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Coastal livelihoods in transition: How are Vietnamese households responding to changes in the fisheries and in the economy?



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ABSTRACT

This article is concerned with how far-reaching economic and ecological changes are affecting the livelihoods of coastal households in Vietnam. In particular, we are interested in the livelihood effects of two aspects of this changing environment: (1) the transformation of the fisheries sector, including declining stocks and species loss and the rapid expansion of aquaculture, and (2) the broader structural change in the Vietnamese economy, from household-based primary-sector activities to wage and salary employment and self-employment outside the household. Our analysis, based on a survey of 599 households in 12 coastal communes in two provinces, shows considerable changes in livelihood patterns over the decade covered by the survey. Over one-third of the responding households reported a different primary earnings source in 2012 than in 2002. Fewer relied on aquaculture as their main livelihood activity in the later year. While aquaculture, encouraged by official policy, has assumed an increasingly dominant position in fish production in Vietnam then, this is not necessarily a shift that has worked to the benefit of households in the coastal communities we studied. For most, aquaculture has not generated very high incomes so some are making it a less important aspect of their livelihood portfolio, not dropping it completely but shifting productive efforts to other livelihoods. Meanwhile, economic growth and structural change have created new opportunities for wage employment and self-employment for growing numbers of households. However, human and financial capital are necessary conditions for taking advantage of such opportunities arising from Vietnam's economic development, which raises concerns about growing economic inequality in the country's coastal communities.

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1. Introduction

Coastal villages throughout Southeast Asia are in a period of structural transition, motivated by far-reaching economic changes stemming from urbanization and globalization (Jarvie et al., 2015), fisheries declines and species loss (Worm and Branch, 2012), and the rapid expansion of fish farming (Bostock et al., 2010; Beveridge et al., 2013). These developments can significantly impact the livelihoods of households in coastal communities, in terms of the productive activities they pursue, how they combine these activities into a “livelihood portfolio”, and their overall economic well-being (Scoones, 2009). While some households are able to benefit from structural transitions and the opportunities this brings, others are marginalized, suffering from dwindling prospects in their traditional livelihood or greater precariousness and uncertainty in changing livelihoods. Indeed, the aggregate and distributional

impacts of structural transformations remain at the center of debates about the development process.

As such, coastal villages in Vietnam offer a particularly insightful case, since Vietnam has experienced rapid economic structural change (World Bank, 2012), is at the forefront of the trend towards greater aquaculture production (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2014), and faces serious vulnerabilities from environmental shifts along its coastal areas (Allison, 2011; Hallegatte et al., 2013). Rural households in Vietnam, whose livelihoods depend on agriculture (including fishing and fish farming), experience substantial income variability because of ongoing change (environmental and infrastructure-related) and price fluctuations in the context of rapid liberalization and reform processes (Nguyen et al., 2015). We focus on two aspects of this changing environment that have important implications for the livelihoods of households in Vietnam's coastal villages: (1) the broader structural change in the Vietnamese economy, from household-based primary-sector activities to wage and salary employment and self-employment outside the household, and (2) the specific transformation of the fisheries sector, including the ongoing shift from capture fishing to

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aquaculture (i.e., fish farming).

Structural changes in the Vietnamese economy began with the introduction of liberalization reforms (*Doi Moi*) in 1986. Since that time, Vietnam has sustained an average annual GDP growth rate of over 7% per year (although this has slowed somewhat since 2008), advancing from one of the poorest countries in the world to lower middle-income status.¹ The structural change that has underpinned this growth is evident in the country's shifting employment profile. In 1996, 70% of Vietnam's workers were in agriculture, fishing, and other primary industries; by 2012, this share had fallen to 47%, with the majority of the country's employment now in industry and services (World Bank, 2015). These structural changes have resulted, in part, from the magnet of urbanization and the success of Vietnam's export-oriented electronics, textile, and footwear industries (Dinh, 2013). Manufacturing now accounts for a 5% greater share of GDP than it did two decades ago (World Bank, 2015).

Along with these structural changes, Vietnam's fisheries sector has also been transformed over the past two decades. Vietnam is now the third largest aquaculture producer in the world, behind only China and India (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2014). Seafood is important for country's economy, accounting for nearly 10% of GDP and seafood was the sixth most important source of export earnings in 2012 (General Statistics Office, 2011, 2014). Within the fishing sector, capture fishing has continued to grow in Vietnam over the past two decades despite the depletion of fish stocks: between 1990 and 2011, the annual growth rate was 5.7% (Belton and Thilsted, 2014). However, aquaculture has been expanding more than twice as quickly, at 14.7% over this period (Belton and Thilsted, 2014). The growth in aquaculture production has accelerated since 2002 and, by 2007, it had surpassed fishing in overall production. This rapid change is set in a transitional fisheries economy in which both traditional, lower-intensity aquaculture and fishing exist, along with intensive, single-species fish farming and offshore fishing targeting high-value species (Marschke and Betcherman, 2015).

