of “hard” materials and thus fail to meet the standards. Similarly, a standard-meeting toilet must have the two-compartment septic tank design. Standard-meeting kitchens, though not having to follow regulations as rigid as those for toilets, must also be in a separate space and must be “order and clean”. A commune, to fulfil the criteria, must have no “dilapidated, makeshift houses” and must have at least 75% of households meeting the “three hard” criteria of the Ministry of Construction. Similarly, in the case of criterion No. 6 (Cultural facilities), traditional village cultural institutions, such as village communal houses, temples, shrines and family worshipping houses, are not considered standard-meeting cultural facilities. Therefore, to meet criterion No. 6, each village must build an additional “cultural complex”, including a “cultural house” of prescribed area, equipped with and bookshelves, loudspeakers, radio, microphones, banners and sports field. At higher administrative levels, each commune must also have all these cultural facilities, only in greater scale. Along with this addition of cultural facilities, villagers’ cultural customs must also change in the direction of socialist modernity, as regulated by criterion No. 16 (Culture). Based on the content of previous cultural

7 Decision no. 691/QĐ-TTg on June 5, 2018. The prerequisite for Advanced New Rural status is prior recognition as standard New Rural, and that for Model New Rural status is prior recognition as Advanced New Rural.

8 This is the statement of former Prime Minister Nguyễn Xuân Phúc at the ceremony to commend advanced examples in the emulation movement “The whole country joins hands to build new rural areas” in Nam Định in 2019: <https://baochinhphu.vn/thu-tuong-xay-dung-nong-thon-moi-chi-co-diem-dau-khong-co-diem-ket-thuc-102262867.htm>.

“civilizing” programs of the government and relevant ministries,⁹ in order to have a standard cultural life, villages must be “cultural villages” for more than five years.¹⁰ Interestingly, to be recognized as a “cultural village”, they must follow a number of supplementary criteria, such as: not holding funerals later than 24 hours after the deceased’s death; not scattering votive papers at funerals; not playing funeral music before 6am and after 10pm; burying the deceased in centrally planned cemeteries; not having domestic violence, theft or robbery, or other social vices in the community; not having too many feast tables at weddings; limiting 3-day, 7-day, 49-day, 100-day, first death anniversary and exhumation rituals to only one day and within the family; and so on. Village communities must also fulfil other supplementary criteria that are rather formalistic, such as: everyone must participate in public movements like “Day for the poor”¹¹; those who are of working age must have a stable job; communities must achieve a certain level of clean water access; there must be no litter on village roads; “backwards and superstitious customs” must no longer exist; and so on. Other criteria, such as “Transportation and traffic” (No. 1), “Rural commercial infrastructure” (No. 7), “Production organization and rural economy development” (No. 13) and “Environment and food safety” (No. 17), are all directed towards replacing or transforming traditional customs with practices oriented towards universalist progress. For example, criterion No. 1 dictates that “100% of commune roads must be constructed with asphalt or concrete and over 80% of village roads must be ‘hardened’ for convenient car traffic throughout the year” and “the majority of village roads must be clean and able to ensure convenient traffic”. Similarly, criterion No. 7 stipulates that “the commune have rural markets or trading spaces”, and criterion No. 17 prescribes that “burial and cremation follow regulations and standards” and that communities “build green-clean-beautiful and safe landscape, not letting residential sewage gather”.

The numbers of the “Advanced New Rural” (reserved for communities already recognized as “New Rural”) and “Model New Rural” (reserved for communities recognized as Advanced New Rural) criteria sets remain at 19. However, in the content of these

9 See more in Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (2019) “Inspection and evaluation of the national New Rural criteria set in 2016-2020 period,” “Tentative direction for building the national New Rural criteria set in the period after 2020”.

10 “Cultural village” [*làng văn hoá*], together with “cultural family” [*gia đình văn hoá*], is a category and merit title introduced by the Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism. In order to be recognized as a “cultural village”, a community has to meet a number of designated criteria and targets, as briefly mentioned in the text.

