

RESEARCH

Revitalization with Stagnation: The Mixed Effects of Vietnam's New Rural Development Program

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Abstract

Based on research in four communes in rural areas of Hanoi, this paper investigates the hidden shortcomings of Vietnam's New Rural Development program. Introduced in 2010, the program was designed to modernize farming, diversify rural economies, boost incomes, and reduce rural poverty. We argue that while headline data paint a positive picture, these achievements have been secured through an unsustainable combination of non-farm laboring, often *ex situ*, by younger generations and low return farm laboring, *in situ*, by older residents. These are socially combined – and make economic 'sense' – in the context of households that operate as units of production, reproduction and redistribution. With rice land abandonment and ageing farmers, the fissures in the New Rural Development program are becoming all too clear.

Keywords: Vietnam, rural development, agriculture, rice land, household

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Introduction: The New Rural Development Program in Historical Context

In traditional Vietnamese rural society, the household was the basic production unit and livelihoods were secured through agricultural production, especially wet rice cultivation, and/or handicraft production (Nguyễn Hồng Phong 1978:481). During the period of agricultural collectivization from the late 1950s to the 1980s, however, households lost their role as the primary production unit, to be replaced by agricultural cooperatives (Quang Trung 1987; Trương Lai 2002; Vickerman 1986; Woodside 1970). This period of collectivization was comparatively short lived, especially in the south, and from 1981 to 2003, shifts in agricultural policy led to the progressive dissolution of agricultural cooperatives, with the household and the family farm being gradually restored to their former central position and role in rural production, as well as in rural society (Kerkvliet 2005).

Three critical interventions drove the dissolution of the collectivist policies of the decades from the late 1950s. In April 1988, 'Resolution 10' set the stage for decollectivization. Although it was presented as a means to make the collective production system more efficient, it was *de facto* a first step in the dismantling of that system by contracting production to individual households (or groups of households). In 1993, the Law on Land was enacted, which allocated land to households and individuals, giving them the right to convert, transfer, lease, inherit, or mortgage land use rights (Article 3, Clause 2) (Quốc hội [The National Assembly] 1993)]. For Kerkvliet (2005:228), Resolution 10 and the Land Law "gave villagers and local officials the green light to proceed pell-mell with allocating land to individual families". A decade later, the 2003 Land Law reinforced these provisions (Quốc hội [The National Assembly] 2003).

While these three critical interventions reinvigorated what was becoming an increasingly moribund rural economy, with stagnant production and declining material living standards, by the end of the 2000s it had reached its limits and second order – or second generation – issues had begun to emerge. No longer insulated from developments in the wider national and global arenas, rural Vietnam was seeing the impacts of – and being profoundly shaped by – such wider processes. Agriculture was being squeezed as opportunities in other sectors eclipsed the attractions of farming; young people were being drawn away from, and out of, the countryside; and rural-urban relations were evolving in a manner that challenged the rural/urban binary and transition 'pathways', sometimes to the detriment of communes, socially and environmentally (Nguyen Tuan Anh 2019a; Nguyen Tuan Anh 2019b; Nguyen Tuan Anh 2021; and see Mao, Nguyen, and Wilcox 2024). The integration of the rural economy into the wider space economy of Vietnam has, therefore, created

numerous new challenges for rural households, family farms and, by extension, for the rural economy and society. These include rural out-migration, population ageing, labor shortages, growing inequality in land access, and aspirational changes that have made farming an increasingly low status occupation, especially for the young (Nguyen Van Suu 2004; Nguyễn Duy Thăng 2007; Nguyen et al. 2021; Nguyễn Văn Sửu 2018; Nguyễn Xuân Mai 2007). The result is that even in areas of historically high rural population densities, such as the Red River Delta, farming is being dis-intensified and agricultural land abandoned in some places, as the social (low attractiveness) and economic (poor returns) factors that disincentivize agriculture combine with the effects of excessive land fragmentation and, in some places, land degradation (Nguyen Tuan Anh 2019b:331-333). In the space of little more than three decades, then, Vietnam has transitioned through three, overlapping agrarian eras:

- 1950-1980: collectivist era that concluded with low agricultural productivity and declining rural living conditions;
- 1980-2010: reform era of marked increases in agricultural productivity and improving rural living conditions;
- 2010-present: late-reform era of rural diversification, thorough-going rural-urban integration, and agricultural stagnation accompanied by improving rural living conditions.

A good deal of scholarship has focused on the first two of these three agrarian eras, but rather less on the third, which is emergent. While material living standards in rural areas of Vietnam have continued to improve across the piece, agriculture in many places is either stagnant or in decline. The basis of rural livelihoods is less tied to farming and instead is allied to the expansion and growing significance of non-farm activities and occupations, both on farm (i.e. *in situ*) and off farm (i.e. *ex situ*), a process referred to in the wider literature as de-agrarianization (see Hebinck et al. 2018; Yaro 2006; Babin 2020; Bilewicz and Bukraba-Rylska 2021; Majumdar 2020).

In effect, the rural economy and the living standards of the rural population in Vietnam have become progressively de-linked from farming and conditions in agriculture. To appreciate this, it is necessary to see the rural economy as more (and increasingly so) than the agricultural economy, and rural livelihoods as more (and increasingly so) than farming. This direction of travel is implicitly recognized in Vietnam in the New Rural Development (NRD) program or *Nông thôn Mới*, introduced in 2010 with the intention of shaping a “new countryside” (Nguyen et al. 2021). While the NRD recognized that existing rural development policies were out of step with the realities of the Vietnamese countryside – hence ‘New’ – we argue in this paper that the authorities have been unwilling to jettison the productivist tendencies (i.e. the maximization

of production and profit through intensification [see Wilson and Burton 2015]) that date back to the revolutionary era, when 'more' was necessarily 'better'. This has resulted in a gap between what the NRD program seeks to achieve, and its grounded effects in rural areas.