These trends reflect government policy, encouraged by donors and international agencies, that has promoted aquaculture as the main source of poverty alleviation and export income in coastal areas (Ha and Bush, 2010). The last three 10-year Strategies for Social and Economic Development (SSED) have called for the upgrading and industrialization of the fishing sector through fish farming (Gaudreau et al., 2012). Through the 1990s and into this century, the focus was on small-scale aquaculture and its potential for poverty alleviation (Pomeroy et al., 2009). During the 1990s, government poverty reduction programs supported rural people in transforming potential areas (e.g., flooded fields, swamps, tidal flats) for aquaculture use, in particular for extensive or semi-intensive shrimp farming (Armitage and Marschke, 2013). The 2001 Sustainable Aquaculture for Poverty Alleviation (SAPA) strategy formalized the promotion of aquaculture as a poverty reduction measure (Béné et al., 2010). The SAPA was based on the premise that livelihoods and food security in coastal areas would be served by a transition from small-scale capture fishing into small-scale aquaculture and identified how policy could offer support for the poor to make this transition.² The last two SSEDs, as well as the Vietnam Fisheries Development Strategy through 2020, have

continued to promote the transition away from capture fishing and towards aquaculture. However, while policies in the earlier period concentrated on small-scale fish farming and poverty alleviation, these more recent documents place more emphasis on the industrialization of aquaculture, including the expansion of scale and improving the links to international markets (Gaudreau et al., 2012).

What does this evolution in Vietnam's economic structure and in the fishing sector mean for Vietnam's coastal villages and the households that reside there? While the agrarian transformation of Asian villages has been documented by a number of researchers (e.g., Scott, 1985; Hart, 1989; Rigg, 2006; Li, 2007; Rigg and Vandergeest, 2012), much less attention has been paid to the specific case of coastal villages depending on fishing and fish farming. Empirical evidence detailing how households in Southeast Asian coastal villages are responding to the shifting landscape and what the impacts are on their economic welfare is scarce (Bhandari, 2013).³ To address this gap, and as part of an effort to comprehend longer-term change over time (Scoones, 2009), we analyze data from a new survey, the Vietnam Fisheries Transitions Survey (VFTS), which collected data from 599 households in 12 fishing communes in Vietnam's Mekong Delta and North Central Coast regions.

The paper is set out as follows: Section 2 introduces the methodology underlying the Vietnam Fisheries Transitions Survey which provides the data for our analysis. Following this, we consider three specific issues related to understanding livelihoods in coastal communities and how they have been affected by the shifts in fisheries production and by broader economic structural changes. Section 3 describes the primary livelihood activities of households in the surveyed communities and how these changed between 2002 and 2012. In this section, we present a transition matrix to illustrate the flows of households between different livelihoods over this period. Section 4 looks at how household incomes vary according to different livelihood activities. While the previous two sections focus on the primary economic activity of households, in section 5 we look at how households combine fishing and non-fishing activities in their livelihood portfolios. Section 6 provides a discussion and conclusion.

2. Survey methodology

The analysis in this paper relies primarily on quantitative data from the Vietnam Fisheries Transitions Survey (VFTS).⁴ The VFTS was carried out in December 2012–January 2013 with surveyors⁵ administering a structured questionnaire through face-to-face interviews, usually to the household head.⁶ The total number of households in our final sample was 599. The VFTS was designed by the authors, drawing on the multi-topic household survey design of Vietnam's Living Standards Measurement Survey, carried out biannually since 2002, and fisheries modules piloted by Worldfish (Béné et al., 2012). The VFTS questionnaire includes nine modules: household information; employment and earnings; other sources

¹ Poverty has fallen dramatically in the process. Using the Vietnam General Statistics Office–World Bank poverty line, the poverty headcount rate fell from 58% in 1993 to 15% in 2010 (World Bank, 2012). However, pockets of chronic poverty exist, vulnerability to poverty is high, and inequality has been rising.

² The geographic focus of the strategy included the two regions covered in our survey, the North Central Coastal provinces and the Mekong Delta. See Le (2001).

³ Notable exceptions include Hall (2004); Fougères (2008); and Belton et al. (2011).

⁴ The study also was informed by qualitative data from focus groups (n=15) with village residents immediately prior to doing the survey field work and from follow-up interviews (n = 35) carried out with surveyed households and local officials within a year of the survey.

⁵ The survey fieldwork was carried out by Vietnamese surveyors affiliated with the Hue University of Agriculture and Camau Agricultural Extension Centre. Data was inputted by the Hue University survey team with final editing at the University of Ottawa.

⁶ 85% of the respondents identified themselves as the household head.

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