11 A national movement, launched by the Central Committee of the Fatherland Front since 2000, taking October 17 as “day for the poor”. On this day, the Front mobilizes all people throughout the country to contribute money to help the poor, in both “material and spiritual aspects”.

two criteria sets, besides the higher targets of the original criteria (average income per capita is equal to 46 million đồng per year versus 36 million đồng [USD 1,500] per year, the ratio of greened land per capita is 4% versus 2%, the ratio of cremation within the community is 10% versus 5%, and so on), new “hard” and “soft” content is also added to bring the communities to a higher level of modernity and beautification. For example, criterion No. 6 requires communities to “install facilities for sports and physical exercises in public spaces and organize culture, performance and sports events regularly”. Similarly, with the criteria for model new rural villages, criterion No. 17 also instructs that “main roads have uniform shade trees, flowers and decorative plants for public landscapes”, besides the requirement of greened area. Even more interestingly, one of the compulsory criteria for the recognition as “model new rural” is that each province has “at least one smart rural model”, which means that there must be at least one community where people are able to use digital platforms in their lives, such as for communication, information access or production. For these two criteria sets, many provinces proposed their own initiatives based on the national criteria, with the purpose of making their rural areas more “clean, beautiful, and tidy”, such as: every house must have a gate; flowers must be planted around houses and villages; each house must have a garden and plants, either fruit trees or flowers, in the garden must be arranged in orderly plots; and so on.

Thus, the content of the program’s criteria set clearly expresses a development vision based on the “high modernist” ideology (Scott 1998), which aims at a total social, cultural and economic transformation of rural areas. As Harms (2011, 2012), shows for Vietnamese urban contexts a new rural condition can be achieved only by (to some extent) demolishing “old” elements and replacing them with “new” ones displaying characteristics of socialist modernity and beauty. Created by trustees whose positions are separate from “the people whose capacities need to be enhanced, or behaviors corrected” (Li 2014:6), the detailed content of the NRD and its accompanying criteria is the foundation on which local authorities specify targets and plan their realization. It is also used as a national standardized tool to examine and assess whether communes and districts can be recognized as meeting NRD standards.

The New Rural Development Program in Practice

According to the 2010-2020 NRP reporting conference held by the program’s Central Coordinating Committee in Nam Định province, by October 2019, after nine years of implementation, 4,665 communes had been recognized as meeting the New Rural standards – a 35.3% increase from late 2015 (when the Phase I report was released)

– and the ten-year (2010-2020) target assigned by the Party, the National Assembly and the government had been surpassed by 2.4%. Among the areas that surpassed the five-year (2016-2020) target assigned by the Prime Minister are the Red River Delta (by 84.86%) and the Northern Mountains (by 28.6%). Out of 63 provinces and municipal cities, 36 completed and exceeded the targets assigned by the Prime Minister; and eight provinces and municipal cities had 100% of their communes recognized as meeting New Rural standards. In addition, by the end of 2021, nationwide, 764 communes had been recognized as “Advanced New Rural” and hundreds of communes had achieved “Model New Rural” status. During its nine years of implementation, apart from human resources the program has mobilized substantial material resources, amounting to 2,418,471 billion *đồng* (roughly USD 95 billion). A considerable proportion of this sum has come in the form of donations from people and private enterprises. In addition, within ten years, 45 million square meters of land has been voluntarily donated by the people to the program.¹²

These impressive numbers officially reported by the Central Coordinating Committee – especially as regards recognized communes and mobilized resources from the people – give rise to the question, how are the program's criteria and their associated targets put into practice in the localities? The implementation of any civilizing or development program, according to Li (2014; see also Scott 1998), requires distinctive means and methods. Apart from coercive measures and tools, they also utilize the means and methods of governmentality, in Foucault's use of the term, where “educating desires and configuring habits, aspirations and beliefs” (cited in Li 2014:5) are utilized as effective means to bring rural people to change their living conditions, mode of thinking and conduct as calculated. However, whether coercive or persuasive, the means and methods used are all quite subtle, and are portrayed and generally interpreted as being in the name of the higher good for all individuals and the whole of society (Li 2014; Nguyen 2018). The New Rural program utilizes both of these approaches in its implementation.

Drawing on lessons learned from previous development programs,¹³ the Central Steering Committee pays particular attention to the propagation of the content and significance of the NRD in mobilizing local people and authorities. Therefore, right

12 Central Steering Committee of National Target Programs in the Period 2016-2020. “Report on 10 years of implementing the National Target Program on New Rural Development in the period 2010-2020.” National conference materials, Nam Định, 2019.