The NRD program, like the efforts of the collectivist era, has both a productivist and a civilizational imperative. Hoàng's (2024) focuses on the latter; here, we pay attention to the former. Our contribution should be read alongside Hoàng's, as both are important and linked components of the NRD.

We argue that much as farmers during the collectivist era sought ways to get around those policies, so rural populations in the era of the new countryside are giving the impression of enthusiastically adhering to the program while energetically doing otherwise. This is not to suggest that the policies of the Vietnamese government, like those of the Chinese government (see Nguyen, Vo and Wei (2024)), do not leave a mark and are not of significance when it comes to understanding the direction and nature of agrarian change in Vietnam. Rather, it is to note the need also to pay attention to the gaps between policy prescriptions and policy effects. In similar vein, Li (2007:28) argues that attention be paid to the 'messy consequence of programs' which are just as real as the programs themselves and the aims, objectives, levers and instruments that programs deploy to make their case and achieve their ends. Drawing on research in communes in the north of the country, we show that many rural workers, including both the young and the more elderly, have been either unable to achieve or unwilling to address the program's goals of raising rural incomes through transforming agricultural production methods. Indeed, rural workers, and especially younger workers, have often abandoned agricultural production to seek alternative livelihoods. Some younger rural women and men have turned to factory work in industrial zones or engaged in various non-agricultural professions, such as domestic help or small-scale trading in central Hanoi, often migrating to urban and industrial areas to seek work.³ Middle-aged and more elderly laborers, by dint of their age and education, have not had been afforded these opportunities, forcing them to continue their low-return agricultural activities or engage in low wage non-agricultural work. On the one hand, the new rural development process has failed to retain the young in rural areas while, on the other, it has not adequately supported those

3 The contemporary mobility revolution in Vietnam is quite well covered in the literature, focusing on a wide variety of migration flows from transnational (Bélanger 2011) to rural-urban (Locke et al. 2012), with attention paid to such issues as marital dissolution (Locke et al. 2014), precarity (Nguyen 2019), climate change (Ngo et al. 2023), poverty (Brauw and Harigaya 2007) and livelihoods (Rigg et al. 2014).

older generations who have remained. An aspirational squeeze with a distinct demographic signature has emerged, with the result that the NRD’s productivist aims are being thwarted. In this paper we explore how the NRD has become twisted. As a national program, it is impossible to ignore or overlook; but as a program which is out of kilter with the realities of rural life and livelihoods, it is equally impossible to embrace. It is this paradox, and how it is navigated on the ground in the communes of north Vietnam that this paper investigates.

Research Sites and Methods

The paper draws on data gathered from field research conducted in four communes in rural areas in the vicinity of Hanoi. These communes are Lam Điền commune in Chương Mỹ district, Hát Môn commune in Phúc Thọ district, Hữu Bằng commune in Thạch Thất district, and Ngọc Liệp commune in Quốc Oai district, all situated between 23 km and 30 km from the center of Hanoi (Table 1).

Table 1 An overview of the research sites

	Hát Môn ⁴	Lam Điền ⁵	Hữu Bằng ⁶	Ngọc Liệp ⁷
Distance from center of Hanoi to the commune	30 km	23 km	25 km	25 km
Total land area (ha)	434	811	178	611
Agricultural land (ha)	254	524	125	338
Agricultural land as a % of total land	58%	65%	70%	55%
Population	8,585	12,870	16,832	9,321

4 Sources: Ban chấp hành Đảng bộ xã Hát Môn - huyện Phúc Thọ [Communist Party Committee of Hát Môn Commune, Phúc Thọ district] 2017: 9-12; Ủy ban Nhân dân xã Hát Môn [Hát Môn Commune People’s Committee] 2022.

5 Sources: Hội đồng Nhân dân xã Lam Điền [Lam Điền Commune People’s Council] 2016: 1; In-depth interview Vice Chairman of Lam Điền Commune People’s Committee, September 21, 2022; In-depth interview with Đại Từ hamlet head, Lam Điền commune on September 21, 2022; In-depth interview Vice Chairman of Lam Điền Commune People’s Committee, September 21, 2022.

6 Đỗ Danh Huấn 2022: 57, 138; Ủy ban Nhân dân xã Hữu Bằng [Hữu Bằng Commune People’s Committee] 2021: 1.

7 Ban chấp hành Đảng bộ xã Ngọc Liệp - huyện Quốc Oai [Communist Party Committee of Ngọc Liệp Commune] 2013: 12; Ủy ban Nhân dân xã Ngọc Liệp [Ngọc Liệp Commune People’s Committee] 2021; Cổng thông tin điện tử Ủy ban Nhân dân huyện Quốc Oai – Thành phố Hà Nội [Portal of Quốc Oai district, Hanoi city] 2017.

The four communes selected for the study all met – on paper – the standards of the New Rural Development Program. This consisted of 19 indicators covering a range of objectives from the social to the economic and environmental (see below). In these four communes, a significant proportion of households relied on agricultural production, albeit to varying degrees. Alongside such agricultural work, households also engaged in a diverse range of other activities, contributing to the multi-stranded (and often multi-sited) livelihoods that have become a hallmark of Vietnam’s – and Asia’s – evolving space economy. The communes were selected to reflect the different household livelihood patterns and spatial signatures that are emerging in rural areas around Hanoi.

The fieldwork and interviews were undertaken in September 2022 and September 2023. These were supplemented with telephone conversations between the first author of the paper and some of the informants in April 2024 to clarify issues. Prior to that, both authors conducted multiple field trips to Lam Điền and Hát Môn communes between 2017 and 2021, as part of a separate but related study.⁸ Two main data collection methods were employed. The first involved analyzing existing data, including numerous documents and reports from Party Committees, People’s Councils, and People’s Committees of the communes, which were used to support, challenge and cross-check the primary data. Alongside and to complement this information, the authors conducted in-depth interviews with key informants and respondent household heads. In total, 25 in-depth interviews were conducted, 16 in September 2022 and a further nine a year later. These included interviews with key informants (e.g. commune leaders and village/hamlet heads) and respondents (e.g. rice and pig farmers, and craft workers). The distribution of interviews between communes was: Hữu Bằng (7), Ngọc Liệp (8), Hát Môn (4) and Lam Điền (6).⁹ In addition to these interviews, we draw on the interviews undertaken during the authors’ field trips to Lam Điền and Hát Môn between 2017 and 2021. In effect the study has become longitudinal, stretching over six years, enabling us to situate the NRD Program within the context of Vietnam’s agrarian transition more broadly.

The New Rural Development Program and the Evolving Nature of Inequality in the Vietnamese Countryside

The Resolution of the Seventh Conference of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam in 2008 set out the objectives of the New Rural Development

8 See Nguyen et al. 2020 and 2021.

9 The names of the interviewees in the paper are pseudonyms.

program, as follows: “To develop a new countryside with modern socio-economic infrastructure, a rational economic structure, and productive organization that links agriculture with the rapid development of industry” (Ban Chấp hành Trung ương [Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam] 2008, and see Hoàng forthcoming). To give practical shape to this Resolution, on October 28, 2008, the Government reaffirmed a commitment to build and organize rural life to achieve ‘modernity’ (*hiện đại*) while preserving cultural identity and the physical (ecological) environment (Chính phủ [The Government] 2008). Based on this Resolution, the Prime Minister issued a Decision on April 16, 2009, introducing a set of national criteria for assessing the achievement of these NRD objectives (Thủ tướng Chính phủ [Prime Minister] 2009). Following this Decision, a ten-year plan running from 2010 to 2020 to build the New Countryside was launched, on June 4, 2010 (Thủ tướng Chính phủ [Prime Minister] 2010). This plan set the goal of “building new rural areas with gradually modernized economic and social infrastructure; rational economic structure and production organization forms, linking agriculture with rapid industrial and service development; [and] integrating rural development with urban planning...” (Thủ tướng Chính phủ [Prime Minister] 2010). For economic development in rural areas, the plan outlined five specific ‘contents’ as follows:

“Content 1: Restructuring the economy and agricultural production towards developing commodity production with high economic efficiency;

Content 2: Strengthening agricultural extension work; accelerating research and application of scientific and technological advances in agriculture, forestry, and fisheries production;

Content 3: Mechanizing agriculture, reducing post-harvest losses in agricultural, forestry, and fisheries production;

Content 4: Conserving and developing traditional craft villages under the motto ‘one village, one product,’ developing industries based on local strengths;

Content 5: Intensifying vocational training for rural laborers, promoting industrialization in rural areas, addressing employment and rapidly shifting the rural labor structure.” (Thủ tướng Chính phủ [Prime Minister] 2010, and see Hoàng 2024).

Twelve years later, on March 8, 2022, the plan was updated with a new national set of criteria for new rural communes issued for the period from 2021 to 2025 (Thủ tướng Chính phủ [Prime Minister] 2022). Among 19 criteria to determine whether a rural commune warrants the epithet ‘new’, there is a criterion relating to the organization of production and rural economic development. One of the contents of this criterion is that the “commune has a model linking production with consumption of key products to ensure sustainability” (Thủ tướng Chính phủ [Prime Minister] 2022).

The implementation of the New Rural Development Program in Vietnam over the period since 2009 has yielded significant accomplishments. As of July 2021, 65% of communes across the country had achieved the standards set for new rural communes and in 12 provinces and cities all communes had met these standards. The headline achievements are impressive: between 2010 and 2020, per capita incomes in rural areas more than tripled and the proportion of rural households defined as multidimensionally poor declined from 11.8% in 2016 to 7.1% in 2020 (Lê Sơn 2021). Against these achievements, however, are a set of emergent trends that indicate a re-shaping of the nature of inequality in Vietnam that the NRD has not managed to address and may even have accentuated.

It has long been noted that rural-urban inequalities are persistent. The 2021 Population Living Standards Survey, recorded that average monthly incomes per capita in urban areas were 1.5 times higher than those in rural areas (5.4 versus 3.5 million Vietnamese dong (Tổng cục Thống kê [General Statistics Office] 2022). Indeed, the government's NRD program was instituted to address these inequalities, with the aim of achieving greater balance in Vietnam's spatial economy. There is even some evidence that the country's trend of widening inequality has reversed. Between 2016 and 2020, the Gini coefficient of income inequality declined from 0.431 to 0.373 (Tổng cục Thống kê [General Statistics Office] 2020). But if inequality is viewed *within* rural and urban areas (rather than *between* rural and urban areas), the trend becomes more nuanced: urban areas displayed a lower and more rapidly declining level of income inequality compared to rural areas. In 2016, the Gini coefficient in urban areas was 0.391, declining to 0.325 in 2020. In rural areas, the respective figures were 0.408 in 2016 and 0.373 in 2020 (Tổng cục Thống kê [General Statistics Office] 2020). In terms of the rich-poor gap, inequalities in the countryside have barely declined. The gap between the lowest and highest quintile income groups in urban areas decreased from a multiple of 7.6 in 2016 to 5.3 in 2020; in rural areas the figures were 8.4 in 2016 and 8.0 in 2020 (Tổng cục Thống kê [General Statistics Office] 2020).¹⁰

In 2008, the area of Hanoi expanded significantly when Ha Tay province was formally incorporated within the administrative areas of Hanoi city, adding 2,193 km² of land to the city. This administrative action, however, did not at a stroke make rural areas, urban. In many respects – in terms of infrastructure, services and amenities, structure of the economy, livelihoods and income levels – these newly incorporated areas are rural in complexion. Since 2008, only two rural districts, Nam Từ Liêm and Bắc

10 The impact of the COVID pandemic and government provisions to poorer segments of Vietnam's society may also have helped to lift the incomes of the poor.