13 Prime Minister's decree on recognition of the “Cultural family” title; Circular from Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism in 2011 on “Practicing a civilized lifestyle in weddings and funerals”; Law on Domestic Violence Prevention in 2007.

after the Prime Minister signed Decision 1620/QĐ-TTg 20/9/2011, which launched the NRD nationally, propaganda work – in diverse forms, through a diverse range of media and with the participation of diverse ministries – was also started. At the national level, the most popular form of propaganda work involves cooperating with high-coverage communication agencies such as Vietnam National Television (VTV), National Assembly Television, People's Television and VTC to create new programs on New Rural topics, such as "Livable Countryside", "New Rural" (VTV1), "Rural Stories" (National Assembly Television) and "Reforming the Countryside" (People's Television). A series of New Rural press contests with impressive award ceremonies were held in order to maximize journalists' participation in the cause of propagating the content and significance of the program. Propaganda work at the local level, from provinces to districts, was even more diverse and lively, especially in Phase II (2016-2020). Following the Central Steering Committee's "National Target Program communication and propaganda project for 2016-2020" executive plan, all local communication agencies and media, from provinces to communes, were required to integrate the specialized "New Rural" program into their broadcasting schedule. In parallel with such top-down propaganda work, hundreds of New Rural communication products were produced and disseminated locally, including contests, cultural performances, TV gameshows and handbooks, varying in medium and form from locale to locale. Especially, and by no means less effectively, hundreds of thousands of propaganda banners and posters, with vivid and compelling images, forms and colors, were placed in all nooks and corners of the countryside, from uplands to lowlands, from central regions to the most remote villages of the country. Interestingly, regardless of communication form and medium, the main ideology and content of the program remain focused on a single message, which is that the NRD is the best model of development and can improve all aspects of rural people's lives, from material to spiritual. The images the propaganda panels and posters bear show what rural people will or should strive for. For example, the most common panel motif, with the slogan "New rural, new vitality, new appearance", is accompanied by images of villagers using modern agricultural tools (tractors and plowing machines) on a background of cultural houses, flower-fenced residential houses, clean roads and high-voltage electric poles – symbols of a modernized world.

In order to put the program into practice, collective movements were also launched and implemented in parallel with the propaganda campaigns. In addition to the overarching "The whole country join together in building the New Rural" movement launched by the Prime Minister in 2011, most of the ministries and agencies, through their subordinate offices (down to commune level), designed their own movements with specific content and target audiences. For instance, the movement organized by the Central Veterans' Union is called "Veterans contribute initiatives and labor to the

construction of the New Rural”, and that of Vietnam Women’s Union is called “5 have not’s, 3 cleans”.¹⁴ The movements launched by the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union are called “Youth join together in building the New Rural” and “4 companions of life-building youth”. Provincial governments, on their own initiative or following neighboring provinces, also launched hundreds of movements on different themes, such as: Bắc Giang Province’s “Clean from house to alley, clean from alley back to home”; Hoà Bình Province’s “Clean house, beautiful garden, unpolluted environment, civilized neighborhood”; Vĩnh Long and Nghệ An Provinces’ “Bright, green, clean, beauty”; Quảng Ngãi Province’s “4 have’s for communes” (have distinctive local products, model residential neighborhoods, flower-lined street and welcome gates) and “3 have’s for residential areas” (have green gardens, clean houses and nice alleys); Quảng Nam Province’s “Villages without garbage, replacing wild grass with flower paths”; and Hà Tĩnh Province’s “Donating golden land to village cause” and “Donating land – one loss for two gains”. In terms of content, the names of these movements show that they are aimed not only at transforming rural infrastructure and rural people’s conduct, but also at creating images of a future that rural people should or must aspire to. In terms of implementation, participation in these movements is voluntary, at least in theory. In practice, however, members of the various associations and communities are required to participate to fulfil their membership responsibilities. Those who fail to participate or do not participate actively can be reprimanded in meetings and considered “irresponsible citizens” by their associations or communities while active members receive certificates of praise.

In all of the locations where I conducted ethnographic fieldwork, along with propaganda extolling the NRD’s benefits and encouraging people to join voluntarily, rectification of deficiencies, especially those at the household level, is carried out in different forms under various initiatives and under the strict supervision of government officials – and this tends to be coercive. A common scenario is as follows. Once assigned to participate following a set timeline, commune authorities, in cooperation with village officials, will ascertain which conditions the community still lacks in comparison with the national criteria set. Based on this assessment, authorities at all levels will then mobilize local people to participate in the program’s implementation so that the lacking conditions are realized. In Phù Yên, a mountainous district in Sơn La Province, where the majority of the population consists of ethnic minorities, to meet the targets of environment and hygiene, especially the number of

14 The five have not’s are: no poverty, no legal violations or social vices, no domestic violence, no violations of the population policy, no malnourishment or dropping out of school; and the 3 cleans are: clean house, clean kitchen, clean alley.

households with standard toilets, the commune authorities sent specialized officers to the villages to monitor families who were falling behind in meeting this criterion and to supervise their execution, with each officer in charge of several households. If the households under an officer's supervision did not complete the targets, the officer might be reprimanded for failure to fulfil the mission in the annual evaluation session. In addition, according to a commune leader in this district, to pressure people, the authorities came up with an "initiative" modelled on the national government's COVID-19 zoning strategy.¹⁵ At the village cultural house, a village map with all of the village households' names and locations was displayed. On this map, households with no separate toilet were marked in purple, those with a toilet that did not meet the standards were marked in yellow, and those with a standard toilet were marked in green.