Từ Liêm, have been formally recognized as urban districts.¹¹ The majority of the areas that were rural in 2008, remained so. Per capita incomes in Hanoi's rural areas in 2017 stood at 38 million VND/year, less than half the Hanoi city average of 86 million VND/year (Đặng Kim Sơn 2022).

While the evidence is only emergent, and the support packages put in place by the government during the COVID pandemic have complicated matters, the NRD policy has had the effect, we suggest, of reshaping inequalities in rural areas and between rural and urban areas. In sum:

- Income inequalities *between* rural and urban areas have begun to narrow after a long period of widening. (That said, they remain historically and internationally high.)
- Income inequalities *within* rural areas remain high and may by some measures even be widening.

The conjecture here is that to understand these two trends, we need to look at processes of transformation in the country's rural communes, processes that have been supported by the NRD policies. The paradox is that the NRD may be making rural areas collectively relatively more prosperous in income terms than urban areas, but at the same time making some – usually poorer and more vulnerable – segments of rural society relatively less prosperous in income terms than those that are more prosperous and resilient.

There are several factors contributing to income inequality between rural and urban areas. Perhaps the most significant – historically – was the low income generated from agricultural production, and particularly from rice cultivation. The land allocated for rice cultivation remains small and is becoming increasingly fragmented, leaving each household with only very small areas for cultivation. The income derived from rice production on such limited land is meagre, hardly sufficient to support farmers' livelihoods. To exacerbate matters, while rice prices have trended downward in real terms, the numerous expenses that farmers incur – for soil preparation, planting, harvesting, fertilizers, pesticides, and more – have trended upwards, further squeezing profits and returns per-unit-area.

11 On December 27, 2013, the Prime Minister signed and issued a Resolution adjusting the administrative boundaries of Từ Liêm rural district to establish two urban districts: Bắc Từ Liêm and Nam Từ Liêm. With this decision, the rural communes of Từ Liêm were transformed into wards under the urban districts of Bắc Từ Liêm and Nam Từ Liêm (source: <https://vnexpress.net/ha-noi-them-2-quan-bac-tu-liem-nam-tu-liem-2929721.html>).

In 2018, we interviewed farmers in Lam Điền commune to calculate the costs and returns to rice production (Table 2). The net returns, after costs, from farming two crops of rice over three *sào* (1,080 m²) of land amounted to some 3 million VND, or US\$136. Agricultural wage laborers in the commune were paid 250,000-300,000 per day; this profit was therefore equivalent to around two weeks' waged work. As one male farmer in the commune said with some frustration, 'the cost of cultivating rice is similar to the price of buying rice' (Hoàng Văn Tuyển, male, 38, Lam Điền commune). No wonder, then, that many farmers had abandoned their fields in search of other job opportunities that offered higher wages. Some farmers, however, could not access such alternative opportunities – and it is at this point that the vision of the NRD begins to fray.

Table 2 Costs and returns to rice over 3 *sào* of land (2018)

Production and returns	per <i>sào</i> (360m ²), per crop	Over 3 <i>sào</i> (1,080m ²) of rice land	
		per season	per year
Production (kg)	150	450	900
Market value (VND)	1,350,000	4,050,000	8,100,000
Costs (VND)			
Commune fees	100,000	300,000	300,000
Ploughing	140,000	420,000	840,000
Transplanting	300,000	900,000	1,800,000
Fertilizer	200,000	600,000	1,200,000
Harvesting	180,000	540,000	1,080,000
Total costs	920,000	2,760,000	5,220,000
Net profit (VND)	430,000	1,290,000	2,880,000

Note: commune fees are levied per *sào* per year; US\$1 = 22,000 VND

Source: household interview, Lương Xá hamlet, Lam Điền commune, 2018; adapted from Nguyen et al. 2020.

Except for a handful of farmers in the communes we studied who were cultivating extensive areas of land or raising livestock on a large scale, farming alone was not sufficient to support the average household: areas of land were too small, costs too high, and output prices too low. In response, rural livelihoods were becoming multi-stranded, based on the interlocking of farm and non-farm, agricultural and non-agricultural, and rural and urban activities. In this way, households were raising their

incomes and material prosperity, even while agriculture was in relative decline. But, and here is the rub, access to the more remunerative activities that comprised these pluri-active livelihood complexes was uneven. Household members who found themselves *de facto* excluded from such work were the old and infirm, the unskilled and less well educated, and those forced to juggle work with caring responsibilities. In most instances, however, this unequal access could be navigated at the household level. For instance, older members grew rice for subsistence consumption while caring for their grandchildren, and younger members worked away from the commune remitting money to support the natal family. Nguyen Van Suu's (2004) study of inequality in the Red River delta focused on inequality of access to land. Here, some two decades on, we suggest that inequality of access to factors of production *other than* land are more significant in explaining the status of rural livelihoods. Whether this juggling of activities to secure a livelihood is sustainable long-term is questionable in the light of Vietnam's dwindling demographic dividend (Wei et al. 2019).

The government's NRD program for the periods 2010-2020 and 2021-2025 anticipated the declining returns to farming – and especially rice farming – evident in Table 2, placing an emphasis on restructuring the rural economy towards non-agricultural activities (e.g. through promoting craft production and the 'one village one product' principle) and agricultural production towards high return commodity production (Thủ tướng Chính phủ [Prime Minister] 2010; Thủ tướng Chính phủ [Prime Minister] 2022). The inter-locking objectives of the NRD program were to create employment opportunities for people in rural areas, increase incomes for rural residents, and reduce poverty rates in the countryside (Thủ tướng Chính phủ [Prime Minister] 2022a; Thủ tướng Chính phủ [Prime Minister] 2022b; Thủ tướng Chính phủ [Prime Minister] 2009). In reality, however, a two-fold problem emerged which sheds light on the evolving quality of inequality in the Vietnamese countryside. On the one hand, younger farmers – who were often best placed to embrace new, non-traditional high value crops and alternative production methods (see Borda et al. 2023; Jansuwan and Zander 2022; FAO 2017) – were not inclined to remain in farming. They were leaving agriculture to seek higher-paying and more prestigious and desirable jobs in industry, mainly in urban areas. This was contributing to an accelerated aging of the farm labor force. And on the other, those who remained to farm were, in the most part, unable or unwilling to embrace high value agricultural commodity production.

Rising Incomes, Lagging Farming: The New Rural Development Program and Innovation in Agriculture

As noted, one of the key aims of the NRD program was to encourage innovation in agriculture as a means to raise productivity and boost incomes. This would then entice rural populations, and especially the young, to stay in the countryside. In both aspects, the NRD program had largely failed in its stated mission in the four study communes. Younger inhabitants continued to leave rural areas and/or agriculture to seek work in urban areas and non-agricultural sectors; and farming had not been reinvigorated through the planting of new crops and the use of new methods to enhance agricultural productivity. The absence of change in agriculture was particularly acute in wet rice farming areas. There were, however, exceptions to this general picture. For instance, in Lam Điền commune, some households had shifted to livestock farming as part of the NRD initiative. But opportunities for change in rice farming were limited both for agro-ecological (paddy fields have evolved over centuries into quite 'sticky' agro-ecological systems) and political/regulatory reasons (rice was a strategic commodity where crop change was resisted by commune leaders). Thus, in the four communes that we studied, most younger workers opted to leave rice production in search of non-agricultural jobs, whether local or more distant, while older generations continued to farm rice, sometimes supplementing inadequate income from farming with low skilled non-agricultural work in the commune.

In Lam Điền commune, a Vice Chairman of the Commune People's Committee estimated that there were 700 individuals aged between 18 and 22 registered as resident in the commune. Some were attending university, college, or a vocational school, while others not pursuing higher education typically found work as laborers in factories or in various other non-agricultural occupations in Hanoi. Those aged between 22 and 60 years numbered around 5,000, with approximately 4,000 employed in non-agricultural jobs, such as working in industrial zones, construction, domestic cleaning, housekeeping, and trading, particularly in central Hanoi. Remarkably for a commune which had such an agricultural history, only about 20% – around 1,000 – of those aged between 22 and 60 in Lam Điền commune were working in agriculture, of whom the majority were aged 50 or older.¹² As the Vice Chairman of the commune explained:

Employees [of the commune] from 18 years old to under 50 years old are basically workers working outside [this commune]. They go to work as workers for enterprises [in industrial zones], or as cleaners [for families in the center of Hanoi], or as builders.

12 In-depth interview Vice Chairman of Lam Điền Commune People's Committee, September 21, 2022.

Some people trade. They take vegetables grown in the village to sell at the wholesale markets [in Hanoi] and buy fruits at the wholesale market to sell here [in the commune]. The people in the village who are [factory] workers are mainly employed in the industrial zone in this district, about 10km from their homes... About 4,000 laborers work outside the [commune]... [Just] a thousand work in [this commune and they] are mainly 50 years old and above...¹³

In Chương Mỹ district, there were several industrial zones which attracted young workers from communes, like Lam Điền, in the vicinity. One industrial park was only about 10 kilometers from the commune, allowing workers to commute daily between their homes and workplaces. Laborers employed in this industrial park earned approximately 250,000 VND per day, or 6 million to 7 million VND per month. This was significantly higher than what they could earn from agricultural work.¹⁴ For younger residents, the returns to non-agricultural work made the choice an obvious one on pecuniary grounds alone. Allied to this, however, were the various other attractions of such work. It was physically less taxing, compared to farm work; often indoors, out of the sun and sometimes in an air-conditioned environment; and brought together young women and men from across the district, so was socially appealing as well.

In Hữu Bằng commune, agriculture was the primary livelihood activity until the 2000s, and the commune – and life there – was defined by farming (Đỗ Danh Huấn 2022). This lasted even after *đổi mới*, with rice growing dominating work and life through to the late 1990s (Đỗ Danh Huấn 2022:58). Since the turn of the Millennium, however, Hữu Bằng's identity as a rice-growing commune has diminished. According to Mr. Đặng Trung Long,¹⁵ from the early 2000s, local residents gradually abandoned their fields and by 2010 only a minority of households continued actively to farm. Initially, some households continued to produce rice by hiring labor from neighboring areas to undertake the various cultivation tasks. But by the end of the decade farmers in Hữu Bằng had stopped farming altogether. The land still belonged to these households, but they no longer cultivated it, leaving the fields idle. In September 2022, only three households in Hữu Bằng commune were still involved in rice cultivation, managing approximately 80 *mẫu*¹⁶ of land. Each household planted rice on 25 to 30 *mẫu* – very large areas indeed, historically. The only

13 In-depth interview Vice Chairman of Lam Điền Commune People's Committee, September 21, 2022.

14 In-depth interview Vice Chairman of Lam Điền Commune People's Committee, September 21, 2022.

15 In-depth interview Đặng Trung Long, born in 1969, Hữu Bằng commune, September 10, 2022.

16 1 *mẫu* = 3600 m².

way for these households to farm such large expanses of rice land was by investing in labor-saving machinery and all three had purchased tractors and harvesters. They had, in effect, made the transition from smallholders to professional, commercial farmers. Interestingly, these three households initially sought permission to cultivate the land from its putative owners; in time, however, they cultivated the abandoned fields without consulting the original owners.¹⁷ In September 2023, when the two authors conducted fieldwork in Hữu Bắng commune, of the three households cultivating rice in 2022, only one household continued to cultivate a few *mẫu* of land; the two other households had quit cultivation in the year since the 2022 fieldwork.¹⁸ This sole farming household also stopped agricultural production in 2024. The head of the household explained that the profits from agricultural production were too low, and switched to non-farm work.¹⁹