The purpose of this public display was, on the one hand, to remind the households who had not yet met the target of having a standard toilet and to shame them into completing it, and, on the other, to publicly praise those who had already done so that others would follow their example. Under another initiative proposed by the commune, kindergarten and middle school teachers would reproach students whose families have not met the standard in front of class so that the ashamed children would urge their parents to finish their toilet construction. This was considered an "effective initiative", according to one commune official, because, in his words, "all parents love their children and fear the teachers." In a district of Nghệ An Province, in order to meet criterion No. 16 on culture, specifically "Civilizing funeral and wedding practices", according to the program's regulations, before holding a ceremony, a family would have to submit a 3 million *đồng* (120 USD) deposit to the commune authorities. Any families who failed to follow the regulations – for example, by holding a long funeral, playing music outside the permitted time, throwing votive papers in the street during the funeral parade, holding a big feast after burial, or having too many feast tables at a wedding – would not be allowed to reclaim the deposit money. A chairman of a district Party secretary in Nam Định Province said, "Every weekend a few other officials and I drive the car around the area to supervise the implementation of the environmental requirement. If I see any litter, I will call the person in charge of that area [the head of the commune or the village] so they can come to check and fix the issue."

15 At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021, the government implemented the zoning initiative to separate areas of differing infection rates. Areas marked in purple were danger zones with high infection rates, those marked in yellow were relatively dangerous, and those marked in green were safe zones.

Thus, the NRD, like many other development initiatives in Vietnam, uses two mechanisms for its operation. In addition to mobilization through exemplarity and self-consciousness, it also utilizes means of control and discipline. The combination of these two mechanisms of governance has contributed to “the construction of a moral subject occupied with self-optimization and private responsibility and yet possessed of a heightened sense of duty to community and society” (Nguyen 2018:629). Thus, as I discuss further below, for the people of rural Vietnam, participation in the implementation of the program is not merely a matter of coercion. Many people, both villagers and local authorities, participate voluntarily and, to some extent, proudly, taking a positive attitude towards the fulfilment of the duties and responsibilities of good citizens in joining hands to build a new, modern, beautiful and civilized countryside.

Về đích [Reaching the Finish Line] and Trajectories of Rural Life

Let us return to Thương whom I mentioned at the beginning of the article. Apart from falling short of the “three hard” criterion, Thương’s family’s house also fails to meet the program’s standards for toilet, kitchen and minimum area per person. Thương said that her family were unable to build a “standard” new house because she and her husband were struggling to have children. In order to have their first child, who was four years old and played with the research team during our interview, they had to borrow more than 500 million đồng (USD 20,000) to travel to Hanoi for in vitro fertilization (IVF) several times. Despite the burden of their debt, however, they worked hard to be able to replace the “dilapidated makeshift house” they had long been living in with a new house that met the standards. In fact, in order to partially fulfil the standards, they had to spend more than 30 million đồng [USD 1,300] – just enough to build a toilet area and renovate the kitchen according to the program’s criteria. Explaining why her family was so determined to meet the criteria, Thương said: “We have to follow whatever they do, because if we don’t make an effort our commune won’t be able to reach the finish line of the New Rural.”

“Reaching the finish line” [về đích], or fulfilling the minimum criteria stipulated by the NRP for recognition as New Rural, is a common turn of phrase used by both villagers and officials at all levels when talking about individual and collective efforts in participating in NRD, whether with or without coercion. If participating in the program can be seen as a marathon with a fixed finish line and goals, rural people, like marathon runners, must do their best, whether voluntarily or under coercion, to complete this long race, involving both hardship and honor, together with all of the other runners. In order to finish this race, which not only brings participants the glory of honor

bestowed and New Rural certificate granted by their superiors but also allows them to become modern and civilized citizens, rural residents, including both villagers and officials, must do two things at once: renounce socio-cultural practices considered out of date or unfit for the new good life, and fulfil all the conditions they are lacking, from material to spiritual. For both individual families and communities, achieving the program's criteria and targets, thus, becomes "immediate desire for the material . . . or for more abstract: wellbeing, prestige, reputation and respectability" (Wilcox et al. 2021:14). The race towards the New Rural finish line over the past ten years has had notable impact on the appearance as well as the socio-cultural life of Vietnam's countryside, albeit on various scales in different locales and communities, as I discuss below.