There were two main reasons behind the abandonment of fields and the shift away from rice cultivation in Hữu Bắng commune. Neither was surprising, although they were historically remarkable. The first reason has already been noted: the low returns to rice cultivation. Each adult in Hữu Bắng was allocated one *sào* of land (360 m²) for cultivation, allowing for two rice crops per year, yielding rice with a value of approximately 2 million VND. This was the subsistence guarantee that came with residency of the commune, a guarantee that threads its way deep into the Red River's past. The reasons why households were willing to renounce this guarantee and potentially lose access to their land reveals the depths of change in Hữu Bắng commune. Abundant alternatives to rice cultivation presented themselves: factory work, which yielded monthly earnings from 4 to 6 million VND; and craft work for which monthly incomes were higher still, ranging from 10 to 15 million VND. Even the elderly could find marginally more attractive alternatives to farming, taking on cleaning and polishing tasks in the commune's craft workshops, undertaking domestic chores, or following small-scale trading opportunities. With scarcely a glance over their historical shoulders, former farmers either left their rice lands idle or let them be cultivated by others at their will.²⁰

17 If the owners of the land make a request to reclaim their fields, then the expectation was that these three households would return the land to the original operators. In-depth interview Đặng Trung Long, born in 1969, Hữu Bắng commune, September 10, 2022.

18 In-depth interview Đặng Trung Long, born in 1969, Hữu Bắng commune, September 10, 2023.

19 In-depth interview Đặng Trung Long, born in 1969, Hữu Bắng commune, April 10, 2024

20 In-depth interview Đặng Trung Long, born in 1969, Hữu Bắng commune, September 10, 2022; In-depth interview Nguyễn Đình Nhu, born in 1960, Hữu Bắng commune, September 10, 2022.

The second reason was that young workers in Hữu Bắng were no longer interested in farming, finding non-agricultural employment opportunities, within the commune and further afield, more attractive as well as more remunerative. As farmers left their fields untilled, so carpentry workshops began to emerge in Hữu Bắng. Some households converted their rice land into furniture production workshops. Younger workers either found employment in these workshops or, in some cases, started their own production workshops. Some individuals who did not have available land (or land in the right location) purchased rice land from other households to establish their furniture workshops. This change in land use – from rice land to craft land, so to speak – was against the law, yet commune leaders were unwilling or unable to prevent such conversion.²¹ A retired land administrative officer in the commune, said:²²

The local government still prohibits [the conversion of agricultural land into carpentry workshops], but there are some daring individuals who still proceed with it. Given the local context, the prohibition is only enforced to a limited extent.

A former Director of the Agricultural Service Cooperative in Hữu Bắng commune explained why it was so hard to hold the line when land policies ran against the grain of evolving livelihoods:²³

So, carpentry is the main profession... That's why land is complicated, it's very complicated... Nowadays, to develop the carpentry industry, people must have their own land. So, the cooperative's fields²⁴ have been reducing because households keep encroaching on agricultural land to build their carpentry/furniture workshops. This person gives it [sells his/her agricultural land] to the other. It's complicated like that.

While the boost that this development gave to local employment opportunities and incomes was in line with the policies of the NRD program, the means of its achievement – by encroaching on productive rice land – was not. The issue was that returns to rice cultivation had become so out of kilter with other activities, that it had created the conditions where even commune leaders found it impossible to resist the logics

21 In-depth interview Đặng Trung Long, born in 1969, Hữu Bắng commune, September 10, 2022;

In-depth interview Nguyễn Đình Nhu, born in 1960, Hữu Bắng commune, September 10, 2022.

22 In-depth interview Nguyễn Đình Nhu, born in 1960, Hữu Bắng commune, September 10, 2022.

23 Nguyễn Văn Trung, born in 1951, former Director of agricultural service cooperative in Hữu Bắng commune, September 10, 2023.

24 In the past, during the socialist transformation period, agricultural land belonged to agricultural cooperative.

of the market. A relatively unskilled worker in a carpentry workshop in Hữu Bằng could earn about 500,000 VND per day, and a skilled worker over 1 million VND per day.²⁵ The income from one *sào* (360m²) of rice land could be matched by just a few days' work in a carpentry workshop. The aims of the NRD program were achieved, but the means of their achievement went against the broader aims of the program.

Like Hữu Bằng, Lam Điền commune was also peppered with abandoned,²⁶ recently productive, rice fields. The hamlet of Đại Từ consisted of 553 households and possessed around 80 *mẫu* of agricultural land, of which 20 *mẫu* were abandoned.²⁷ Mrs. Nguyễn Thị Thủy was one householder in the hamlet who had stopped cultivating her rice land. Aged 41 years when we interviewed her, she and her 45-year-old husband possessed 6 *sào* of land. Five *sào* they continued to cultivate, growing pomelos and vegetables, but they had stopped cultivating their one *sào* of rice land five years previously. They retained ownership, however. Mrs Nguyễn's husband, the Duẩn, no longer farmed at all: he drove a vehicle for a paper company in the Chúc Sơn industrial site.²⁸

The broad employment trends across the four communes were clear: a move out of farming into non-farm work; a relative shift from rice farming to other crops; and the spread of idle rice lands – unless they could be converted, against the grain of policy, to craft land. These changes can only be understood in relation to urban spaces and opportunities, challenging the rural-urban binary that obscures the “multiple ways in which [urban and rural] are entangled with and connected to each other and the global world” (Mao, Nguyen and Wilcox 2024). Where we take this forward is in arguing that these shifts were not equally spread across income classes or generational cohorts. It was younger workers who were leaving farming for non-agricultural occupations. According to a farmer²⁹ in Ngọc Liệp commune, ‘left behind’ farmers are aged 45 years, or older. Approximately one-in-ten households in the commune had left farming altogether, and two-in-ten no longer grew rice. These were households without older members able to continue farming when younger members had absented themselves to pursue non-agricultural occupations. Some allowed relatives and neighbors to grow rice on their land, while others sold or leased their fields

25 In-depth interview Đặng Trung Long, born in 1969, Hữu Bằng commune, September 10, 2022;

In-depth interview Nguyễn Đình Nhu, born in 1960, Hữu Bằng commune, September 10, 2022.

26 In other words, the land has been uncultivated for a long period (*ruộng bỏ hoang*), with no indication that it was likely to be brought back into cultivation.

27 In-depth interview Hoàng Văn Chính, born in 1956, Lam Điền commune, September 21, 2022.

28 In-depth interview Nguyễn Thị Thủy, born in 1981, Lam Điền commune, September 21, 2022.

29 In-depth interview Đỗ Danh Vang, born in 1952 in Ngọc Liệp commune, September 10, 2022.

to households within or outside the commune. But there was also a group of households who were unable to pursue these alternative farming strategies, and instead left their land uncultivated.³⁰ An informant explained:

The younger generation no longer works in the fields. Some households have even sold all of their farmland. Many young people let others cultivate their fields or leave the land for their parents to work on, while they work as laborers in companies. They are employed by enterprises, and their fields are either cultivated by others or left for weeds to grow instead of rice.³¹

One of the central objectives of the NRD program is to modernize agriculture, improve productivity, and thereby raise incomes for smallholders. However, the evolving picture in the communes presented above reveals that the NRD goal of modernizing agriculture was not being achieved. Three reasons present themselves. First was the 'stickiness' of land which meant that – albeit with exceptions – land holdings remained small. Even when some more committed farmers assembled historically large areas of land (such as the three farmers in Hữu Bằng commune), this did not endure. Part of the reason was that even relatively large farms barely paid their way; but also at work, and this is the second reason, was the tendency for the young to absent themselves from agriculture, a theme noted not just in Vietnam but across Asia (Rigg 2000). Of significance here is the possibility that the NRD program may be contributing to this tendency through its civilizing mission (see Hoàng 2024), implicitly valuing certain occupations, behaviors and skills over others through its developmentalist philosophy. A third reason was that households were unwilling to transfer their land use rights to agricultural enterprises to enable the consolidation of land into larger units of production. In Lam Điền, Ngọc Liệp and Hữu Bằng, no enterprise had come to negotiate with households over land assembling; only in Hát Môn was an enterprise holding discussions with households to lease their land. These negotiations, though, had become stuck over the duration of the land lease and farmers' post-lease rights.³²

Rather than seeking to innovate and modernize, or to lease their land to others who might be minded to innovate and modernize, farmers either continued to farm using their established methods or left their land idle and uncultivated. The

30 In-depth interview Đỗ Danh Vang, born in 1952 in Ngọc Liệp commune, September 10, 2022.

31 In-depth interview Đỗ Danh Vang, born in 1952 in Ngọc Liệp commune, September 10, 2022.

32 In-depth interview Nguyễn Đăng Minh, born in 1963, a leader of Hát Môn commune, September 13, 2022.

former approach tended to be preferred by older farmers, and the latter by younger workers. Often times, cross-generational households embraced both, with income from working in non-agricultural activities providing the leeway to permit 'unproductive' farming to continue. This runs counter to the objectives of the NRD program; to be sure, household incomes had risen, but in the context of a contracting farm sector. These economic changes had quite far-reaching social consequences. For while some of the young commuted to work, returning home each evening, many had left the communes longer term for work in Hanoi. This led to an increasingly top-heavy age profile, raising questions about how elderly care will be delivered in the longer term and as Vietnam's demographic dividend becomes a demographic burden, in short order. The households that were most vulnerable were those without younger members. Those aged around 50 years and older found it difficult to secure non-farm work, farm work had become increasingly arduous as these commune members aged, and they did not benefit from income remitted by absent children to support their livelihoods. These were the emerging precariat in Vietnam's rural communes, and we argue they were hidden behind the inequality data.

The NRD program, a success on paper, is revealed to have been rather less so when the headline income and poverty data are scrutinized more closely and viewed against emergent trends in the communes. The young have not been retained in the countryside, but have escaped their natal communes; the elderly have largely missed out on new working opportunities, and have been marginalized in low return farm and non-farm work; and farming, far from being modernized, has languished or been written out of the rural script altogether. This was not the vision of a new rural future that the NRD program set out to create.

Households under Pressure: Juggling Farming, Work and Care

The key challenges evident from our research in these rural communes around Hanoi were the twin failures of farming to modernize and older commune members – aged around 50 years or older – to transition to non-agricultural occupations. These challenges were of a piece, and evident in the experiences of two cases drawn from our research, those of Mr Hoàng Văn Chinh and Mr Đỗ Danh Vang.

Mr Hoàng Văn Chinh,³³ a resident of Lam Điền commune's Đại Từ village, was born in 1956. He and his wife had three children: two married daughters who were living

33 In-depth interview Hoàng Văn Chinh, born in 1956, Lam Điền commune, September 21, 2022.

separately, and a son born in 1992 who was living with his parents along with his wife and their two sons (Mr. Chinh's grandsons). Mr. Chinh and his wife cultivated 3 *sào* of rice and 3 *sào* of vegetables. Although this extended family of six lived under one roof and ate together, Mr Chinh's son and his daughter-in-law did not actively engage in agriculture. Instead, they worked as industrial workers in Phú Nghĩa Industrial Park, some 10 km distant. Long working hours meant that they left the house early in the morning and returned late at night. This left the task of caring for their children to Mr. Chinh and his wife, who were juggling farm work on 6 *sào* of land with caring responsibilities for their grandchildren.