The most remarkable and visible transformation is perhaps in terms of infrastructure. In my fieldwork trips in 2021-2022, what immediately struck me and my fellow researchers upon our arrival at many rural areas – whether upland or lowland, whether the local community was still trying to "reach the finish line" or had already "met the standards" [*đạt chuẩn*] – was the sight of wide asphalted roads lined with trees. Most of the village lanes had been expanded and straightened and adorned with colourful flowers on the sides. In the Northern Delta villages, beside ancient temples and village communal houses there stood cultural houses covering large areas and featuring sports grounds. Cultural houses, at both commune and village levels in many areas, including most of the highland areas, are all built according to a similar structural design and outfitted with similar interior decoration and equipment (amplifier, loudspeaker, radio, banner, desks and chairs, and so on). Similarly, drastic transformation was visible in the communities' agricultural production area, where most of the irrigation system and field paths were bolstered with concrete. Walking through recently built gates into houses qualified as Standard, Advanced and Model New Rural in communities I visited, I noticed that homeowners had arranged things in their houses – from kitchen to cattle shed – in a "tidier", more "orderly" manner. A woman in Nghệ An province, after inviting me and two colleagues to eat a plate of guava picked from her family's "model" garden [*vườn kiểu mẫu*], proudly invited us to visit the garden, which had been divided into beautiful neat plots. Each plot was covered with the same kind of fruit tree with signposts, even though the garden covered just over 200 square meters. This was a model garden designed according to the guidelines of the program's model countryside criteria. Similarly, in the definition of a commune chairman (on the "Livable Countryside" program broadcast on the People's Television), "A civilized village is the one that has streets with flowers and houses with designated number." Observing the changes that occurred in Nepal's rural areas under the impact of rural development programs, Pigg (1992) noted that these programs' discourses have transformed villages, with

all their existing diversity, into villages in capital both in reality and in the villagers' minds. Many of Vietnam's rural areas today, viewed from the outside, have taken on a similar form. The uniformization of infrastructure in accordance with national standards will possibly become even more common, when all rural areas reach the finish line of Standard, Advanced and Model New Rural in the near future.

More importantly, the efforts and aspiration to "reach the finish line" through the fulfilment of the NRD's criteria and targets have transformed not only rural Vietnam's infrastructure, but also the people's ways of thinking, living and daily socio-cultural practice. The foundation and guiding influence of these transformations is the idea of the NRD's criteria set and targets, as it acts as an authoritative and hegemonic toolkit, offering villagers and local officials specific and detailed instructions on which socio-cultural practices and modes of thinking must be changed and which must be added to achieve a better life or a "good life". For example, participating in daily physical exercise, even after a long day of work in the farm, at village cultural sports institutions built to fulfil criterion No. 6, according to many people in both mountainous and lowland areas, is considered essential for becoming a modern subject and having a healthy and beautiful life. Based on this toolkit, Nùng people in a commune of Lạng Sơn Province and local cultural management officers, having implemented and received the New Rural recognition, have actively organized cultural performances, including new *then* (Nùng folk ritual) and *đàn tính* (Nùng traditional lute) songs, while simultaneously encouraging villagers to abolish the superstitious aspects [*hoạt động mê tín, dị đoan*] of their traditional rituals. Thương's rammed-earth house – the traditional house style of her people – is no longer considered a "suitable" house style, despite having the rare advantage of being "warm in the winter, cool in the summer" and is quite sturdy, despite being built with materials not considered "hard". Meanwhile, the "good" house model that satisfies the "three hard" criterion and the toilet and kitchen standards, becomes the house style that Thương's family aspires to build, regardless of their financial hardships. Similarly, in some lowland areas, numerous eating customs that have become cultural characteristics of local communities, such as "takeout from a communal feast"¹⁶ in some areas of Nam Định, Thái Bình and Hà

16 "Takeout from a communal feast" (*ăn cỗ lấy phần*) is a long-standing custom in these regions: people who attend weddings and funerals only eat a small amount at the events, then the good food is shared among the guests to take home, with the host supposed to prepare containers (leaves or plastic bags) for the guests to carry the food in. During the implementation of the NRD in these regions, both villagers and authorities came to consider this an outdated custom that needed to be eradicated. Some locales even proposed forms of punishment if the hosts and guests did not abandon this fascinating feasting custom.

Nam, or “supplementary meal”¹⁷ in Nghệ An, are discouraged by local authorities or by villagers themselves in their efforts to abolish “backward customs” that are unsuitable for the New Rural life. Also in a district of Nghệ An Province, based on the semantics of the concept of “brightness” in the NRD program’s “bright, green, clean, beauty” movement, many households voluntarily and with their own money rebuilt or repainted their fences and gates with the colors white or yellow, so that their houses could be “brighter” and “more beautiful”, even though many repainted or demolished walls had been built with stones covered in moss and thus had a pleasant antique look. In many other mountainous areas in Sơn La and Lạng Sơn Provinces, many families even spent almost 100 million đồng (4,500 USD), most of it borrowed money, on building standard-meeting toilets and bathrooms, although in some places, such as in Xuất Lễ (Lạng Sơn Province), “having two-compartment toilets is great, but many families cannot use them, because in many areas there is not even enough water for people, let alone for toilets,” according to an ethnic Nùng village official.

On a different level, “reaching the finish line”, through people’s efforts to satisfy all the criteria’s targets, promotes and reinforces the program’s core ideals of the evolutionary understanding and imagination of development and modernity, a developmentalist philosophy that has dominated development models among rural residents, especially local officials, in Vietnam during both high socialist and late-socialist eras.¹⁸ This vision has led those who directly guided the implementation of the NRD to devalue their “old”, “outdated”, “hillbilly” (*nhà quê*) ways of life accordingly, while admiring new things and promoting changes envisioned by the program. Thus, several of the commune officials I met during fieldwork confirmed that after fulfilling the requirements, the people in the locales they were responsible for were no longer “starved for culture” [*không còn đói văn hóa*], or experienced cultural deficiency resulting from a lack of standard-meeting cultural facilities (cultural house, sports complex) and complementary cultural performances and activities, as specified in criterion No. 16. Similarly, certain terms in criterion No. 17 regarding environment, especially toilets and bathrooms in urban areas, are used as a basis for assessing

17 “Supplementary meal” (*bữa phụ*) is the meal right before or after the main feast in weddings or funerals. In a wedding, in the evening before the main ceremony, the host family organizes a meal to welcome guests from afar and to thank those who help the family prepare food for the main feast (butchering pigs, picking vegetables, etc.). The supplementary meal of a funeral is the meal that the host family prepares to express their gratitude to neighbors who have come to help their family prepare the funeral for the deceased.

18 For more about the evolutionary thinking and understanding of development in Vietnam, see Hoàng Cầm and Phạm Quỳnh Phương (2015), Hoàng Cầm et al. (2018); Evans (1985) and Jamieson et al. (1998).

whether a community's lifestyle is "civilized" or not. An ethnic Nùng commune official in Lạng Sơn confirmed: "Before the New Rural, most people here were very backwards, because almost none of the households had a decent toilet and bathroom." The struggle of Ngọc, an ethnic Mường woman and the commune present of a highland district in Sơn La Province, in specifying which cultural practices are considered good and civilized, also attested to the program's impact on her thinking. When asked how to differentiate between "good customs and traditions" and "superstitions", specifically in the case of the *mới* ritual – a shamanic healing practice of the Mường people, in implementing criterion No. 16, as a Mường person and at the same time the leader of the steering committee of the commune's New Rural program, Ngọc said: "Most of the time I find it difficult, as this is a long-standing tradition from our ancestors. But I think rituals that do not cause people's death are [good] customs, and those that result in people's death are superstitions."¹⁹ She added that one of the biggest challenges in implementing criterion No. 16 in her locale was to convince non-Protestant Hmong families to give up their custom of "not putting the deceased in a casket". According to Ngọc, as proposed in the "5 have, 3 cleans" movement of the New Rural program in Sơn La,²⁰ where a sizable Hmong population lives, this is a "backward" custom that pollutes the environment.²¹

Discussions with Ngọc, Thương, and many others in upland and lowland areas revealed, as we have seen, that the NRD's vision of development and progress, expressed in the program's criteria set and targets, has provided rural residents with detailed and clear perceptions of what modernity and civility should be. Given its hegemonic value in recent local perceptions of a good life, the program's vision of development has motivated both local officials and, to a certain extent, the majority of villagers to believe in the righteousness of the program in general and the content of the criteria in particular. Therefore, besides Thương, who understood having a modern house and facilities not as a must-do but as a need-to-do, almost all of the people we met

19 For similar situations see Yang (2020) and Endres (2002).

20 To adapt the New Rural program to local contexts, the Women's Union of Sơn La Province changed the content of the "5 have not, 3 have's" movement launched by the Central Women's Union into the "5 có, 3 sạch" [5 have, 3 cleans] movement, which means "having safe housing, sustainable livelihoods, health, knowledge and cultured lifestyle" and "clean houses, kitchens and alleys".