Mr. Đỗ Danh Vang³⁴ was born in 1952 in Ngọc Liệp commune. He and his wife had three children, all married and living separately. Mr. Vang's children still owned the land that was allocated to them in 1993 by the former cooperative, with each receiving 540m². None cultivated their land; they were full-time industrial workers, scrap collectors, and welders. Instead, their fields were cultivated by Mr Vang and his wife (who also farmed their own land). The children collected rice harvested from their land for their own consumption. Other than farming, this ageing couple also produced votive papers for ancestor worship, a common occupation among the elderly in Ngọc Liệp commune but one which generated only about 50,000 VND per person per day.

These two households – one co-residential and the other multi-sited – might be characterized as ones where inter-locking livelihoods sustained the families, with the tasks of production and reproduction taking on a cross-generational hue, to the benefit of all. But this overlooks the degree to which the strictures of work constrained matters. Mr. Chinh and his wife remained in farming because they had no choice; non-farm work was not an option. Mr. Vang and his wife likewise, supplementing the meagre returns from farming with the equally low returns from making votive papers. From these cases, two views of such transforming rural communes offer themselves. First, as economies where residents creatively combined farm and non-farm, subsistence and cash, reproduction (care) and production (work), and local and non-local, to the collective interests of all. The young benefited from care work by older family members and subsistence rice production from their fields; and older cohorts were supported by income generated by non-farm employment by younger generations. The second view is to see these households, and especially older cohorts, as trapped. Returns to rice farming were so marginal that it was barely

34 In-depth interview Đỗ Danh Vang, born in 1952 in Ngọc Liệp commune, September 10, 2022.

worth continuing³⁵ and even vegetable farming was risky, with Mr. Chinh talking of wild price fluctuations depending on market conditions.³⁶ At the same time, residents of fifty years or older were in large part excluded from non-farm working opportunities in the modern economy.³⁷

Evidently, farming has not modernized in line with the vision of the NRD program. Most farms were too small and profits too thin or too risky to warrant investment. The young had little choice but to seek work elsewhere, leaving older generations marginalized in farming. The outcome was that in these rural areas of Hanoi, there had been little change in agricultural, and especially rice cropping practices.

For the meantime at least, this cross-generational combination of marginal farming with precarious non-farm work delivered rising incomes at the household level even if the incomes of some individuals – namely, older generations in farming – were (relatively) falling. At the national level there were also clear attractions: cheap labor from rural areas could be transferred to serve capitalist production in Vietnam's industrialization process. The costs of reproduction were transferred to rural communes to be borne by families rather than by the state, and rice to meet the subsistence needs of these workers – and the nation – continued to be produced. Furthermore, at the household level the NRD program had met its broad aims, raising incomes and reducing poverty. But at the scale of the individual there were a growing number of vulnerable elderly. Furthermore, this situation may not be sustainable. Given population ageing and total fertility rates that have dipped under replacement levels, the ability of households to continue to juggle livelihoods in this manner will become increasingly difficult. The responsibilities of the state and the pressure on the state will only grow.

Conclusion: Staying and Leaving the Commune

Vietnam is facing many of the agrarian challenges highlighted in other countries of Asia: a rapidly ageing rural population (Rigg et al. 2020), the challenge of elderly care (Phongsiri et al. 2023), stagnant smallholder farming (FAO 2021; Otsuka et al. 2016), and enduring rural-urban inequalities (Imai and Malaeb 2018). The country's New Rural Development program was devised to address these issues, notably by

35 From their three *sào* of rice, the family produce around 1,320 kg of rice each year. After deducting expenses, they are left with 660 kg of rice to feed the family. With the price of rice in 2022 of 800,000 VND/100 kg, this would yield an income of 5.3 million VND per year.

36 He remarked on onion prices fluctuating between 7,000 and 45,000 VND per kilo.

37 In-depth interview Hoàng Văn Chinh, born in 1956, Lam Điền commune, September 21, 2022.

increasing agricultural productivity through promoting new, modern methods and raising the incomes of rural workers. Officially, the program has been a success: as noted, by mid-2021, two-thirds of communes nationally had achieved the standards set and in 12 provinces and cities achievement was universal, and incomes had tripled in the decade to 2020.

In this paper, drawing on research undertaken in four communes in peripheral areas of Hanoi, we dig into these headline achievements to show that they are both more, and less, than they seem. We argue that there has been the co-production of rising incomes and generally stagnant farming, the latter reflected most strikingly in the *de facto* abandonment of large areas of historically productive wet rice land. Diminishing relative returns to agriculture, and especially rice farming, have created the conditions in which villagers search for alternative working opportunities. At the same time, the income generated from such alternative work permits low return farming to persist. They are two sides of the same rural development coin: integration into urban spaces and non-farm employment is the solution to rural underproduction, but also further promotes such underproduction.

This pattern, and this is the second point, took on a distinctly generational hue. It was the younger generations who were able to access the better paying non-farm work opportunities, while those over around 50 years of age remained in farming. From a household perspective, and most data use the household as the unit of analysis and assessment, this combination of farm and non-farm delivered rising aggregate incomes. But it was only rendered possible by the willingness of older generations to provide their labour at a cost of less than its reproduction. And this willingness was embedded in a household 'bargain': younger cohorts transferred the costs of their children's care to grandparents; older cohorts allocated their labour to care and subsistence production for the family; and the income from younger generations' work helped to lift the collective incomes of the household (see Mao, Nguyen and Wilcox 2024).

The New Rural Development program has not only failed to address this challenge, it has played a part in creating it through supporting the emergence of a rural space economy where younger workers have to leave to secure their futures, and older workers remain tied to the past. From the urban and national vantage points, the countryside is a reservoir of cheap labor and even cheaper agricultural commodities, both supporting the industrialization process. From the rural communes, the cracks are beginning to show.

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