21 Some researchers (Nguyễn Phương Châm 2022 at al) discussed the potential loss of cultural diversity and the homogeneity resulted from the program's implementation. Their research shows that the implementation of the criterion 16 has led to the "unification" [*đồng phục hoá*] of the rural culture, not only in terms of cultural infrastructure but also lifestyle and ritual practices under the "5 have not's" movement. In a personal talk with me in 2023, one cadres from the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism informed me that the regulation that funerals cannot be held for more than 24 hours has made it impossible for Muong and Thái people to perform all their funeral chants, (usually takes at least 2-3 nights) leading the risk of losing many ritual processes.

regarded changing customary behaviors following criterion No. 16 as the right thing to do and as necessary for the building of a better, rational and more civilized life. In terms of the impacts of the program, the ideas of modernity and civility that drive NRD have functioned in a way quite similar to that which Harms notes for ideas of urban beauty in the New Saigon (2012). Notions of beautification introduced by city planners, Harms shows (2012:737), act as “modes of control precisely because they appear not to be top-down, because their meanings are highly fluid, and because they are coded as ‘positive’ and resonate deeply with people at different stations in social life”. In the years to come, NRD’s development ideas, resonating with other development discourses and practices that have hegemonically portrayed rural people, especially ethnic minority communities in the uplands, as the evolutionary laggards of history (Evans 1985; McElwee 2004), will produce more “desiring subject” (Rofel 2007) as they shape rural people’s lives and ideas about the future.

In the long race to reach the finish line of the New Rural, however, it is not always the case that everyone – especially those with a “low starting point” [*xuất phát điểm thấp*],²² the phrase used to refer to communities with a large gap between their cultural practices and economic circumstances and the program’s targets – can meet the program’s criteria as well as their desires and aspirations demand. Despite the motto “The state and the people all work together”²³ used to herald the program’s implementation, while economically well-off communities in the lowlands can meet the criteria and targets easily, many families and communities have faced difficulties and challenges, especially in terms of mobilizing financial resources to fulfil the targets.²⁴ Many families in upland areas, like Thương’s, in their efforts to meet the program’s minimum criteria, fall into debt. The economically disadvantaged families and communities that I encounter complain not only about inconsistencies in state financial contributions but also about rigidity in the implementation of the program’s targets. The targets for income and environmental hygiene, for example, are difficult to achieve for many upland communities.

22 In Vietnam today, there still exists a large gap between the majority and minorities in terms of poverty rates and educational levels. According to data from the National General Statistics Office, in 2022, the multidimensional poverty rate in ethnic minority areas was 23.7%, while it was 2% among the Kinh: <https://www.gso.gov.vn/du-lieu-va-so-lieu-thong-ke/2023/10/thanh-tuu-giam-ngheo-va-cac-chinh-sach-ho-tro-nguoi-ngheo-o-viet-nam-giai-doan-2016-2022/>.

23 See more in Nguyen (2017).

24 During fieldwork, we noticed that economic conditions, especially family income, infrastructure, environmental sanitation conditions or cultural institutions in many communities in the Northern Delta, such as Nam Dinh, has exceeded the targets set by the program. Therefore, implementing the program for them hardly encountered any difficulties.

Interestingly, however, despite difficulties, hardship and sacrifices, even poor families I met do not oppose the program's core ideals and vision of development. As in the case of the people of the New Saigon discussed by Harms (2012:734), their "descent becomes atomized", since having a new form of identity and subjectivity as well as modern and beautiful rural landscapes promoted by the NRD are also what they aspire to. In the process, rural people find different ways to get to the finish line. I asked Tuấn, a village leader of a Thái village in Sơn La, how his village could meet the criteria by the end of 2021, the deadline set by the commune and district. "There are many different ways," Tuấn replied without hesitation. One of the ways that Tuấn, as well as many other communities, used was to "ask for extension on targets, then compensate later". The criteria they often asked for extension on, as Tuấn explained, are those that are unattainable, such as household average annual income and environmental targets, or those that they feel are unnecessary, such as the standard area of the cultural house and sports complex. According to Thắng, another Thái village leader in Phù Yên District whom we talked to in 2021, this was the easiest way, as "once already recognized as New Rural, no one cares to ask us to make up for the unfulfilled targets." To prove this statement, Thắng said that the current situation of all the criteria for which he asked for extension, especially the environmental targets, was far from improved and was in fact even worse than before, although at the time of our meeting his village had already received the New Rural certification five years earlier.

Another way, even more common, Tuấn said, is to "distort the data". "If we want to, it only takes one night to get every household to reach the annual income that is equal to or even higher than the proposed target". "Data distortion" has become so common that Vietnam's National Television, in their program called "New Rural: Good and Not Good" recently exposed a number of cases related to this "data distortion". According to the reports, a community, despite not having any "solid" meter of dam, was still recorded in the certification file as having a dam made of cement and steel rods. Similarly, in a certified New Rural commune, the main village road was full of potholes, but was still recognized as "concretized" in the certification file. By misreporting or distorting data in these ways, local rural residents limit their agency to "weapons of the weak" (Scott 1985) or everyday tactics (de Certeau 1984)²⁵. And in so doing, too, local people and local authorities both contribute to the transformation of rural life, albeit in many cases in unexpected manners and forms, and while

25 In his *The practice of everyday life* (1984), de Certeau developed the term tactics to capture the ways in which ordinary or subjugated people utilize their everyday cultural practices as a "creative resistance" to the organizational power structures.

reinforcing the stereotypes of the “backward” and deficient rural that, in both the short and the long run, must be further civilized and transformed.

Conclusion

This paper contributes to a new understanding of rural life in Vietnam by examining how the NRD, the most expansive and ambitious development initiative in the modern history of Vietnam, has been designed and implemented and has affected the rural areas of Vietnam over the last decade. The paper shows that the core ideals of the program, which are clearly expressed in its criteria’s content and targets, bear important similarities to previous rural development programs in Vietnam (Hoàng Cầm and Phạm Quỳnh Phương 2015; Hoàng Cầm et al. 2018; Jamieson et al. 1998), Vietnamese urban development (Harms 2012, 2016) and other rural development programs around the world from colonial times to the present (Nguyen et al. forthcoming; Harwood 2014; Li 1999, 2014; Pigg 1992; Escobar 1995; Harrell 1995; Kampe 1997). The basic idea of the program is that the rural areas and their populations, whether lowlands or uplands, despite certain transformations, are still deficient subjects, lacking not only income and the material amenities of modern life, but also other basic factors necessary for them to be healthy, modern, and beautiful. In order to help the rural populations rectify their deficiencies, the program must, as its name partly suggests, replace and demolish “out of date” rural infrastructure and “disorderly” and “ugly” rural landscape. On another level, it also depends on cultivating a more rational, advanced mode of thinking and new socio-cultural practices so that rural people will have a “spirit of change and innovation” (Harwood 2014: x). In the process of helping rural people to reach a new level of life quality, various associated parties, especially ministries and their experts, who “claim to know how others should live, to know what is best for them, to know what they need” (Li 2014:4) have acted not only to develop criteria and targets for the program but also to monitor its implementation and measure its final achievements.

To some degree, some content of the program has been resisted and modified, especially by those whose socio-cultural practices and economic conditions differ significantly from the program’s criteria and targets. Yet, as Harms (2012) notes in the case of the New Saigon or Pigg (1992) describes in the case of rural Nepal, Vietnam’s rural villagers, on the whole, ultimately support the core ideals of development visions designed by the NRD’s trustees. They support the program because their aspirations for modernity and their ideas about what it means to have a “good life”, at certain levels, crosscut state visions of development articulated through the NRD and other state development discourses. The idea of the good life as defined by the NRD, containing modern infrastructure, convenient, safe and hygienic material objects,

and beautiful landscapes as well as advanced modes of thinking and lifestyles, is largely shared by rural people. Therefore, despite facing difficulties and challenges, Vietnam's rural people aspire and make great efforts, both in terms of human and financial resources, to build their rural homeland's landscape and infrastructure to be "modern" and "beautiful" following the program's vision and standards, as well as to change their socio-cultural practices and mode of thinking following the program's guidelines.

The hegemonic vision of development and progress envisioned and promoted by the program, especially its definition and designation of what is considered "good" and "bad", "old" or "new", thus, has been appropriated and internalized not only by local authorities but also rural people at large. The "new", equating with the "good", once appropriated and internalized, transforms what it means to be a true "new" or "civilized" rural people. Its vision of development, as we have seen, has been assimilated into the everyday practices and their mode of thinking of Vietnam's rural people. It has become a new source of reference and meaning for rural people to use to change their conduct and navigate their future (Nguyen 2017). In so doing, state imposed development discourse and practices articulated through the program's set of criteria and targets, thus, effectively act as governing mechanisms in shaping the conditions of rural life and people's conduct toward state goals. This efficacy of state power has led to the loss of diverse cultural forms that are significant for the flourishing of social and cultural lives among both upland and lowland communities.

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